

# A FEW RESERVATIONS

BY JAMES BOWMAN

Among some marvelous pictures of the American West in an exhibition at the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., last spring there were before-and-after photographs of a Dakota Indian maiden called Zie Wie (Yellow Moon). "Before," a grim-faced girl stares into a camera as she sits on the ground wrapped in a blanket. "After," the same girl, in a European-style dress but with exactly the same expression on her face, stares at us from a chair with a basket of sewing on her lap.

The exhibition's accompanying commentary reads, "The impact of acculturation was in reality far more devastating than works such as this [a painting by William Fuller called *Crow Creek Agency*] suggest. Before and after photographs of Zie Wie...taken at an Indian boarding school in 1878 reveal the price of progress as loss of cultural identity."

Alas, poor Zie Wie! We can only guess from her stunningly impassive features what that dress, that chair, and that box of sewing cost her in cultural identity. But let it not be said that the creators of the exhibition, "The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier," were shy about guessing—or about revealing the political motivation for their conjectures.

"One often attains a clearer perception of period bias through what was not painted rather than what was," observes William Truettner, the curator principally responsible for the exhibition. The statement is a pretty good general indication of both his methodology and his own period bias—according to which all of American history can be understood in terms of the maxim: Red man good, white man bad.

The exhibition catalogue is full of the same kind of tendentiousness. Of a portrait by Charles Bird King of a beautiful Indian woman in European dress, Julie Schimmel writes that she "must have appealed to her white viewers as a morally



Alexander Edouart's *Blessing of the Enriquita Mine, New Almaden, California, 1860*: Does the scene's suspicious tidiness reveal a hidden ideology?

inferior savage who was yet ennobled by simplicity and nature."

Must have? What kind of scholarship is this, where that which is not in the paintings can be used to interpret them in exactly the same way as that which is? Truettner tells us that it was significant that painters did not paint "the telling chaos of abandoned mining towns" or "barren and abandoned homesteads." Of Joseph Lee's pleasant painting of a homestead near San Francisco, the main thing Truettner notices is that it ignores the "less attractive aspects of urban life." Most people would think that these things are pretty hard *not* to ignore in painting a picture of a farm.

Of course, every picture that is about something is therefore not about something else. It takes a bold interpreter to pick with such confidence from among the infinity of things something is not about the one that is significant for being ignored.

Truettner can do other tricks, too. In a seemingly unremarkable courtroom scene by George Caleb Bingham, he no-

tices that "the legal system, some now believe, upheld laws that curbed democratic practices; surely the defendants (the ordinary citizens) in these courtroom pictures received less than their full share of justice."

You can tell that from a *picture*? I couldn't even tell what the case was about.

But Truettner and his merry band of historical revisionists prove themselves whizzes at this kind of thing. From the suggestion of imperialism in the rectilinear frames to frequently observed crucifixion imagery in portrayals of white explorers and settlers, in image after image of the Old West they discover a project of "mythologizing," whose purpose was to provide a justification of the white man's rapacity in the name of "progress." As Schimmel explains, "White Americans perceived Indians through the assumptions of their own culture. As a result, Indians were seen in terms of what they might become or what they were not—white Christians."

Every culture perceives others in terms of its own. So what? Schimmel's

real project, and that of this exhibition, is to discredit white European culture for not being what it could not have been—Indian.

Going around the exhibition you couldn't miss it: There is no way for white artists to win. If they admire the Indian subjects, they are romantically distorting the reality. If they see them as violent savages, they are politically distorting it. Either way, the "reality" remains safely in the hands of the modern interpreters.

Now it is true enough to say that these painters "mythologized" the West. In the same way, Raphael mythologized the Holy Family, David mythologized the French Revolution, and Monet mythologized water lilies (nasty, smelly things!). That's what artists do.

Yet the subtext of Truettner & Co.'s exhibition is that such mythologizing is in itself discreditable. When I asked him why he thought the exhibition had generated so much controversy, Truettner told me that it was because this was "a sacred era of American history" and because people were shocked to discover "their preconceptions about the West were aligned with an ideology. The exhibit takes away a basic belief in images."

