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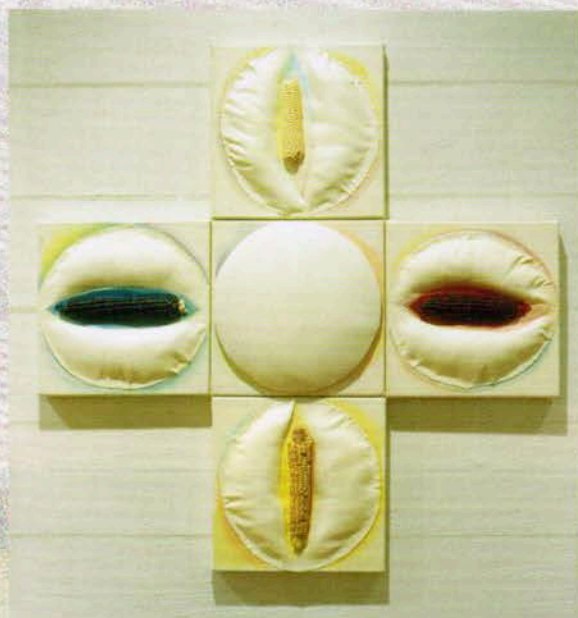
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NATIVE PEOPLES • VOLUME VIII • NUMBER 3 • MAY/JUNE 2005

Artrain USA

A VEHICLE FOR PERSONAL GROWTH

BY GAEL D. HANCOCK



With a childlike sense of wonder and delight, Irina Wolff embraces her dual worlds: the German-American world she grew up in, and the Native realm she has explored on her own. As a child, she lived in Florida with her German grandparents and mother. She ate German food, celebrated German and American holidays, and occasionally wore traditional German dresses.

But Wolff also celebrated her father's heritage—her mother never let her forget him or the fact that he was full-blood Mi'kmaq. To stay grounded in Native culture, Wolff attended powwows, participated in the youth program of the Florida Governor's Council on Indian Affairs, and graduated with a B.F.A. in museum studies from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe.

It was her degree that led to a job with Artrain USA. Artrain first pulled out of the station 34 years ago to take art exhibitions in a rolling gallery to out-of-the-way places via the country's rail system. The current exhibit touring the nation, *Native Views: Influences of Modern Culture*, curated by Joanna Bigfeather (Western Cherokee and Mescalero Apache), will travel through the end of 2007.

Working as a fellow through Artrain's Maggie and Bob Allesee Fellowship Program, Wolff arrived last year in the organization's home office in Ann Arbor, Michigan in time to work on the exhibit's final preparations. "I was part of putting the whole show together," Wolff says. "I helped with painting, preparing for the artwork and even doing some of the fact-checking for the exhibition catalog."



Finally the art started arriving and everyone was excited, but perhaps no one more so than Wolff. She felt a particular kinship for the exhibit. Her former teachers at IAIA, friends and artists whose careers she had studied, created many of the works featured. "I was in awe of them," she recalls.

And how could she not have been? Here was a hanging fabric art piece by Nadema Agard (Cherokee/Lakota/Powhatan) called "Grandmother Moon and Her Corn Moon Daughters." Agard was a friend of Wolff's mother and had been an occasional babysitter for the young Irina. There was an oil-on-canvas piece called "Kansas" by Joe Baker (Delaware Tribe of Indians), an IAIA dean while Wolff was a student. The exhibit includes a mixed-media piece by IAIA instructor Norman Akers (Osage) titled "Spring Matrix IV," and another mixed-media piece by Wolff's friend and teacher Linda Lomahaftewa (Hopi/Choctaw) called "Spirit Deer Gathering XXII." In all, the exhibit includes 71 contemporary artworks by 54 Native artists. Wolff felt right at home.

Which was good, because the Artrain was to be her home for the next few months. Definitely not your typical nine-to-five, Wolff's job entailed traveling from community to community in a van and living out of a suitcase in hotels and dorm rooms; working, eating and recreating with other fellows; and serving as part tour guide, part museum coordinator and part cleanup/maintenance crew member.

Artrain USA Fellows Sought

Artrain USA is seeking applicants for the Maggie and Bob Allesee Fellowship Program now through the middle of October. Fellows must be 21 years of age at the start of the program, have at least a 2.5 grade point average and must have graduated from a fine arts, art history, museum studies or arts administration program. Applications for the six- to 24-month jobs can be found are due by October 14, 2005. For more information, visit www.artrainusa.org and click on Educational Programs, then Fellowship.

Working on the train helped give Wolff a stronger sense of self and confirmed that her Native heritage was a valuable asset to be honored and respected. Not only did she know many of the exhibiting artists, she was able to explain the Native symbolism to the other fellows. She also found herself answering questions of protocol at Native events held on Artrain stops in conjunction with the exhibit.

