

PHOTO Giotto: 14th Century painting, “St. Francis receives the stigmata” by Italian fresco artist Giotto serves as inspiration for the contemporary installation, “Stigmata at Wounded Knee” by Shawn Skabelund, currently on display at the School of Mines’ Apex Gallery.

PHOTO: The fetal bones of a coyote connect by sinew-like threads to the enlarged photo of Si Tanka, frozen in the snow in the aftermath of the Wounded Knee Massacre; in the new art installation, ‘Stigmata at Wounded Knee.

PHOTO: 38 smoked skins hang, like spirits of those massacred at Wounded Knee, silently bearing witness in Shawn Skabelund’s show, “The Stigmata at Wounded Knee.”

PHOTO: The artist Shawn Skabelund discusses his art installation currently on display in the Apex Gallery at the School of Mines and Technologies through Nov. 9.

All photos by Abena Songbird

Stigmata at Wounded Knee

New ‘must see’ art installation at Rapid City School of Mines through Nov. 9

Abena Songbird

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RAPID CITY — The Apex Gallery on the School of Mines campus currently hosts an exhibit that’s surprisingly moving and haunting, *Stigmata at Wounded Knee*, through November 9, 2007.

Upon entering the room, the senses are immediately engaged: a large blow up of the famous image of Minneconjou Chief Si Tanka’s (Big Foot) body frozen in time, lays front and center. The scent of smoked buckskins hang from the ceiling like discarded husks; the spirits of those massacred at Wounded Knee lay silent witness; testimony to the gold, greed and attempted genocide that played out in these Black Hills. Silver miner pans catch the frail fall cottonwood leaves, with lengths of sinew running back to Si Tanka, whose own connection to the bones of a coyote; the wild self, curls in fetal position.

Artist Shawn Skabelund, MA., MFA, a Drawing, Figure Drawing and Installation lecturer from Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff expresses his installation this way, “Stigmata at Wounded Knee highlights another ugly mark made in the name of progress, discovery, and manifest destiny which has contributed to the “unsettling of America” – a tragic mark culminating in the massacre of 300 Lakota at Wounded Knee.”

A Utah native, the artist grew up in a variety of small western communities, and is known for his “site specific, placed based” work; installations across the country that he’s designed for the specific site they are shown, with themes that deal specifically with that place.

Questioning history – Bury My Heart

He credits Dee Brown’s book, “Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee” which he read at the age of 14, for planting a seed for much of his future work.

“I started questioning all of history that I learned as a child and in high school. At 14 I knew there was this other history out there,” he said.

When working ten years ago on an installation with the theme: “the life of Saint Francis,” he began studying the paintings of early Renaissance artist Giotto, the Italian fresco painter. Skabelund then made the connection for this piece.

“One of his paintings that really struck me was his “St. Francis receives the stigmata of Christ. He’s in a pose with arms upward,” said Skabelund. “Remembering Si Tanka’s image – that same pose reminded me so much of that same piece,” he added. “I put the two together—two beautiful art objects—a photograph and a painting, that’s the only similarity.”

Years went by before he began to design the piece. Running into School of Mines and Technologies Apex Director, Deborah Mitchell, at a conference in Seattle, he discussed developing the idea for an installation. When she moved into her current position—it became a reality.

He started the show four years ago, and finished it in mid-September, adding the gilded cottonwood leaves that dangle over the gold-miner pans. “I needed something—fallen leaves, the sacredness of the cottonwood tree, something to balance all that—why it all started: gold in the Black

Hills," he explains. "That's where it all started: this land and the people on it...Custer going in with his troops and finding that gold and deciding, 'Okay, I'm going to break that Treaty...'

Skabelund always uses sacred objects in his work, in juxtaposition with the European-American to counterbalance and show the resulting conflict. "Not in a disrespectful way, but a conflicting way," he notes.

A work of intentional, tragic irony

The artist intentionally chose the School of Mines to house his installation.

"I'm finding in all my research, because I do these shows all over, basically it's the mining, the exploitation of minerals underground...it continues today, this theme: the white man's covetous orbit," said Skabelund. "It's reservation lands now, from the people who live there."

"I wanted these students who are going here to know this history; that this university was built on mining, that's what was happening in the Black Hills," he added.

