

# Diversity *and* Dialogue

THE EITELJORG FELLOWSHIP  
FOR NATIVE AMERICAN FINE ART

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## Gerald Clarke (CAHUILLA) FROM A PLACE OF RECOGNITION

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(Western Cherokee  
and Mescalero Apache)

I first met Gerald Clarke in October 1996 while attending an Atlatl arts conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma.<sup>1</sup> At the time, Gerald was an instructor of art at Northeast Texas Community College in Mount Pleasant, Texas, and I was an artist and director/curator of the American Indian Community House Gallery in New York City. Like many of the people attending, we had come to meet other artists, see new work, and to learn and share information at the many panels and workshops over the course of three or four days. It was exciting.

It was evident then, and is equally clear now, that Clarke's "ultimate goal as an artist is to give Indian culture back the humanity that has been taken from it by stereotypes created over the past five centuries. Neither the super-shaman nor the drunken-Indian convey what we as a people feel. In my work, I look for the unconventional beauty one finds only in TRUTHS. It celebrates, it mourns, and it outshines all else."<sup>2</sup>

A couple of years after our first meeting, while vacationing in southern California, I was invited to attend a cattle roundup on Gerald's family ranch on the Cahuilla Reservation. If you have never attended a roundup, you might expect it to be a little bit like Hollywood depictions of ranch life. There are lots of good-looking cowboys on horseback, but it is horrifying when you witness how cows are branded and calves are castrated. It actually is nothing like the movies we watched when we were children. As I think back, however, these are the events that contributed to the formation of much of Gerald Clarke's work. The found and

fashioned objects used in his art represent the tools of ordinary working class people. A cattle ranch cannot run on its own. Among many activities, one has to check and mend fences, run barbed wire. You have to ride out and make sure a cow is not sick, or gotten its leg caught in a hole, or a calf has not strayed from its mother. To fix the fence, you need the right tools.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar sense, Gerald Clark views art as an object, much like a tool. He has written that he is "a very traditional artist, in the fact that I'll always feel the need to make an object." "I view my work as being very traditional. People blink a couple of times when I say that. Cahuilla basket makers go out and gather materials, and they put them together to produce something that is both functional and aesthetic. I kind of do my work the same way. I go out and I gather these things. I combine them."<sup>4</sup>

Baskets are a traditional art form of the Cahuilla people. Gerald's Aunt Patsy is a basketmaker and from this Gerald is following a family as well as a tribal tradition. The real difference is in the material he uses and the meaning of the objects he creates. Thus, his work deviates from the basket tradition through the creation of a visually complimentary object created with crushed beer and soda cans. The result represents new issues. As Clarke writes, "Sugar and alcohol have certainly had an impact on native communities so it stands to reason that they would be included in native art."<sup>5</sup> *Continuum Basket* is larger than life, as are the related social conditions in Indian Country.

5. Gerald Clarke, *Continuum Basket* (detail), 2002. Metal (aluminum cans)



3. Gerald Clarke, *Artifacts*, 1996.  
Four shovels, photographs, ink

In *Artifacts*, created in 1996, we see four shovels leaning against a wall; the top of each handle is wrapped with a different colored ribbon (black, green, red, and yellow) to represent each of the artist's three aunts and his father. Affixed above the top of each blade is a photograph of a family member while a corresponding story about that person is written along the entire length of the handle. Finally, welded to each blade is a symbol representing a cattle brand utilized by Clarke's family. His deliberate use of the shovel symbolizes the "digging up of the past" to reveal

12. Gerald Clarke, *To the Discriminating Collector*, 2002. Iron

the American Indian present.<sup>6</sup>

*To the Discriminating Collector* is a welded iron branding iron with the word "INDIAN," created to suggest that those who really are not so discriminating can put the mark of authenticity wherever they think appropriate. The artist writes that he "created this 'branding iron' so that they [collectors] could place the INDIAN mark on all artwork that they deem 'authentic.'" The function of the iron is to brand art objects, books, clothing, religion, or even people that a collector might consider "Indian."<sup>7</sup> A burned paper work



4. Gerald Clarke, *Branded*, 2006.  
Burned paper



titled *Branded* provides a graphic impression of the effect of the iron. This very piece represents the dilemma of artists who work conceptually and are often the first to be considered inauthentic. This is constantly played out in Indian markets across the United States, where traditional arts are pitted against contemporary art forms.

