Voice in the Blood

*A Conversation with Colleen Cutschall**

BY AGNES GRANT

Agnes: Colleen, you are an Oglala-Lakota artist, an assistant professor, artist-in-residence and chair of the Fine Arts Program at the university in Brandon, Manitoba. You have had solo exhibitions, have been a curator and a contributing artist to many shows. You refer to yourself as a "fine artist," not a "traditional artist." Yet I look at your paintings and I see largely representations of Lakota mythology. How do you make the distinction?

Colleen: Traditional artists begin, not necessarily with a reserve experience, but that has been their major relationship and focus and cultural experience. Their entire identity has never been otherwise. Many Native traditional artists, and also self-taught fine artists, who have been at home evolving their skills, simply start by producing articles for their families and friends. A family may be involved in the pow-wow circuit with a long tradition of dancing. Members of that family will be developing the smaller items, like small pieces of beadwork or quillwork or leatherwork specifically for costumes and not for markets. These skills develop and they become very good at them, even well-known, but for a good long time the purpose is not non-Native markets. Many of these items are not made for a monetary trade system. It's more a barter system where exchanges are made for certain raw materials in return for particular skills.

Traditional art takes a great deal of time. Preparation and modification of raw materials takes time. A major portion of a traditional artist's time has to do with choice of materials and collecting those materials. It can take months just to gather the quality materials that a connoisseur of Native art might be looking for. There is a misconception that there are many artists working in this field. There aren't. To get quality items that a museum collector might be looking for is not quite that simple. Often they do not have access to the materials they were able to collect in earlier times. It takes weeks, months or maybe years to make the kind of item you might find in a museum.

Items made for ritual purposes take on a mythological time. The recreation of sacred time is very much alive in the minds and hearts of Native people. Whether or not spirituality is specifically in their iconography, it certainly is a part of their lives. This sacred, or mythological time is constantly being renewed. This is why the culture hasn't been lost. The whole concept about world view is born in them and constantly is renewed.

Agnes: When you speak of the influences in your life, it is usually men's names that appear — names like Oscar Howe, Art Amiotte, Herman Red Elk and others. Are you unique — a female Lakota artist?

Colleen: Very few Native females pursue an academic degree towards a Fine Arts career. It's amazing how few, but there are some fairly basic reasons why. All we have to do is look at the age statistics for unwanted pregnancies occurring on reserve settings. We can also look at both males and females and at what age alcohol becomes a problem. At age 18 people have already become crippled with major social problems. At that age, if you have kids, you're going to spend the next ten years at least trying to put your kids' lives together before college can ever become a realistic goal again.

I don't think the schools did much for me in the way of encouraging art work. Art classes were electives in junior high school. Our local Catholic church was sort of a Native community centre; just as I got into high school we started to have Indian art shows — local people from Rapid City and surrounding areas. I was just a typical, very young, untrained artist. But I liked to paint and displayed my work with all these older people. About 1964 my father took first place with his ornamental welding, my mother took second place with my painting. We kind of cornered the market that year!

That was a good starting point for me and I know this hasn't happened in other Native communities. When I was just out of junior high I went to an Indian Arts workshop with Oscar Howe. This was a very good experience for me at such an early age. He was far beyond me, but I did learn a great deal from him about his art work and about some basic principles of painting. My interests moved more and more into the direction of wanting to study art in a serious way.

I was very young when I started to identify as an artist. At 14, this became my primary purpose in life. There were no art classes during the rest of my high school and I became starved for that kind of information.

I attended a Catholic university for women in Chicago. There I got the kind of encouragement I'd never had in my life before. My colleagues and peers had the same intensity of desire to work in the arts. This is probably the finest part of every trained artist's experience — to have this creative environment and shared

* *The art of Colleen Cutschall is featured on the back cover of this issue.*

support by so many other people. And to have professionals around to encourage and give direction.

The experience was very valuable though I had to go through all the things Native students go through, like culture shock and being away from home. But I was so intrigued with what I was studying! I became more foreign, or this world became more alien the longer I stayed in it, but what I was learning was what I really wanted. I got a broad experience in the history of art as well as studio work. However, it wasn't Native; there was nothing that could support my personal identity as a Native or encourage what I might know about my own artistic roots.

