Telling Stories/Making Connections

The Arts in Native American Populations

I selected the Native American population because I am fascinated by the culture and distressed by the current state of the population. I began with a very broad search for artists working with Native American populations and discovered a number of things. First, most of the artists who are working with Native American populations are Native American, however they don’t work with just their tribe. Second, the mission for most of these artists is to restore a sense of history, culture, and community to the population. Third, the artists fall into two categories; artists sharing cultural traditions as they have been practiced for generations, and contemporary artists who infuse the work with tradition but practice in a contemporary style. Regardless of the approach, the goals of building community, fostering a sense of empowerment and forging tribal connections are consistent throughout.

When imagining a design for this piece, I thought about the storytelling tradition that is so strong in this culture. That lead me to the idea of designing an artist’s book. I also wanted the piece to be easily installed and transported. I selected brown paper to connect it to nature. The background text is the poem *Grace* by Joy Harjo (Muskogee). I felt that Grace, in this case, was both a person and a state of being. I felt that it talked about that line that Native people walk between their cultural history and contemporary society. The poem was written in water soluble graphite then coated with matt medium for strength. This process had the added bonus of giving the paper the appearance and feel of fabric or leather. String was incorporated to facilitate hanging. Additional earth colors were added for variety. I contrasted the printed text and the artist images with color as well. I felt that it was important to show the vibrancy of the featured projects in full color. The text is printed on vellum which allows what is beneath to show through. This implies layers of culture and history. In selecting content, I decided to include some statistical data and imagery in the form of graphs and text. This is important to give the viewer a sense of what the population is dealing with. I included a broad sampling of projects and artists, both traditional and contemporary. I felt that it was important to show the diversity and quality of work being done. In addition to the featured artists I have included quotes from various readings and my interview. The quotes give voice to the piece and make it more personal.

When I began this inquiry I felt that I had an idea of what I would find. I have an interest in Native American culture and have traveled to the American Southwest to study both ancient sites and contemporary pueblos. While the economic situation is clear to see, the stark reality of the statistical data was shocking. I expected most of the work being done to focus on teaching traditional arts like Pathfinders. I was surprised to find that there were few non-Native artists working with this population, but was excited by the work done by contemporary artists like Bunky Echo-Hawk, Rosie Simas, and Dancing Earth. These artists are acting as mentors and giving back to the community through their work. I was glad to find that contemporary Native artists were honoring tradition while addressing contemporary issues and approaches. They are proving that this type of artmaking is important, and that they don’t have to make work for the tourist trade to practice. They are setting an example for young artists and giving them a look at a possible future that embraces tradition and personal expression while strengthening their community.