

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Museums

A Cherokee Artist Wrestling with Grief, Colonialism, and False Dichotomies

- by [Elena Goukassian](#) on April 6, 2016



Kay WalkingStick, “Night/O’RT (Usvi)” (1991), oil, acrylic, wax, and copper on canvas, 36.25 x 72.25 x 2 in (courtesy the Montclair Art Museum, purchased with funds provided by Alberta Stout)

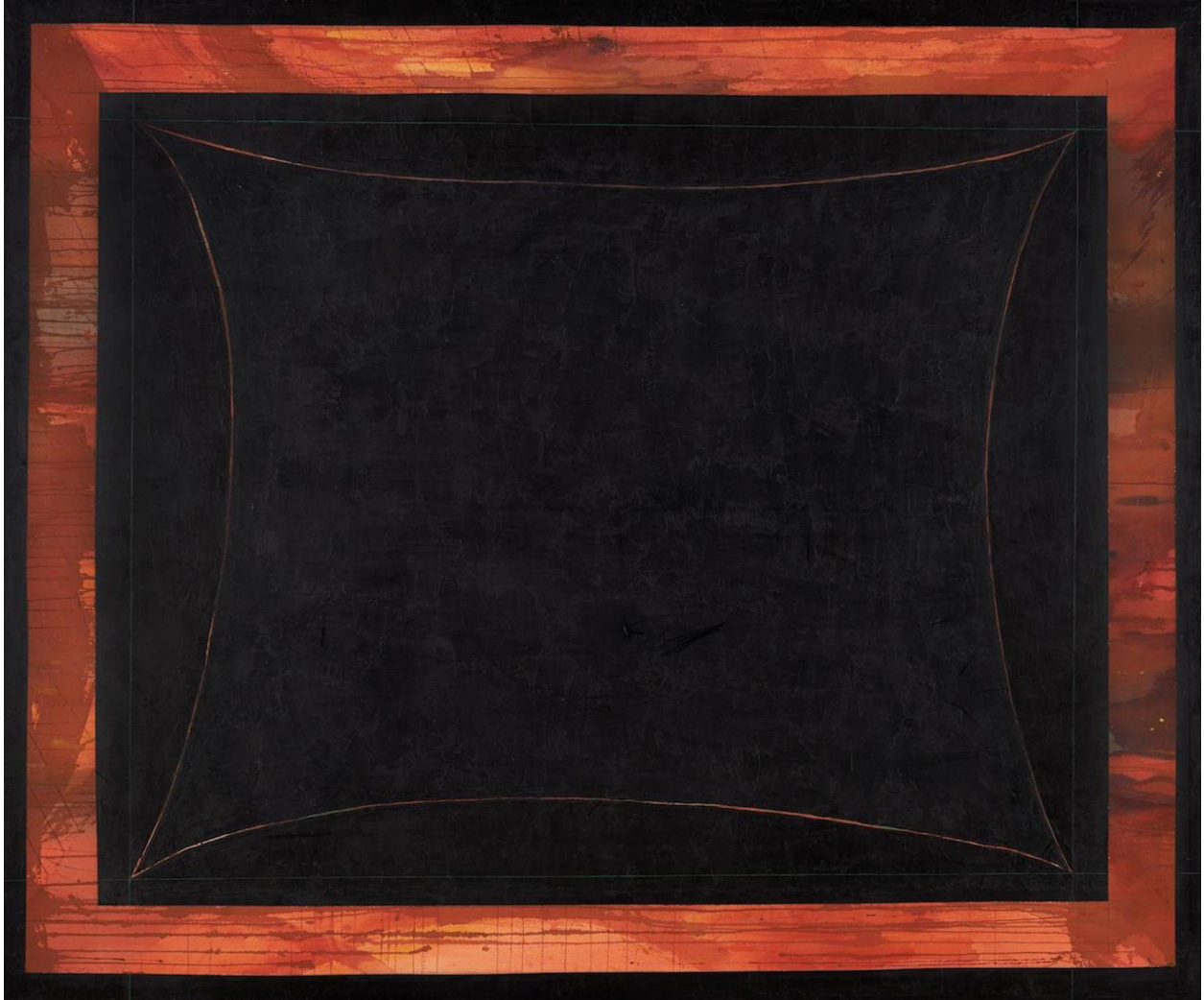
WASHINGTON, DC — Kay WalkingStick has devoted herself to breaking down perceived dichotomies. At her retrospective at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), the introductory wall text describes WalkingStick as “a citizen of both the United States and the Cherokee Nation.” Her father was Native American, but she grew up in New Jersey with her Scottish-Irish mother and converted to Catholicism when she was in her 60s. WalkingStick describes herself as an artist, a mother, and a biracial woman. She says her work is part of an effort to reconcile the anger she feels toward her absentee, alcoholic father with the perception of “Indians as noble Americans.” WalkingStick’s works span abstraction and realism; her materials of choice are saponified wax mixed with acrylics and oils; and her strongest works are diptychs.



