

Tears and Rain

One Artist's View from Sea Level

by Rebecca J. Dobkins

RICK BARTOW'S WORK AFFIRMS the power of close observation and the interconnectedness of humanity with all forms of life. Accepting his invitation to see more carefully and to feel connections more deeply brings us a greater understanding of this place we now call Oregon. Bartow's source of sight is grounded in close observation of his surroundings on the Oregon coast and in understanding that which is not immediately obvious: the presence of the past, the impact of change, the stories that lurk within every creature and corner.

Bartow's work is provocative, insistent, and engaging. For some, the multiple layers of significance in his images may be ambiguous or hard to read. But careful looking rewards viewers, who are invited to recognize their place in the network of human-animal kin relations that Bartow reveals. Bartow's embrace of aesthetic traditions across time and place leaves open an invitation for the viewer to meet his work at various intersections. He draws on his Native heritage but defies simple

categorization as a "Native American artist." In addition to many contemporary indigenous artists, he counts as influences European artists who work expressionistically with human and animal forms and who explore the fantastic and the emotional, including Marc Chagall (Russian, 1887–1985), Francis Bacon (British, 1909–1992), Odilon Redon (French, 1840–1916), and Horst Janssen (German, 1929–1995). Ultimately, however, Bartow's work has its genesis in the land and light of his home place.

Bartow was born in Newport, Oregon, in 1946. His family has been in Oregon nearly a hundred years. In 1911, his grandfather John Bartow walked over three hundred miles from McKinleyville, California, to Lincoln City. The Bartow family eventually settled in South Beach, Oregon, and homesteaded a plot of land near a slough along Idaho Point Road. John Bartow was of Wiyot tribal heritage, though for many years the Bartow family believed him to be Yurok, a neighboring tribe in northwest-



Rick Bartow, *Guardian*, 2005, pastel, mixed media. 10" x 4" x 4" (Courtesy of Froelick Gallery, Portland, OR)

ern California. Such misidentification is not uncommon in families with Indian heritage, because of the complex history of displacement and relocation of Native communi-

ties. John Bartow and his family developed bonds with the local Indian community at the Siletz Reservation, itself made up of diverse tribal groups from western and southern Oregon and northwestern California. Rick still nurtures those bonds.

John Bartow and his wife Jessie had six children, including Rick's father Richard, who married a non-Indian neighbor, Mabel Nelson. When Rick was just five years old, his father Richard died, and Richard's twin Bob played an important role as mentor and surviving link to Rick's paternal lineage and Native heritage. Rick's uncle was closely connected to the land, and shared with him observations of—and conversations with—creatures in the slough and near the shore where the Bartow family lived. Rick and his family (son Booker, daughter Lilly, and wife Karla Malcolm) still call

that land home. Hawk, eagle, elk, and deer teem around the nearby Yaquina Bay mudflats, even as encroaching development displaces them, pushing them closer to the Bartow front door.



Rick Bartow, *Seeking the Medicine*, 2005, wood, 25" x 26" x 16" (Courtesy of Froelick Gallery, Portland, OR)

In many ways, Bartow's childhood and early youth in Newport were much like that of any other small-town kid, particularly after his mother married Andrew Mekemson, who Bartow considers a beloved second father. From an early age, he had been drawn to art, and that tendency was encouraged by his parents and paternal aunt. In high school, he began playing the guitar and bongos, discovering the music that remains an important part of his life as an accomplished blues musician. He made important connections with art instructors by going to what is now Southern Oregon University in Ashland, Oregon, to take a workshop with Joseph Magnani and winning an

art competition that brought him to the attention of Hal Chambers. At the time, Chambers was chair of the art department at Western Oregon State College (now Western Oregon University) in Monmouth, where Bartow eventually enrolled to study secondary art education.

Bartow was married by the time he graduated from college in 1969, after which he was quickly drafted into the army. As for many in his generation, Vietnam was profoundly life altering. Bartow was in Vietnam from 1969-1971 and, along with his duties as a teletype operator, his talents as a musician were put to work. He played with a band that first appeared in officers' clubs but



Rick Bartow working on *Crow Ghost*, 2006, wood and metal, 25" x 204" x 7"

was later sent to perform at a military hospital to boost morale. There, Bartow was overwhelmed by seeing the wounded and dying.

