From the SelectedWorks of Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

Summer 2016

Ho-Chunk Artist and Designer Jodi Webster

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.
Jodi Webster is a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation and Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation. She recently graduated from the University of Kansas with a BFA in drawing and painting and is currently working as a visual artist in a range of media including graphite, colored pencil, serigraphy, oils, and acrylic. Her design practice makes use of computer graphics, and she has developed critical interest in jewelry. Webster’s work often incorporates Northeastern Woodlands aesthetics and iconography, particularly ribbonwork. Her work has been featured in several publications including an illustration of her son for the cover of the edited volume Beyond Two Worlds: Critical Conversations on Language and Power in Native North America. In 2013, she received a SWAIA Residency Fellowship at the Santa Fe Art Institute. I spoke with Webster about her art and design practice.

How did you begin making art?

As a child, I fell in love with cartoons and children as the subject matter because they are often the most vulnerable in our Native communities. Sometimes I address issues they face or simply offer an understanding nudge of encouragement to persevere.

Does a philosophy or set of rules govern your work?

I want my pieces to tell a story or convey a feeling. I want the viewer to appreciate a contemporary Native interpretation. In an attempt to counter stereotypes, I employ design motifs from my tribes. My work is intended to relate to family’s home lands in the Great Lakes region.

You continue to incorporate computer graphics into your work. What is the reason behind the shift into design?

After several years of casino work, I struggled to decide on an alternate career path. I wanted to use my artistic talents in some capacity, so in 2006 I opted to go to school for graphic design. Obtaining a graphics degree facilitated my growth as an artist to further explore line, design, and color.

What does design, specifically computer graphics, offer that pen, pencil, and paintbrush do not?

The lines created in Adobe Illustrator make serigraphs unbelievably crisp. They remind me of ads or cereal boxes, but only the cool ones … like Lucky Charms or Frosted Flakes. I know I am talented enough to pull these lines off in any medium, but the fact that they are mathematically on point is too irresistible.

In works such as I’m Not That Kind of Indian, you use computer-editing software to create a pastoral scene featuring stereotypical depictions of “Indian-ness.” Can you discuss the meaning behind this work?

Growing up in Wisconsin, I had my fair share of daily encounters with racists including the fake Indian noise “woo woo woo” at school. I would watch cartoons to unwind from the taunting. Upon seeing the artists I idolized portray Native people so inaccurately, I felt mad, slighted, and insignificant. I’m Not That Kind of Indian features a Ho-Chunk girl physically exemplifying her presence among erroneous Native illustrations. At first glance, the young girl is slightly less noticeable due to the variance in lines to create the characters. I thought about a cartoon version of her but preferred the play of lines.