That is typical academic disingenuousness. Instead of defending his own ideology, Truettner pretends that he is only pointing out to gallery-goers less sophisticated than himself that there was an ideology at all.

There is no need to deny that there is a political content to many of these paintings, but the pictures offer no support to the political assumptions brought to them by their interpreters. About Alexander Edouart's painting *Blessing of the Enrequita Mine, New Almaden, California, 1860*, for example, the commentary tells us that it "represents the annual blessing of the mine as a tidy ceremony in which the often disparate interests of the Catholic clergy, Hispanic workers, and white owners were conveniently united." The words *tidy*, *disparate*, and *conveniently* tell us nothing about the political reality, only that the interpreters don't believe that those interests could have been united.

And the exhibitors' own ideology is left rather murky. It is, says Truettner, simply "the perspective of the 1990s," by which he seems to mean something like the vague complex of opinions and sensibilities that sometimes goes under the name of "political correctness"—an uneasy amalgam of antiracism, feminism, Marxism, and environmentalism. The reason that the "perspective" is not set out more clearly is that only in respect to the last of these do the Native American cultures come off very well.

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No one pretends that tribal warfare and human sacrifice (quoth the catalogue: "Aztec children were rarely sacrificed and only in times of drought. Young male adults were the usual victims.") are enlightened alternatives to white racism, or that the Indians in general treated their women as anything but inferiors, if not mere beasts of burden. And true Marxism must welcome the capitalist rape of the primitive, prefeudal Indian culture. The historical dialectic is far more unforgiving than land-hungry white farmers or loggers or miners, and its iron rule of the supersession of nomadic and agrarian cultures by urban and industrial ones admits of no sentimental bleatings on behalf of those superseded. The "capitalist" and "imperialist" white Europeans were a sweet bunch of guys by comparison.

Only from an environmentalist point of view was white settlement clearly A Bad Thing. If it weren't for the white Europeans, where there are today farms and shopping malls and superhighways there would instead be millions of furry animals whose great-grandfathers our

own made into hats. The Indians may have led an unspeakably brutal existence so close to nature, but at least they didn't tear up the earth, cut down the forests, and concrete over the prairies. As John Collier, a former commissioner of Indian affairs in the Interior Department, says, Indians lived in "perfect ecological balance with the forest, the plain, the desert, the waters and the animal life."

Which is OK if you like that sort of thing, as most of us who believe in supermarkets and polio shots clearly do not. And it is to the exhibitors' credit that they rarely indulged directly in the sort of enviro-sentimentalism that Kirkpatrick Sale does, for example, in his book about Columbus, *The Conquest of Paradise*.

Indeed, they seized upon examples of romanticizing about the Indians or what Frederic Remington called "the Old America which is so fast passing" to illustrate their thesis about how the West was mythologized. Yet at the same time they themselves attempted, in effect, to re-mythologize the West as vaguely "imperialist" and "exploitative" and constantly sneered at what their grandfathers took for granted as "progress."

But if there *was* a hidden ideology of empire and conquest implicit in the art of the West, were empire and conquest worse than the alternatives? The settlers found tribes of Indians playing the old zero-sum game of war, piracy, and mercantilist trade that most of mankind has played through most of its history. *Progress* was precisely the Adam Smith style of capitalism that delivered the world from the pernicious superstition that this was the way things had to be. When the settlers brought the good news that survival and growth did not have to be identified with greed and exploitation—their evil *doppelgängers*—there was indeed a compelling claim upon the Indians to assimilate. Instead of Zie Wie, the exhibitors might have tried before-and-after pictures of these United States. You would have to be a pretty dedicated troglodyte not to choose living in the "After" world.

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# FREE TO LAUGH

BY BRYAN MILLER



Aaron Freeman and Rob Kolson:

Can you feature Milton Friedman and still have a comedy hit?

