

Jim Denomie: Imagination and Survivance

Jim Denomie's tableaux are jammed with narratives—spaces, times, and characters—and words are not meant to explain or make them into something coherent and knowable, because to do so would be to make the visual text surrender when it needs to do everything but. A Western/Euroamerican mindset all too often takes on a narrative or object in order to know it, because to know is also to master, to explain away, maybe even to admit that something of history was reprehensible, but that it is *history*, over now. Denomie's visual narratives refuse such forms of mastery. They go for the imagination instead.

With the imagination, a priest—or arbiter of missionary and boarding school violence—shares a last supper with Jesus, Elvis Presley and the Lone Ranger in “Vatican Café” (2014). Elvis snaps a selfie with a gun and donut at the ready, two things he likely didn't live without in those later years. The Lone Ranger, Jesus, and a priest with his pants down stare straight ahead, but each with a different gaze: The priest, with flaccid and erect bananas in front of him, stares with some sense of satisfaction—calm eyes and a wide, toothy grin. Jesus, already wearing the crown of thorns and a halo of light, looks off and to his left. The chalice, fork, and fish suggest his role at the table. The Lone Ranger sits with bingo cards, a common game of chance across Indian Country. He looks straight ahead.

All seem caught in their own thoughts or worlds, except for the two people next to the priest who wait for Jesus to make the next move. A pregnant waitress about to pour some water reminds us of the time suspended, of waiting *on* and waiting *for*. Only Tonto breaks the time and silence with a profound question, *What's good here?* The question suggests he's new to the café. The specters of more Catholic violence reside in the background, behind the priest: Joan of Arc's sacrifice, the denial of Galileo's science. Behind Elvis are the violences of a more recent past—KKK members gather around a cross; an army tank spews orange. And in the distance, a mushroom cloud billows. Tonto's question hovers. The more time the viewer spends with this scene, a haunting answer—*nothing*—creeps in. And yet, Elvis, Tonto, and the Lone Ranger—Euroamerican icons who made their careers on the appropriation of other people's art and lives—sit at their Last Supper.

The Lone Ranger and Tonto reappear in “Toast” (2014). As the masked rider proclaims the face of Jesus has appeared on his toast, his position and gesture hail the viewer into the miracle—we, too, might believe because we can see it for ourselves. Tonto asks the perverse question, “How's it taste?” Tonto's question alludes to the Catholic ritual of communion, ingesting the body of Christ. As in “Vatican Café,” he manages the position of a present outsider. He's included in the scene, and very much a part of the action, but he undermines the ruse of Christian-colonial structure and history—in this case, by assuming the toast as food, or Christ as tasty. He carries a live chicken by the neck in his left hand, another signifier of potential food. The visions of religious icons on toast are their own kind of consumption, the traffic of faith, miracle, and capital.

Denomie's use of humor never escapes the eye of art critics and fans. Even in the most horrific scenes—the prairie during the 1862 U.S.-Dakota War, for instance—characters manage to draw on and out the absurd or grotesque, and often at their own expense. As a

general category, *humor* is perhaps too easily set aside, as levity, frivolity. But Denomie casts humor into an altogether different order. To be sure, his characters and scenes will provoke a smile and a laugh, but humor is also a form of resistance and restoration, an exorcism done not with a Bible, but with sex, color, anachronism, and the imagination.

Curators, critics, and the casual viewer of Jim Denomie's work also consistently cite his use of color—it's unmistakable, as we see in "Toast" and "Vatican Café." Vibrant colors and shapes frame each scene. Such radiance counters a colonial way of seeing and representing Native America. Whereas white settler representations often imagine Native peoples as noble but dying, ready to be mourned, sepia-toned, in Denomie's hand, colors suggest life and futurity—what Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor calls *survivance*, an active sense of presence. Survivance may be resisting and fighting Catholic power, living through abuse and with trauma; or it may take the form of violent resistance on the front lines of removal or police brutality. These are forms of living and acting, and they're alive and well in Denomie's canvases. But he also lets us in to the quieter and more intimate moments of life, as in "Remote" from 2009. The touch of a loved one, human, cat, and dog; the sounds of a pileated woodpecker working on a tree, or a finch in the feeder; the silent loons and curious squirrel (notice too the little rabbit in the background—a common character in his visual narratives): This scene reminds us that sometimes the boldest act of all is living quietly, with oneself, one's love, and some animals.

Denomie's art argues that the imagination itself is survivance. He takes the viewers to uncanny worlds, where we might recognize something, a character or set of images, but they're also bizarre and perverse. He uses sex and eroticism in generative ways—humorous, shocking, and pleasurable. The priest at the Last Supper is a recurring figure, always in the middle of a pose or act that reminds viewers of the enduring traumas invoked by the Catholic Church, by its forms of power administered on the Native body and mind. Denomie won't let his viewers forget that sexual violence is one of the colonizer's most effective maneuvers. But the priest is also always rendered absurd by his banana, a diminutive phallus. And Denomie hands back a potent racist symbol, for the banana historically connotes savagery and subhumanity.

