This Other Me: Uses of the Alter Ego in Contemporary Art

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In 1921, MAN RAY photographed artist Marcel Duchamp’s alter ego, Rosette Sélaïre for the first time. Swathed in a fur-trimmed coat with glistening rings and a diamond bracelet, her patterned hat barely hides the wispy hair that crawls down the side of her face. Sélaïre’s soft, posed hands gently cradle the fur of her coat, hands that may not even be hers but those of another artist. Rosette Sélaïre is Marcel Duchamp as Rosette Sélaïre. Her name derives from a cheeky phonetic appropriation of the French “eros” and the expression “Cest la vie.” Taken together, it translates as “sexual desire, such is life,” a pun indicative of Duchamp’s staunch commitment to trickery and farce. The aftermath of Sélaïre “coming out” through Ray’s photographs continues to unfold in art historical discourse. Duchamp’s androgynous alter ego deconstructed sexual identity and self-imagery to challenge the performative aspects of storytelling to embody an alter ego.

The practice of oral storytelling implicates and induces the orator in a complex performance that utilizes voice and movement in an economy of knowledge, pedagogy, and exchange. It is possible that one assumes alter egos when embellishing certain moments and events in a story or when embodying the identity or appearance of a character, animal, or being in a story. Moreover, the alter ego draws a strong conceptual link to the trickster, who becomes visible in the alter egos of several indigenous artists including James Luna, Lori Blondeau (Cree-Saulteurs-Méts), Adrian Stimson (Siksika), and Marcus Amerman (Choctaw). Allan J. Ryan describes the trickster as a figure who transcends “geographical boundaries and tribal distinctions” and is “most often characterized by frequent feasting, outrageous punning, constant wordplay, surprising association, extreme subtlety, layered and serious reference, and considerable compassion.” In this sense, the trickster is a social phenomenon that functions as a therapeutic form of compartmentalizing everyday realities and experiences, be they positive or otherwise. The embodiment of the trickster as a central facet of the artist’s alter ego—as one struck with good humor, earnest critique, and tireless play—says much about the multidimensional characteristics of indigenous social identities as opposed to conventional Western concepts of the self as static, even fixed.

Shame-man

IN 1993, Payómkawichum-Ipi (Luiseno-Digoetno) and Mexican-American artist James Luna performed under the name Shame-man at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC, as part of an ongoing collaboration with Chicano performer Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Occupying a diorama space in one of the museum’s halls, Gómez-Peña is sitting on a toilet dressed as a marachi in a straightjacket with a sign hanging around his neck that reads, “There used to be a Mexican inside this body.” Meanwhile, as this occurs, Shame-man moves throughout the space fluidly shifting identities between “Indian show-shiner,” “janitor,” and “diabetic Indian.” He is caught vacuuming the diorama floor; at another point, he fills a syringe with insulin and shoots its contents into his stomach (Luna is diabetic). Museum visitors gather in the hundreds to watch the performance unfold in a state of bewilderment while, situated directly adjacent to them, supposedly “real” dioramas represent an illusionary vision of Indigenous culture existing in a vacuum, far removed from everyday historical and social realities. When asked about the origins of the Shame-man, Luna replies: My main source of inspiration is from observation and from media. The Shame-man began as a TV used car salesman (Cal Worthington) who had this country, down-home persona and used cheap jokes and bits in his sales pitch. This kind of humor is universal, so it allowed me to speak to some passionate issues [such as] the sale of our cultures, but also to use this opportunity to speak about and to our communities who are guilty of selling, which seemed like something nobody in our community wanted to speak to.