Agnes: When you finished college, what opportunities did you have as a Native woman with a Fine Arts degree?

Colleen: I went home to the Black Hills. This was extremely necessary for me at that point. Chicago had drained me. I had to go home to recover something of the Native person I had left behind. I had got the education I wanted, but I didn't have an education about my own people.

I got a job in the education system. As a teacher I had to do a lot of research for my classes because I was teaching, quite happily, the cultural arts of the Plains. It was a way for me to find out about my own culture. I now understood the phenomenon of art history and felt that, indeed, we must have one as well.

It was a very hotly political period as well; it was right after the second standoff at Wounded Knee. My personal life was in an upheaval and I became more concerned with the social and political. I was not totally able to express what I was feeling. There was no place for me to show my work, no reception for it and I pretty well quit painting for five years. It was emotionally such a volatile time for everyone.

There was no place for me to show my work, no reception for it and I pretty well quit painting for five years.

Agnes: So, what started you painting again?

Colleen: I left South Dakota in 1977 and began to resume my painting in 1978. What I started with were large ethnographical portraits of Lakota women of the early reservation period. I found, in learning about my history, how blank this period was for most people. They were having a hard time connecting the major events of the present period with the romantic historical Natives of 100, 200 years ago. In our own communities many of us had parents and grandparents who had come through the brainwashing where cultural activities and language were taboo. People had become Christianized. It happened very quickly and was a particularly violent period and one which was poorly understood. My effort in this work was to look at this period for its visual content in terms of the actual accoutrements of the people and the changes they were making from the traditional buckskin, quills and beads to what was essentially an early pioneer kind of dress. It was such a strange mixture. My own family had a number of photographs that showed these transition stages clearly. I was excited from an historical detail point of view and I wanted to paint these things.

I was also becoming stronger in terms of my own identity as a female. This was very important for me at that time so I was trying to look particularly at women, trying to understand something of myself, how I came out of the history to become what I was. I was having a hard time relating to these women who had left me empty of all this cultural past, who indeed, I felt, had not brought much forward and into my life. I needed to know what that was and why that had happened and to quit being angry about it and try to understand it.

What they were, at least at first, were no-background paintings but they were quite colourful. I put the people up front. I made my people so large and so enormous you would have to notice them. You would have to look at them. You would have to see how ironic or how strange these very strong physical characteristics were, this physical presence, in contrast to the white clothes they were wearing. So this was my way of trying to communicate this — making people look at it. Making myself look at it!

They were very powerful figures. From an artistic point of view, I also understand that probably what I was doing wasn't right. You didn't float figures on no background — but you can if you're a Plains person! So what I began to do was to deal with the actual physical part of a person in a realistic three-dimensional fashion but I took their clothes, which were superficial — superficial to them in their time, and looked superficial on them — and I made those things two-dimensional, very flat. Those two are quite separate styles and normally they should not work together. At the time I felt they were working together. I don't feel that way about them now, indeed, they quite bother me from an aesthetic point of view now. During that time the whole idea seemed far more important than the rules. I still have pretty fair audience reception to the paintings; I think people were quite intrigued with the whole presence of these women.

That particular style grew from single figures to double figures to enormous paintings — major works with 7, 9, 11 figures in a single painting maybe 6 feet wide by 4 feet high. They required one's whole attention and demanded a whole wall to even view. That didn't make carrying my work around very easy! These were things I found out — all the awkward problems with shipping and transporting and also the enormous costs involved in material and paint and framing — when I took them to a major exhibition in South Dakota.

I continued this ethnological work when I moved to Portland. I began to meet Native people on their own reserves much more extensively and I was quite intrigued with their culture and costumes which were quite different from the Plains. So I began to include Native women from other tribes. I was trying to paint real women, not conceptualized women. This was my whole point. And later on I added men as well.

Another fascination took me over around 1978, 1979. I was quite intrigued with the narrative style of beadwork that evolved in the early reservation period. The pictographic painting which had been done primarily on hides in the late 1800s and early 1900s began appearing on vests in beadwork. Some of it was realistic but much was still in the pictographic style. I was always struck by the quality of the beadwork. I like the crisp feeling you get with the white background and the very precise design. The feeling and texture especially interested me. So I began what

were very long, single strokes of paint, probably 1" to 2" long on very large canvases, but how to create that same feeling on a large painting? It wasn't working. It didn't have the texture I wanted to communicate. In less than a year's time I kept reducing the size of strokes and it started getting closer to the feeling I wanted. It made sense to make it larger than the actual beadwork, but it would be paint. It was small enough not to lose the quality of the nice, textured, rounded feeling of the beads.