It is these markets that led in 1998 to Gerald's creation of *Indian Wisdom and Manifest Destiny*, two highly decorated gumball machines with very specific and serious messages. He wrote recently that "the gumball machines were my way of addressing the problem of the Indian art market. This way, I could 'sell out' in my own way!" The first dispenses messages taken from books by Native writers, sharing "wisdom" and connecting consumers to information about Indians from Indians. The artist

jokingly included an image of himself on the front of the machine. With *Manifest Destiny*, he turned "the tables by 'ripping off' the viewer who puts in a quarter and expects a dollar. It's much like the concept of Manifest Destiny itself—something for nothing." The unsuspecting buyer receives a plastic container hidden behind visible "prizes" holding dollar bills. What actually comes out of the machine is printed information of a challenging and political nature. Clarke concluded that such a machine could make money and that is when he "realized it had an Indian gaming thing going on as well!"<sup>8</sup>

Gerald furthered this exploration of ideas about markets and authenticity when he played with them in two performance pieces: *Extreme Makeover* and *Antiques Road Show*. Both are from the documentary, *Borderlands: Gerald*



6. Gerald Clarke, *Indian Wisdom* (gumball machine), 1998. Metal, wood, plaster, pencil, digital print, printed fabric



7. Gerald Clarke, *Manifest Destiny* (gumball machine), 1998. Metal, wood, plastic, dollar bills, cowboy hat, printed fabric

*Clarke, Cabuilla Artist Crossing the Line.* Here, satire reveals how Native people are often viewed by outsiders. A scene in *Extreme Makeover* starts with Gerald appearing in breechcloth and there are two stylists discussing how they plan to make him over—into what, is not evi-

dent. They have preselected a variety of outfits ranging from a hip-hop costume to a suit, and finally settle on a Western shirt and boots, braided hair, jeans, and a bolo tie to express a common stereotype. In *Antiques Road Show*, an Anglo man brings his life-size Indian to the



8. Gerald Clarke,  
*Myaamionki*, 2007 in  
consultation with  
Scott Shoemaker.  
Steel, paint, wood



9. Gerald Clarke,  
*Oonseentia*, 2007 in  
consultation with  
Scott Shoemaker.  
Steel, paint, wood



10. Gerald Clarke,  
*Seekaahkwiaanki*, 2007  
in consultation with  
Scott Shoemaker.  
Steel, paint, wood

“Indian expert” (again Gerald appears in breechcloth) to learn if he has a real and valuable object. Through the expert’s inspection, we witness his conclusion that this is not a genuine Indian since the identifying marks of authenticity are not located on the underside of his feet, and the type of symbol found is unknown, further demonstrating that he is fake, prompting the treasure seeker to leave feeling dismayed and disappointed.<sup>9</sup>

Another video and installation piece first performed in 2002 and revived in 2007 is *Task*. Here, Gerald steps away from issues of authenticity and explores his own reactions to the events of September 11, 2001. Arising from a dream he had a few weeks after the terrorist attack, the work shows him literally “ironing out the wrinkles that plague our world.” It is described as a commemorative and healing ritual in which words inscribed on wrinkled cloth are pressed flat. With concern for



5. Gerald Clarke, *Continuum Basket*, 2002. Metal (aluminum cans)



what kind of life his children could be facing, the artist developed the piece with the realization that “I began to feel that the production of art and the freedom of speech that it entails is incredibly important to our country and in the healing process. Artists, as much as

doctors, psychologists, and spiritualists, have a role to play in settling the nerves of this nation and all of humanity.”<sup>10</sup>

*Task* demonstrates that Gerald Clarke works with art in reference to the larger world. Yet, he never loses touch with his family and cultural base

on the Cahuilla reservation in Southern California. In spite of the fact that he was raised in rural Orange County and spent much of his teens in Arkansas, he remained part of his father's life on the reservation. *Ivawen* ("be strong"), *Kimul Hakushwe* ("the door is open"), *Nextaxmuqa* ("I am singing") and *Nesun e' elquish* ("I am sad") are road signs created in 2001 to greet you along the Cahuilla reservation's washboard road to the Clarke ranch. I had heard from Gerald about these signs. I expected to see yellow caution signs reflecting a winding road, designating falling rock, or calling for a slower speed. What Clarke created in the Cahuilla language is something quite different. He was careful to consider how these signs would affect the daily experience of the people who live on the reservation and was happily surprised to hear that people liked them and requested signs to go along their own property lines. Over time, the signs disappeared, just as many signs along a highway are often collected or vandalized. The artist liked the idea of average people on the reservation seeing them as a natural part of their environment. This reflects his sense of purpose, which is that "the most important audience is my own tribal members. I just want them to see this and feel like, 'Yeah, we are a valuable people.'"<sup>11</sup>

With similar ideas in mind, he created three signs for the Eiteljorg Museum, connecting with Native peoples of that region and addressing them as his audience. Written in Miami, the

signs are *Myaamionki* ("Place of the Miami"), *Seekaahkwiaanki* ("We held on to the tree limbs"), and *Oonseentia* ("yellow poplar tree"). Created in collaboration with Scott Shoemaker, a Miami artist and historian, they are appropriately installed on the grounds of the Eiteljorg Museum, on land that was the original homeland of the Miami people.