Bartow earned a Bronze Star for his service in Vietnam, but carried more than that honor home from the war. He has been very frank about the way he felt after leaving Vietnam. Survivor's guilt followed him home, and his world fell apart. He had nightmares, went through a divorce, took a series of odd jobs, and lost control of his drinking. Today, we identify the condition he and many other veterans suffered through as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The rawness of the Vietnam experience and

the chaos left in its wake are sources of the powerful emotions expressed in Bartow's work, though not the only ones. Through all the struggles of the 1970s, Bartow continued to draw, primarily with black graphite on paper. Bartow says that creating art at that time was therapeutic; in fact, he says it remains so and that doing the work is what keeps him at peace.

IN THE MID 1980s, BARTOW'S drawings came to the attention of William Jamison and Jeffrey Thomas, owners of what was then the most prominent art gallery in Portland, the Jamison Thomas Gallery. Jamison and Thomas began representing Bartow in their galleries in Portland and New York, and Jamison in particular developed a close and trusting relationship with Bartow. Bartow admired Jamison's judgment and vision, and felt supported by Jamison to pursue his not easily characterized work. During that period, he developed friendships with other Pacific Northwest artists such as Lillian Pitt and Joe Feddersen, who were also of Native heritage, and abstract artist Drake Deknatel.

By 1987, Bartow's career was established enough that he was able to leave his job as an educational aide in the Lincoln County schools and create art full-time. His world was expanding through increased contact with other artists and through international travel, and he worked to integrate those new influences with his personal vision. In the early 1990s, Bartow traveled to Germany and Japan, where he had solo shows. His work was included



Rick Bartow, *Crow Ghost*, 2006, wood and metal, 25" x 204" x 7"

in an important exhibition organized by the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1991, *Shared Visions: Native American Painters and Sculptors in the Twentieth Century*, which traveled to New Zealand. As a result, he was invited to an international gathering of indigenous artists in New Zealand in 1995, an experience that exponentially enlarged his sphere of personal and aesthetic influences.

Since the mid 1990s, Bartow has continued to win national and international recognition. With the help of Charles Froelick, Bartow's dealer since William Jamison died from complications of AIDS in 1995, his work is now part of many important collections, including the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. In 2001, Bartow's career reached a new pinnacle with the award of two important national fellowships, the Eiteljorg

Fellowship for Native American Fine Art and the Flintridge Foundation Award for Visual Artists.

BARTOW'S WORK STEMS FROM his family's homestead near Yaquina Bay — and often is literally of that place through the incorporation of found objects — but is not regional in a way that is limiting. As Bartow puts it, he is looking at things "right here" and responding to them. That response is informed by his knowledge of a wide array of art historical moments and cultural heritages. He addresses the predicament and opportunity of the contemporary human condition, one in which the world is full of intersections and disjunctions.

The carving *Seeking the Medicine* (2005) illuminates all this. It began as a hollow log that Bartow dragged up from the beach and that sat outside his



Rick Bartow, *Predator's Dream*, 2004, pastel, 40" x 26"

studio for several years. Eventually, he realized he could carve a notch in it, and the V would become a beak. The crow holds inside his open beak a man who is himself birdlike, with wings and a beaked forehead. Birds are indicator species, and their abundant presence signals a healthy environment. Thus, the medicine sought is that which will lead to a thriving environment. The

conventions of Northwest coast art. *Crow Ghost* extends the conversation about what is to be learned from close observation. It, too, is a way of Bartow articulating what he sees in the place he dwells within and making his understanding manifest in order to share it with viewers. During frequent visits to a seriously ill friend, Bartow kept seeing a crow with white

work alludes to the cycle of death and life, with the man's wings referencing the flight to the next world and the scroll at top cryptically alluding to water, the life-giver. The outsized proportion of crow to man is a reminder of the dimensions of the environment and the spiritual universe; there is something greater than us. The carving reflects Bartow's familiarity with Northwest coast carving traditions — the human/animal iconography, the use of red and black on cedar, and the location of the human figure within the mouth of the bird — yet is clearly not derivative of those traditions in a simple way. The work springs from Bartow's experience and choices, not directly from design