Like many of the other fellows and Native artists from the communities Artrain visited, Wolff demonstrated her art. A photographer and writer, she picked up traditional Native beading and soon found herself applying beads to her photos. "Artrain really reaffirmed that this is what I want to do and that I can do it," Wolff says. "I met so many artists living in so many situations, all finding a way to share their art with others and many making a living doing it. It was incredible meeting all those Native artists that were doing what I want to do."

Wolff also discovered a new talent when she was asked to interpret the exhibit for a group of blind students in Kansas City. "It was an amazing experience," she says. "I described everything I could—the history, how I love the language of symbolism, how some of the art made me feel." After working their way through the train, the group's leader said, "Thank you, that was beautiful," and went on to tell Wolff about jobs for art interpreters.

Wolff's Native sensibilities and insights also made some things difficult. She was sometimes amused but often irritated at visitors' comments as they exited the train. "People would come off the train saying, 'Well, I thought it was going to be more traditional.' I would respond that everything ancient was new once upon a time and the pieces have traditional symbols...I think they were expecting a lot of artwork with tipis and headdresses. It's a jolt to their sensibilities, something they might never see. They'll see



LEFT TO RIGHT: Visitors in one of the galleries; "Grandmother Moon" by Nadema Agard; "Kansas" by Joe Baker; the ribbon cutting ceremony in front of the art train.



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“Ten Piece Offering” (by Gerald L. Clarke, Cahuilla) and maybe they’ll get it and maybe not. At any rate, it’s a great way to wake them up.”

Wolff gained recognition for yet another skill. On the train she quickly moved into the position of technical guru, working on the interactive computer-based exhibits. The continuous vibration when the train was moving was hard on the hard drives. “I did a lot of troubleshooting,” she says. Ironically, it was her technical expertise that brought about contact with her Native father’s family. For years, Wolff has maintained a Web site. On the site she had an article with the little information she knew about her father, Louis Barnaby, that ended with an open request for more information. It was a connection she sorely needed.

“It’s kind of like not being complete,” Wolff says. “I just felt a kind of emptiness. I think I had a very fortunate childhood, having as much Native culture as I did growing up; it was just the wanting to know more.”

Last summer the connection was made. A cousin, Katherine A. Barnaby, was browsing the Internet and stumbled across Wolff’s Web site. Thinking Wolff’s story sounded familiar, she talked to her grandmother, then e-mailed Wolff. Within just a few weeks, Wolff was visiting her father’s family at Eel Ground First Nation, northeast of Fredericton in New Brunswick, Canada.

“I met my family at a powwow. It felt like I was related to half the people there. It was really life-changing,” Wolff says.

Wolff left the Artrain shortly before her fellowship was over to move to Canada to be near her father’s family. Currently she is living in Fredericton with her cousin and is in a master’s program in Native studies at the University of New Brunswick.

A powerhouse of energy, Wolff embraces the opportunities she has been given. “My greatest fear is to have a boring life. I do everything with adventure in mind. Doing Artrain was a big adventure for me, but so was moving to Canada. Sometimes I feel like every day is an adventure just figuring out how things work.”

Details: For more information on Irina Wolff, visit www.musey.net and www.livejournal.com/~artrain. For information on Artrain USA, visit www.artrainusa.org.

Gael Hancock is a freelance writer living in Las Vegas. Her passion is building, lecturing on and studying the effects of labyrinths. She has written a booklet, “108 Ways to Use Labyrinths in Schools,” a how-to for teachers.

Native Views—Influences of Modern Culture will travel through November of 2007. The schedule through October 2005 is below. In 2006, the exhibit will be traveling through the west, including Alaska, and in 2007 in the southeast and north to Wisconsin. This schedule is subject to change as other stops are added.

Washington, DC, May 2-3; Petoskey, MI, May 12-15; Mt. Pleasant, MI, May 18-22; Ludington, MI, May 29-June 1; Holland, MI, June 9-12; Mendota, IL, June 17-20; Valparaiso, IN, June 25-28; Cumberland, MD, July 7-10; Gettysburg, PA, July 14-17; Manassas, VA, July 23-26; Bethlehem, PA, Aug. 5-14; Utica, NY, Aug. 27-30; Providence, RI, Sept. 8-11; Cleveland, OH, Sept. 22-25; Harrisville, MI, Oct. 1-4; Standish, MI, Oct. 7-10; West Branch, MI, Oct. 13-16; Owosso, MI, Oct. 20-23; Grand Haven, MI, Oct. 29-Nov. 1.