Agnes: What influences changed the subject matter of your paintings?

Colleen: Late in the 1970s and early 1980s I was looking for galleries and outlets for marketing my work. This whole period was also reflective of a total focus I had on establishing myself in the field of Native art as a fine artist.

I also began very intellectually to think of metaphysical ideas. I began to explore the depth of Native ritual and ceremonial ideas.

I decided to go to the southwestern United States — for a number of reasons — but one was that the area was more receptive to marketing Native art. There were limited job prospects for me there and I was largely job hunting so I did little artwork and visited few museums. But in New Mexico I lived with people who were deeply involved in their traditions – their rituals, ceremonies, perspectives and outlook on life. I lived with their attitudes, values, lifestyle, art and ritual life on a day-to-day basis.

After my travels I understood myself as a Lakota person . . . My art began to change.

I also had been dealing with mythologies of the Northwestern Native people between 1978 and 1980. I was beginning to understand from these mythologies that there was a group of symbols and I had lots of questions about world view and how these world views affect people today. How this might be expressed in art started to become a concern for me.

What happened next both in terms of my work and my art are very much related. I left the southwest and returned home in order to get a sense of my traditions both for myself and for my four-year-old daughter. After my travels I understood myself as a Lakota person and though I had started out with a great deal of arrogance, my travels had taken care of much of my personal ethnocentrism.

My art began to change. It focused more on metaphysical ideas. I began to depict in a Lakota Plains pictographic fashion what I knew to be metaphysical concepts of my own people. I was no longer conforming to rules of quillwork or beadwork. I was using texture and idea that had originally derived from these techniques but I was beginning to apply it with total artistic licence to ideas I wanted to communicate.

I also became involved in a very personal and intense way with the traditions of my own people. I studied under a mentor and everything really flowered for me in a spiritual sense, in a personal sense and to a large degree as an artist. Over the last 8 years I have been a participant in these traditions and they have had a major influence on my art.

I began presenting far more of my own ideas. And then I took another leap. I began to know my own Oglala-Lakota mythology and studied it within the context of the history of religion. I also spent a year researching temporality, or time.

This resulted in a focus that is in my work now. I did a preliminary series attempting to document the Lakota creation mythology. I felt a great need to express some of the major symbols, and what I was feeling in terms of coming to grips with my own mythology had its beginnings. While this was a personal struggle I was also trying to commit these ideas to canvas. I was trying to put together, in a coherent fashion, what I knew of my own cultural symbolism, what I was beginning to understand as world archetypes and international symbolism. This was an extremely personal and important growing time for me.

Agnes: Tell me about your current work.

Colleen: My current work is a revitalization of this early series on Lakota creation myth. My intention with this series is to enlarge the canvases to a size I think is appropriate to their importance and to explore in detail Lakota mythological narrative and symbolism. I'm hoping the overall effect will be to produce a live, moving story for viewers that relates the mythological past as it's made present in Lakota ceremony.

I am working on a series of 24 to 26 paintings called "Voice in the Blood." Stylistically, I am using the technique that simulates quillwork or the Lakota lazy stitch technique used in beadwork. This technique suggests the universal concept of weaving or spinning time. I am presently working on the first phase and I will continue to work on this project throughout the next year

Agnes: You have taken on this massive project which must consume a great deal of your time and energy. Do you think only mythological thoughts? Do you find the label of being an Oglala-Lakota artist restrictive? Are there other pictures you could be painting?

Colleen: Oh yes, I could do other pictures. Some restrictions are found in terms of interpreting my own culture and how far can I actually go with that? But I don't find it restricting. These are the things I am capable of communicating; it's not that I've always been able to do that. I earned all these things! I had to work toward every bit of this understanding that I've come to now. I could not have done this 10 or 15 years ago. These things have evolved in a form of a personal continuity in my life.

Does my mind always function in an Oglala way? Maybe it does, but in a much nicer fashion than when so many of those doors were closed and I couldn't see how one part of me related to another.