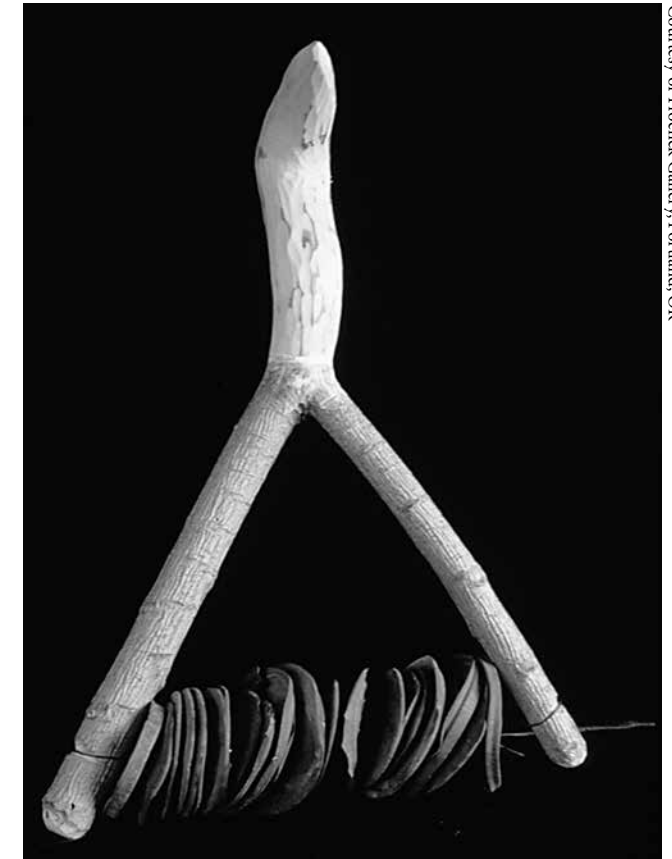
feathers. By doing some research, he learned that a small percentage of crows have white markings. These wings reference that white crow and the ghostliness of such a creature. As Bartow puts it, the crow's job, as told in much Native mythology, is to pass between what was and what is; in legend, the crow can go places we cannot and can return to where we are. *Crow Ghost* is reflective of this spiritual and physical passage. Its monumental scale — seventeen feet in breadth — speaks to the power of that journey, and its distressed surface gives additional dimension to the work.

Crow's job is also to irritate, to humble, to trail after and torment.

With its metal disks clacking, *Crow Rattle* has the voice of Crow, crassly calling out, heckling, drowning out other sounds. Bartow talks about this piece as something related to the sweathouse he is part of at Siletz and the lessons he has learned in ceremonies there. He speaks about the sweathouse as the place where his experience as a veteran and his gifts as an artist were first honored. Over the years, he has made many rattles, just for the joy of making them, and has passed them on to others, who may

then use them in sweathouse or other ceremonies. The rattles have a living voice; they are meant to be in motion and make sound. Their forms are inspired by found objects and sticks and by Mexican folk art rattles made out of colorful soda bottle caps.

In many of his mixed media pieces, Bartow animates or, sometimes, reanimates found objects. A few years ago, he acquired old museum mounts of animal skeletons. Bartow connects the skulls with other found objects — sticks, bones, yarn, buttons, claws



Rick Bartow, *Crow Rattle*, 2000, wood and metal, 16" x 12" x 4"

— to construct a sculpture that honors something that was once living. *Guardian* is one of what Bartow calls his “little challenges;” the problem he is trying to solve is how to honor the creature’s spirit. These pieces are sometimes hard for viewers to understand. Most of us are so carefully but artificially separated from evidence of death that we may be taken aback. But Bartow’s aim is to create what he calls a “macabre dignity” for the creatures who were once alive. In this way, the work is therapeutic, both for him and for the spirit of the animals who were slain and displayed. The pieces can be read as a statement about treatment of the animals and, by extension, the treatment of the environment by humans. These mixed media pieces are, as Bartow puts it, the “purest thing I do.” About the potential for misinterpretation by viewers, Bartow says: “It is medicine. If it bothers you, don’t look at it.”