Gerald Clarke has traveled far. With advanced degrees in painting and sculpture, he has taught at a number of universities and currently serves as Adjunct Instructor of Art at Idyllwild Arts Academy, Idyllwild, California. He describes himself by saying, "I'm a California Indian—part traditionalist, part Disneyland." As you can tell, Gerald is a "contemporary artist of Cahuilla Indian decent. I'm not interested in what most people call 'Indian art' because it seldom seems real to what I've experienced as a native person." He also tells us that "I believe all things have the potential to teach. I create art works that in turn teach me. I create artwork that I think my people could respond to—something to make them think and remember who we are. I also create for the sole purpose of creating."<sup>12</sup>

Gerald Clarke has not striven to create work for the art market. This releases him from a constraint that many artists work under. His work comes from a place of recognition, a place of home, a place of the Cahuilla. ■

1. Since the 1970s, Atlatl has served nationally to promote contemporary Native American art.
2. Gerald Clarke, "Artist's Statement, Fellowship Application, Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art," July 7, 2006. See also, Hudson Old, "Indian drives stake in vampires' art," *East Texas Journal* (November 1996): 4; and, Richard Nilsen, "Indian artists merge culture with tradition," *Arizona Republic*, December 14, 1997, 61.
3. For a short biography of Clarke see, [www.hanksville.org/artists/GClarke/Biography.html](http://www.hanksville.org/artists/GClarke/Biography.html), accessed 7/17/2007. Not long after this meeting in 1999, the first of Clarke's two daughters was born; family has a deep impact on his work.
4. "Artist Conversations with the Curator, Gerald L. Clarke, July 22, 1997, Mt. Pleasant, Texas," *The Heard Museum, Seventh Contemporary Native American Invitational*, Phoenix, 1997.
5. *Raw Material* (Riverside, California: Riverside Art Museum, 2006), 4-5; and [www.hanksville.org/artists/GClarke/Photoalbum/pages/can-basket.jpg.htm](http://www.hanksville.org/artists/GClarke/Photoalbum/pages/can-basket.jpg.htm), accessed 7/17/2007.
6. [www.hanksville.org/artists/GClarke/Photoalbum/pages/Shovels.jpg.htm](http://www.hanksville.org/artists/GClarke/Photoalbum/pages/Shovels.jpg.htm), accessed 7/17/2007.
7. [www.hanksville.org/artists/GClarke/Photoalbum/pages/brand.jpg.htm](http://www.hanksville.org/artists/GClarke/Photoalbum/pages/brand.jpg.htm), accessed 7/17/2007.
8. E-mail from Gerald Clarke to Jennifer Compo McNutt, July 19, 2007. Clarke further develops ideas about relations in his piece entitled *Ethnopoly*. See David Revere McFadden and Ellen Napiura Taubman, *Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation 2* (New York: Museum of Arts & Design, 2005), 60.
9. *Borderlands: Gerald Clarke, Cahuilla artist crossing the line* (Lanham, Md.: National Film Network, 2006).
10. Clarke e-mail to McNutt; and, [www.hanksville.org/artists/GClarke/Photoalbum/pages/task.jpg.htm](http://www.hanksville.org/artists/GClarke/Photoalbum/pages/task.jpg.htm).
11. [www.hanksville.org/artists/GClarke/Photoalbum/pages/netaxmuqa-sign.jpg.htm](http://www.hanksville.org/artists/GClarke/Photoalbum/pages/netaxmuqa-sign.jpg.htm), accessed 7/17/2007; "Cahuilla homecoming inspires art," by Jamie Ayala, *The Press Enterprise* (Riverside, California), July 7, 2006.
12. Clarke, "Artist's Statement, Fellowship Application." [www.hanksville.org/artists/GClarke/Artist%20Statement.html](http://www.hanksville.org/artists/GClarke/Artist%20Statement.html) and [www.hanksville.org/artists/GClarke/](http://www.hanksville.org/artists/GClarke/)