There are times when I want to break free from what I am doing. Perhaps that's why I kept changing styles. Over a period of 10 years now I've developed 5 different styles.

This style is so rigid, so time consuming, so tedious, there are days when I just want to cover the canvas with nothing but colour and do it spontaneously. There are days when I am so stiff from holding this paint brush so rigidly and repeating these strokes in a pattern that I know must be in a certain way! It is very controlled. I'm expressing a very fine point, something that needs to be communicated, so I am not able to be spontaneous. I am trying to be very clear so there aren't any mistakes. So people do not become confused by my work; I want them to be enlightened or find a relationship within my work.

Once the series is done I may have my heyday of spontaneity, a tantrum on canvas!

Agnes: You are a full-time professor, you are developing a Fine Arts program. You are Vice-Chair of the Board of Directors of the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba. You have a 12-year-old daughter. How do you find time to paint?

Colleen: I have to fight for my time as an artist. When people have all these demands on my other skills which totally consume my life, I get very defensive about wanting to maintain that time between me and that canvas. I know it is something I have to fight for. I need to get out of the 8 to 5 routine, doing all the proper things for everybody else and just make time for me, the artist.

The freedom that I feel when I am painting! The freedom to do nothing but paint! To paint what I want. Nobody has control in that studio other than me – and maybe the paint and brush.

Agnes: How do you make the transition from the hectic everyday things to where you can immerse yourself totally in your paintings?

Colleen: I do my best to make my schedule, my appointment book as clean as possible with no commitments. I get everything out of the way that I possibly can. When I come home I have to make sure there are clean clothes for a few days, the dishes are done, that there's something easy to fix for dinners for a few days in a row because I don't want to have to break from painting. I don't want to feel guilty that all this other stuff is not taken care of because I've taken the time to paint. There's always that other Colleen Cutschall who comes into my painting – "Maybe your daughter's hungry" – or you know something should be done for someone else. And I just hate that Colleen Cutschall when I'm up in my studio. She makes me really mad. So the only way I can control her is to satisfy her. Give her everything she wants so the other Colleen Cutschall can go up into the studio. So maybe we are a little schizoid. But I know who that other person is, who does everything right, satisfies all the bureaucracies and all the demands of a normal life. But there's a Colleen Cutschall who has to paint, too. And she gets mad, too!

Feminism, Family and Photography

BY SUSAN McEACHERN

Practically every woman has latent artistic abilities that have never been recognized or developed. We may not all be able to paint a picture (though many who have never thought it possible have discovered they could) but we can express this love and recognition of beauty in the decoration of our homes.

— Polly Cramer

I used this statement of Polly Cramer's in an artwork titled *The Home* that I produced in 1981. It seems an appropriate starting point for a discussion of my work because it makes reference to many topics that are still at the centre of my concern: the sexual division of labour, the value of women's traditional labour, artistic production and popular culture. While I have always attempted to situate my work within the familiar — within everyday life — I have also considered the production of this work as art: I have placed the work within an art discourse.

When I speak of the production of my own work I am speaking of the work I do with the medium of photography. For me photography has a number of characteristics I feel ambivalent about. For instance, to say you are a photographer avoids the question of whether you are an artist or not — photographer is its own tidy category. Also, photography has associations with technical wizardry and fancy gadgets — a technique rather than a method by which one gains a voice. As a feminist, to feel the "odd woman out" in such circumstances is not unique to me nor to the field of photography.

In an effort to write about how feminism has affected my work, it is impossible to begin without considering the time and place in which I decided to "launch my career." I don't think it is useful to attempt to define what feminism is in all the familiar and endearing terms. I never "became a feminist," feminism was a definition that came along sometime during my high school years that seemed to describe my experience up to that point. I was just grateful that somebody had given it a name.

I, like many women of my age, was educated by male teachers and, particularly in terms of my photographic education, the majority of my peers were male. One of the main things that feminism has contributed to my work is a sense of having colleagues and the realization that my colleagues span a great number of formal disciplines as well as enter into the mundane routines of daily life. I discovered that when we give ourselves permission to speak, and convince ourselves that our experience and our insights are worthy of note, then categorizations often drop away, titles fade, and we may be asked to join in.

After studying photography in Banff for two years, I moved to