Bartow’s early artistic development was established on a foundation of drawing, particularly portrait drawing. While he now works in many media, including painting, printing, sculpture, ceramics, and glass, he remains a master of drawing. *Ursa Major* is a portrait of Bear — a recurring figure in Bartow’s imagery. The bear refers back to an elder’s story, told in the sweathouse, about a flying bear and its association with the constellation Ursa major. The bear mother of myth is both tender with her cubs and ferociously protective when they are threatened. The luminous colors

and powerful gestures of *Ursa Major* speak to the fierce gentleness of the mythical bear.

Another drawing, *Predator’s Dream*, is a visceral image that directly articulates the interrelationship between humans and animals and the cycle of predator and prey. Who is the predator here? Who is dreaming? The image invites us to reflect, to relate, to see how we might be both predator and prey in the larger scheme of the natural world, without which we have no social existence. The still visage of Crow contrasts with the open-mouthed alarm of the human figure, and the cobalt blue of the background conjures up the dark of nighttime dreams.

Throughout his career, Bartow has experimented with self-portraiture, and many such images involve a connection with Coyote, the trickster and creator figure in much Native American mythology. Coyote is not neutral. Coyote teases, rejoices in human foibles, stumbles on his own hubris and, through his adventures, creates much of what we know of the landscape. *Self Coyote/Segyp* is an excellent example of the artist’s connection with Coyote. In it, Bartow poses as Coyote, with mischievous grin and piercing gaze. Bartow seems to be making a dual statement about the impossibility of escaping the humbling effects of Coyote: he cannot, and we cannot. The muddy red field in the center left of *Self Coyote/Segyp* links the snout of the figure with the armless human chest, making the human/coyote connection with color as well as form.

Bartow works in interlocking layers. His gestural drawings give evidence of hard strokes, erasure, reworking, and pigment-filled fingerprints and handprints. His constructions and sculptures set back into motion objects that had earlier lives; their distressed surfaces suggest sedimentary layers lying beneath. All his work is made possible by, but cannot be reduced to, his cumulative life experiences and

his interpretation of his ancestral history. He said recently that the thrust of his work is to find ways to speak to the environmental and existential predicament humanity finds itself in: “We are not above the situation; we are an active part of the situation.” We are enmeshed in a world that we have troubled. Bartow looks around in it and responds with creations that help discern a path to healing.

This essay is based upon conversations with Rick Bartow beginning in 1998 and continuing most recently in July 2006. Some material is also adapted from Dobkins, *Rick Bartow: My Eye* (2002). I wish to thank Rick for his astonishing generosity and patience over the years. I also wish to thank Charles Froelick for his extraordinary professionalism and good humor.

RECOMMENDED READING

- Archuleta, Margaret, and Rennard Strickland, eds. *Shared Visions: Native American Painters and Sculptors in the Twentieth Century*. Phoenix, Ariz.: The Heard Museum, 1991.
- Dobkins, Rebecca J. *Rick Bartow: My Eye*, with a foreword by Barry Lopez. Salem, Ore.: Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, in association with the University of Washington Press, 2002.
- McFadden, David Revere, and Ellen Taubman, eds. *Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation 2: Contemporary Native North American Art from the West, Northwest and Pacific*. New York: Museum of Arts and Design, 2005.
- Rushing, W. Jackson, III, ed. *After the Storm: The Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art, 2001*. Indianapolis, Ind.: Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art in association with the University of Washington Press, 2001.
- ed. *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century: Makers, Meanings, and Histories*. London: Routledge Publishing Company, 2005.
- The Evergreen State College Longhouse Education and Cultural Center. *Hiteemkiliixix: “Within the Circle of the Rim”: Nations Gathering on Common Ground*. Olympia, Wash.: The Evergreen State College Longhouse Education and Cultural Center, 2002.

An exhibit of Bartow’s work, *Tears and Rain: One Artist’s View from Sea Level*, will be at the Oregon Historical Society from October 6, 2006, to January 13, 2007.