Kay WalkingStick, “Me and My Neon Box” (1971), acrylic on canvas, 54 x 60 in, collection of the artist (courtesy the artist, photo by Lee Stalworth, Fine Art through Photography, LLC)

Kay WalkingStick: An American Artist is the 81-year-old, Pennsylvania-based painter’s first major retrospective. The show presents more than 75 works chronologically, grouping time periods into five major categories, beginning with “The Sensual Body” — her 1970s feminist explorations through neon colored abstract nudes —and ending with “Landscape: The Power of Native Place” — works from the 2000s that pair native designs with images of the lands that specific tribes have lost to colonization.

The works in the show vary greatly in style and substance, but WalkingStick’s mid-career output stands out as the most powerful. In the 1980s, she started making diptychs, depicting the material world on one side and what she describes as “internal spiritual comprehension” on the other. A group of works that WalkingStick created between 1989 and 1995 is particularly striking. Made in the aftermath of her husband’s sudden death, the series portrays Ithaca’s prominent gorges (WalkingStick served on the art faculty at Cornell University at the time), juxtaposed with abstract panels featuring mysterious shadows of geometric shapes representative of the artist’s grief. The group of works provides a candid view into WalkingStick’s grieving process, from the dramatic, red-and-black “The Abyss” (1989), through the blues and greens of “Letting Go from Chaos to Calm” (1990), to the pink and yellow cliffs of “Seeking the Silence, I” (1994). Although most of the works in the series are paintings, there are also a few charcoal drawings, one of which replaces the natural landscape with a beautifully somber self-portrait.



As time progresses, so do WalkingStick's diptychs, which take on the three-dimensional weight of layers of paint, at times resembling gashes in skin. Eventually, she broke her own boundary and started migrating the figurative panel into the abstract one, all the while showing influences of abstraction in the realist panel. One of her most recent works, "New Mexico Desert" (2011), portrays a landscape that seamlessly spans the whole diptych. An abstract Navajo rug pattern is superimposed on the landscape in the right-hand panel, reminding us that this land once belonged to the Navajo.



Kay WalkingStick, "Montauk II (Dusk)" (1983), acrylic, wax, and ink on canvas, 56 x 56 x 4.25 in, collection of the artist (courtesy the artist, photo by Lee Stalsworth, Fine Art through Photography, LLC)