They're an odd couple: the blocky, charismatic, contrary black man and the angular, nervous, libertarian white man. Aaron Freeman's comedy is highly intelligent and very physical. Rob Kolson's comedy is highly intelligent and very musical. Together, they wrote and star in *Do the White Thing*, Chicago's longest-running revue, a revue in which one skit ends with Mikhail Gorbachev on his knees before a giant portrait of Milton Friedman.

Freeman and Kolson met six years ago at a Chicago nightclub where Freeman, now 34, was performing his celebrated brand of standup political comedy and singing song parodies sans accompaniment. Kolson—who is a thesis shy of a doctorate, has taught economics at the University of Chicago's Graduate School of Business, and spent four years as an investment banker (“without a single indictment”)—offered his abilities as a self-taught piano virtuoso and music arranger. An act was born.

When Chicago's Organic Theater asked Freeman, 38, to work up a show and Freeman asked Kolson to be a part of it, Kolson at first declined: “I was too busy being president of a whey company up in Wisconsin.” But when Freeman pressed, Kolson agreed, and they spent the next six weeks working together al-

most nonstop. “I was ready to quit that job anyway,” rationalizes Kolson. *Do the White Thing* opened in the Organic Theater's experimental Greenhouse annex in November 1989 and readily, steadily won audiences, moving a few months later to the main stage.

**Aaron:** *I'm an*

*IRS auditor,*

*I'm gonna give you trouble, just you wait and see.*

**Rob:** He's from the Internal Revenue Service,

And he's gonna seize your property.

**Aaron:** *Unless I get a small fee.*

**Rob:** And if you did absolutely nothing wrong, babe,

**Aaron:** *Well, that don't matter to me.*

*That's because I'm a federal government bureaucrat, babe.*

*I'm gonna roll all over you.*

**Rob:** He's a federal government bureaucrat, baby.

He's gonna roll all over you.

**Aaron:** *I'm gonna make you blue.*

**Rob:** He's a surly civil servant.

**Aaron:** *You better watch what you do.*

“The idea with this show was to write a revue that was structured like a play,” says Freeman. Certain bits are the same from show to show, starting with the opening: Freeman and Kolson meet on a street corner while attempting to hail cabs. Freeman gets passed up because he's black; Kolson, because he's traveling with a spinet piano. They introduce themselves to each other and the audience. Freeman: “I'm a political satirist. I make fun of politicians.” Kolson: “I'm a financial satirist. I make fun of the

people who own them.”

Newspaper boxes with the day's *Chicago Tribune* and *Sun-Times* provide the grist for a regular improvisational feature. Freeman and Kolson also improvise a song, using audience suggestions. “Sometimes it really comes together, with harmonies and everything,” observes Kolson, “and then everyone thinks we wrote it ahead of time.”

Other skits, most of them evolving to stay current, include Saddam Hussein's attempt to escape retribution by hiding out inside the ego of Jesse Jackson; “West Bank Story”; German reunification; and Mikhail Gorbachev's conversion to the concept of the free-market economy. Freeman and Kolson bring the local, national, and international news into the show, explaining—without appearing to do so—which politician is which for the benefit of those who generally confine their newspaper reading to the sports section.

Songs are a part of almost every sketch, whether delivered by Kolson, smirking behind his piano or guitar, or by Freeman in his typically over-the-top, death-or-glory style. They exploit all styles, from Broadway (“Give me a world where the markets are free/And the government stays away from me/And everyone believes in private property/That's libertarianism!”) to the blues, and from country and western (“Don't really care if she cooks/Don't give a damn about her looks/Don't even care if she's funny/I just care she knows money!”) to the more pretentious sort of rock. The songs may be solos or duets, but they're always bofo—and behind the yucks always lurks a serious point.

The emotional high point of the production is Freeman's re-enactment of his brother Julius's death from lung cancer, the source of the revue's title. Julius, doped on morphine, is ready to go to the place where the colors all converge to