Jim Denomie is Anishinaabe. He grew up in an era of federal Indian policy known as "Termination and Relocation." Under the guise of "helping" tribes become self-sufficient—already itself a contradiction in terms—the federal government instituted programs and incentives for moving Native peoples off reservations and other rural/secluded areas to urban centers where they would learn new trades and contribute their labor to U.S. manufacturing economies. Relocation policies were fortified by the 1953 Termination Act, which resolved to eliminate government-to-government relationships between Native nations and the U.S., to close tribal rolls, remove tribal lands from trust status, and allocate tribal national funds to individual citizens. Only twenty years after it was instituted, the policy was denounced, but much damage had already been done—over 100 tribes were terminated. At their core, Termination and Relocation policies sought to cut off sources of Native cultural existence by removing people from their families and home spaces, and thus from their stories, languages, and lifeways. Jim Denomie was five years old when his parents relocated to Chicago. A year later, he moved with his mom to Minneapolis, and he spent summers on his home

reservation in northern Wisconsin, the Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Ojibwe. These histories—personal, tribal, federal—are intrinsic to the art Jim Denomie makes. They are a part of his dreams, his unconscious, and his personal and collective memories.

Artists who are also Native so often never get to occupy the title of *artist*; they are instead always a *Native artist*, an *Indigenous artist*—an identity form of its own that comes with certain pressures and expectations (usually constructed by non-Natives) to “represent” one’s culture; to make a particular argument or stance; to teach the viewer something. These are tall orders—and ones never placed on white male artists, for instance. But Denomie’s *Totem* series offers a curriculum for an encounter with *art*, which is always an assemblage of histories, politics, memory, the imagination, felt and repressed trauma, pleasure.

The series emerged from frustration. In 2005, Denomie challenged himself to make a painting a day for one year. He created 430 paintings from this project. Most of them were portraits, human faces, and each one different. From this project, he made double portraits, a man and a woman side-by-side. Then triple portraits. He grew tired of this horizontal form, the long composition of three heads and three sets of shoulders. But then a revelation: stack them vertically so that one head emerges from another, and then another. Only one set of shoulders. This, Denomie recalls, was a breakthrough moment—once again, the portraits were exhilarating and fun. The joy is palpable in these 12 foot-tall, four-sided totems (each panel is 6 feet by 15 inches). The distinctions between humans and nonhumans are at times difficult to discern, each one emerging from another. The sculptural element invites the viewer to occupy a different space with these characters. They are above and below us, and at eye level. We can stand behind and in front of them—no walls to arrest our interactions.

The word *totem* derives from the Ojibwe word for clan, *doodem*. When Ojibwe emerged as a distinct group, clan determined one’s place in the tribe’s social and political organization. The dominant chief clans were at first the loon and crane.<sup>1</sup> Denomie is of the *Ajijuk doodem*, the crane clan—they are leaders and orators, carriers of story. Tribes of the Northwest (in both present-day U.S. and Canada) create totem poles, and clearly Denomie’s *Totem* series alludes to this art and ceremonial form. But neither the *doodem* nor the totem pole is in direct consultation with Denomie’s form and concept. He avoided encounters with images of totem poles so his own drawings would not borrow or appropriate this form, nor seek its influence. The totem drawing is also not necessarily Ojibwe, or at least not directly. Instead, these faces and their structure are from Denomie’s own dreams. *Totem*’s narratives are visual and structural.

Words and images live well together—this is the feeling I get when I write about visual art, anyway. The artist started a conversation in another time and place, with paint and canvas or wall, clay, found objects; and by the time I arrive, the piece lives on its own. It opens itself up to other worlds of reception and interpretation. Visual art manages space and time differently, in compressed and compact ways unattainable to written or spoken language. In the time it would take me to narrate the history of the U.S-Dakota War of 1862, Jim Denomie could sketch and perhaps even begin to paint another tableau that narrates this history in visceral detail—and he can create the adjacent time and space of urban police

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<sup>1</sup> Anton Steven Treuer, *Ojibwe in Minnesota*. Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2010; 6.

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violence against Native men in Minneapolis who were hauled off in the trunk of a police cruiser in 1991. These two events, depicted in his 2012 oil on canvas “Off the Reservation (or Minnesota Nice),” are in the same historical genealogy, and to see them next to one another is to understand a radical but crucial collapse between “history” and the “present.” Denomie’s art is alive with pleasure, pain, and imaginary worlds. Find a little corner, a character, a color, an edge, and hold on to it—it will carry you.