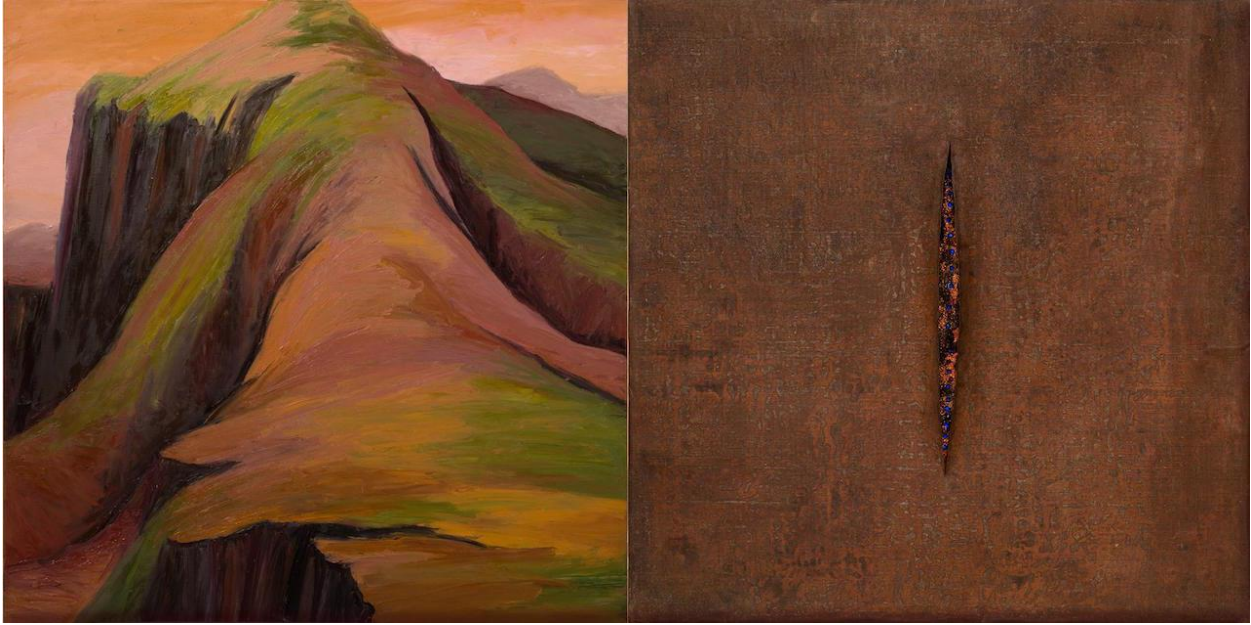
At roughly the same time as she started making diptychs, the 500th anniversary of Columbus' "discovery" of the Americas prompted WalkingStick to create work that delved into her own experiences as a Native American. Although she had already painted a number of works commemorating Native American history and people, like Sacajawea and Chief Joseph, in the early '90s she began incorporating the Cherokee language into her work, foregrounding her identity as a member of the tribe. WalkingStick's works from this period include paintings, as well as artist books and sculptures. Probably the most powerful is "Tears/ᏍᏍᏍᏍᏍᏍ" (1990), a small sculpture of a funeral pyre with a metal plaque where the fire should be, commemorating those who died as a result of Columbus's

“discovery.” One of the artist books, *Talking Leaves* (1993), is a nice complement to WalkingStick’s diptychs, with comments left by people upon finding out that she is Native American on the left-hand side and a gouache self-portrait to the right of each open leaf. With every turn of a page (the NMAI created a reproduction for people to flip through), WalkingStick gets older, while the quotes vacillate between offensive jokes about reservations and alcoholism to unabashedly racist observations — one, for instance, reads: “We were told to hire minority artists, but there were no good minority artists.”



Kay WalkingStick, “New Mexico Desert” (2011), oil on wood panel, 40 x 80 x 2 in, purchased through a special gift from the Louise Ann Williams Endowment, 2013 (courtesy the National Museum of the American Indian)

The NMAI has done a fabulous job presenting all the aspects of WalkingStick’s work. The show even includes a case of 15 of her sketchbooks, spanning 1996 to 2012, which provide a fascinating glimpse into the artist’s process. There’s also a short video, where WalkingStick explains her background and discusses a few of her most important works. But the most instructive addition to the art itself is a smartphone app, in which WalkingStick takes us through the entire exhibition, explaining her thoughts on a couple dozen works for a few minutes each. Although it’s still rather strange to see a contemporary artist’s retrospective housed in an institution that usually operates as an anthropological and ethnographic museum, the fact that the curators kept to the NMAI’s mission of favoring the personal experiences of individual Native Americans — as opposed to fetishizing historical documents — is all the more beneficial to this show’s presentation. Like WalkingStick and her work, the resulting exhibition straddles a very interesting but seldom-explored gray area between dichotomies.



Kay WalkingStick, "Venere Alpina" (1997), oil on canvas (left), steel mesh over acrylic, wax, and plastic stones (right), 32 x 64 in, collection of the artist (courtesy the artist, photo by Lee Stalworth, Fine Art through Photography, LLC)



Kay WalkingStick, "Gioioso, Variation II" (2001), oil and gold leaf on wood panel, 32 x 64 in (courtesy of the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, Indianapolis) Kay WalkingStick, "Gioioso, Variation II" (2001), oil and gold leaf on wood panel, 32 x 64 in (courtesy of the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, Indianapolis)



Kay WalkingStick, "Eternal Chaos / Eternal Calm" (1993), acrylic on canvas, 20.5 x 41 in, collection of the artist (courtesy the artist, photo by Lee Stalsworth, Fine Art through Photography, LLC)

[Kay WalkingStick: An American Artist](#) continues at the Smithsonian's [National Museum of the American Indian](#) (4th Street and Independence Avenue, Washington, DC) through September 18. *Kay WalkingStick: An American Artist continues at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (4th Street and Independence Avenue, Washington, DC) through September 18.*