Shame-man is undoubtedly a pain-of-skinning-shaman—a spiritual healer—and attempts to satirize tropes of “dressing up” and “playing Indian” while also condemning those who exploit sacred rituals for non-Indigenous audiences and financial benefit.
By staging works that insist upon the physical, real presence of the body in colonial space, Luna enacts a mode of decolonial resistance.11 Much like his seminal, durational performance, The Artifick Piece (1987/1990), Shame-man exists as a calculated response to popular tropes of the “Indian princess” perpetuated by Disney films and the derogatory use of stereotypes to describe Indigenous women and girls. Blondeau’s alter ego emerged from a 1998 postcard project made for the Dunlop Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan. Shown in this way, the exhibition demonstrated once again that as a Native woman I could play only two roles in frontier narratives: one as the Indian Princess and the other as the Squaw. I saw this as my opportunity to create an Indian cowgirl.14

Sauvage produces a critical narrative in response to a popular narrative that did not exist previously. She raditates a feeling of idolatry for Canada’s pre-Confederation West through the lens of 1950s Hollywood films like Calamity Jane, which features a similarly androgynous cowgirl played by actor Doris Day. Others have made connections between her and Indigenous women who performed in Wild West shows, such as Molly Spotted Elk (Penobscot, 1903–1977) and Lost Bird (Lakota, 1890–1920), as well as the vaudeville circuit during the early 20th century.15 Still, the charm of Sauvage is how she tackles complicated social and autobiographical histories under the pretext of tricksterism.

In one of her most memorable performances, A Moment in the Life of Belle Sauvage (2002), she stakes her claim to fame as a participant in the only gay Wild West show touring Europe and America. Lit from behind by red lights, a white sheet— an obvious ode to the Canadian flag— Sauvage enters the space to Doris Day’s song, “The Black Hills of Dakota,” before parleying to her audience, whisky bottle in hand, about her life as an outlaw on the margins; about the men and women she has known and the Wild West show that treated her as the cowgirl she yearned to be. Surrounded by objects like a plastic bullhead for roping practice and a life-size, black-and-white photograph of a young Indigenous bronco rider, she motions to his image and asserts, “He was a bronco rider who kept horses in the 1920s on the Gordon Reserve in the Touchwood Hills, Saskatchewan. It’s a pity that he couldn’t leave the reserve without a pass.” The young man in the photograph turns out to be Blondeau’s grandfather and signifies the political hegemony of Indian agents—acting on behalf of the Canadian government—who rigorously controlled the physical movement of individuals living on reserve communities by issuing out-of-service passes.16

The symbolic matrix of Sauvage’s performance alludes to the enduring legacy of the Indian Act in Canada and its deep impact on Blondeau’s personal experience of family and community. The pedagogical potential of Sauvage’s performances can serve to decolonize colonial narratives, their autobiographical details serving as evidence and instruments of learning and understanding.17

**Buffalo Boy**

SAVAUGE AND HER CHUM Buffalo Boy have performed together on several occasions and share a similar fascination with the Wild West. Buffalo Boy is the alter ego of Siskiwa (Blackfoot) artist Adrian Stimson who fashioned Buffalo Boy in two stages, the first during childhood and the second as part of his master’s program at the University of Saskatchewan.

While in my studio on a [cold winter’s day, I looked out the window and repeated Buffalo Bill, Buffalo Bill, then Buffalo Boy! Buffalo Boy was born and went on to do his first performance. Buffalo Boy’s Wild West Peep Show, the intersection of constructed colonized indigenous identity with Two-Spirit identity, was a white fringe feather jacket, similar to the fringe jacket that Buffalo Boy wears.18

Buffalo Boy can often be found wearing fishnet stockings, a bison G-string, a buffalo corset, a buckskin jacket, and a cowboy hat—he’s a two-spirit swindler in drag swag who desires to queer the Western Frontier. Yet in an unexpected twist, he himself maintains a fleet of alter egos, lethally swapping identities between military man, gay cowboy, shaman, businessman, priest, and powwow dancer. Similar to Duchamp’s Rose Sévère, Buffalo Boy—and his additional personas—break down gender binaries into complex, erotic spectacles that deconstruct the American cowboy archetype and dress down the colonial project. Not unlike Sauvage’s caricaturization of Calamity Jane, Buffalo Boy also lampoons William “Buffalo Bill” Cody, who often theatricalized violent skirmishes between Indigenous tribes and cowboys. Take, for instance, the performative series Buffalo Boy’s Wild West Peep Show or the one-off, Buffalo Boy’s Battle of Little Bighorn, where Buffalo Boy reinterpretsthe “conquest narratives” surrounding Manifest Destiny,19 which decimates earlier informed Cody’s productions and entangled settler audiences. In many ways, Cody’s exhibitions propagated the European and American 588-year “Indian War,” and in this light can be viewed as a sinister form of entertainment that dramatized the erasure of tribes, theft of lands, and exploitation of resources in American cultural memory. That being said, the symbolic and spiritual gravity of buffalo to Buffalo Boy is seldom emphasized but remains an important part of his story. The etymology of the word buffalo derives

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15. Ibid.


17. Ibid.


from European settlers who confused two species of Asian and African species of *bison* with what is now known as American bison. The semantic bastardization of *bison* as *buffalo*, which later became widely accepted as “buffalo,” is symptomatic of colonials’ relationship with misrepresentation. During the 19th century, bison were hunted by settlers to jeopardize agricultural farms and cattle economies. Today, the food source of Plains tribes and because they were said to jeopardize the point of extinction, as part of a systemic effort to destroy northern Mexico, the lands which they once roamed, the existence of bison signified the presence of life itself. Along these lines, Stimson’s conceptualization of Buffalo Boy, Amerman asserts that “Buffalo Man reemerges into society when it has reached a critical crossroads. If that society accepts the Buffalo Man into it, it signifies hope and redemption for the culture. If, on the other hand, he is rejected by society, the society is doomed.”23 For Stimson and Amerman, Buffalo Boy and Buffalo Man respectively, buffalo inspires their alter egos and operates as a powerful metaphor, serving as a means of artistic exploration and as a sign of cultural renewal.

**Buffalo Man**

STIMSON IS NOT ALONE in his treatment of bison/buffalo to personify his alter ego. Chocktaw artist Marcus Amerman’s alter ego Buffalo Man was imagined several years ago at a trading post when he exchanged a beaded bracelet for a tan buffalo head. Acting as both subject and model, Buffalo Man can be found curiously appropriating emblematic images of Western popular culture including Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper*, James Bond film posters, and portraits of Yoko Ono and John Lennon in Amerman’s photographic collaborations with Cara Romero (Cheyenne). Amerman maintains his belief that the buffalo head chose him as a kind of puppet, forcing him to dance for the people almost at will.22 Resembling Stimson’s conceptualization of Buffalo Boy, Amerman asserts that “Buffalo Man reemerges into society when it has reached a critical crossroads. If that society accepts the Buffalo Man into it, it signifies hope and redemption for the culture. If, on the other hand, he is rejected by society, the society is doomed.”23 For Stimson and Amerman, Buffalo Boy and Buffalo Man respectively, buffalo inspires their alter egos and operates as a powerful metaphor, serving as a means of artistic exploration and as a sign of cultural renewal.

**Conclusion**

IN CONSIDERING THE USE OF ALTER EGOS in contemporary art, it is necessary to look back to previous manifestations of alter egos, particularly in terms of historical connections to settler colonialism. Taken a step further, one can argue that the attempts to turn Indigenous peoples into a status quo, Judeo-Christian society through forced cultural assimilation almost necessitates the creation of an alter ego as a deliberate strategy for survival. This idea can be applied to White Earth Ojibwe author Gerald Vizenor’s influential explanation of survivance as a process of continuity and, as Stimson writes, “an active sense of presence.”24 When asked why artists choose to adopt alter egos, Stimson addresses this subject candidly by proposing that “to act like someone/thing else” in a social milieu ordered by racist thought and policy insists that one must “be someone else in order to succeed.”25 In nearly all the forms mentioned, the alter ego functions as an entryway into thinking through cultural assimilation, racial discrimination, and social hierarchy. As follows, the very concept of alter ego is burdened with the history of European colonialism in North America and is indicative of its unyielding powers of corruption. But while the alter ego may have emerged from this troubled history, it has also transformed into a persuasive mode of decolonial critique, of political resistance, and of course a little bit of fun.