Even the number of the hides hanging in the work are symbolic—38. After seeing his work in a collaborative show in San Francisco, the gallery director of Minnesota State University invited Skabelund to do an installation. They began talking about socio-political and historical events in western history, and Mankato, the site of one of the largest mass execution in the west, of 38 Dakota became the theme of his 2004 installation, "Pioneer Spirit" in which he compares the Iraq war on "terrorists" to what the U.S. government did to the Santee Sioux in December 1862.

"That installation again was about European Americans moving into that part of the country—Minnesota, and the Native people once again felt they had the right to defend their land. So they were hung for quote, unquote—"terrorist activities"—I tied that into what was happening in Iraq," he explained. "The insurgents came and "we" (U.S.) called them "terrorists" because "we" moved into their country."

Explaining their reuse in this current show he said, "I had spent a lot of money on these hides and they reminded me so much of Ghost Dance shirts. I thought it would be wonderful to fill the room with them as remembrances of what happened at Wounded Knee."

Long strings, like sinew, correlate between objects in the installation: from coyote bones to Si Tanka's photo; from cottonwood leaves to miner's pan, "I use to do these portraits as an undergrad where I would draw myself with lines going up that I can't control like—being manipulated by these forces, 'What is God doing to me," he laughs. "Maybe that's part of why I left the religion I was born into. I don't know what's going. Those beliefs I once had I can't accept now. Those supposedly came from God," he said. "So this stigmata is turning this person now, a puppet...we're constantly bombarded with corporate government policies, that's what's frustrating."

The coyote bones in his piece also hold much significance to the artist. A symbol he said of "the trickster" and "God" he found while living in northeastern Washington after graduate school. His neighbor had shot the coyote and it wandered onto Skabelund's property leaving a trail of blood.

"I saw that shape out in the field and knew exactly what it was—that this was an omen I had to use in my work. To me the coyote is the perfect symbol of marginalization. We kill this animal, marginalize it, but it's still able to survive on the edge. Every once in awhile it still comes into our mainstream culture."

Though painfully aware that he might be perceived in Indian country as "just another white male appropriating Native culture" he says, "That's not what I'm doing. I'm looking at history and I'm sick of it. I now live next to the Navajo Nation, how "we" continually want to take their land. They would concentrate them on these camps, called "reservations" and then "we" discover there are precious minerals: 'Oh let's go in and get them...'

The artist's work is anything but "safe." He has a passion to express particularly those pivotal conflicts European-Americans have visited on indigenous people—and the dire consequences. "I tend to have most of my shows at universities and colleges. I'm trying to educate," he explains. "I'd prefer to have it in malls, then I could educate everyone, but I'm a realist."

All he can do he says, is "set it out" adding, "It's the professor's responsibility to get their students to see the work and talk about it."

On seeing the recent show, First People's Fund President, Lori Pourier shared a bit of history with Skabelund: telling him that the same day Lincoln made the decision to have those 38 Dakota

hung for believing they had participated in killing white settlers in Blue Earth Country, was the same day he signed the Emancipation Proclamation to free the slaves.

"Talk about irony," he added. "I didn't know that."

Skabelund just watched HBO's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* last Thursday when his wife brought home the video. Expressing disappointment in the film he said, "The first half I really didn't enjoy at all—I thought it was way too sappy. I just don't think they went far enough; seeing HBO productions before I thought they were really going to get in there and do something...I think they held back way too much."

Skabelund also is fostering the next generation of artists by working with one of his past students, Erica Damman, an aspiring installation artist. "She took a site specific installation course from me entitled, *Water in the Southwest* and since then her art/life changed," he said.

Prior to that she was focused he said, solely on traditional European art. She is now working on her own installation which "explores the consumption of Americans" or "how we rely on third-world workers to make things," he said, the "slave trade" or "slave economy" that is part of the fashion industry.

"She's finding that all these clothes show up on our shelves in this country, we wear them a few years and then we give them back to Goodwill and they go back worn by these same workers," he added.

Future Installations

He is generally invited by university not-for-profit galleries to build his installations, then "the research begins." None of the pieces are permanent. "If there was the space for it, but I like them temporary—a one shot deal—because there's so much art out there," he said adding, that he's not in it "to make money" but rather to educate. He works with galleries, who may be interested in his work, "I've gone in the red to help galleries, gone in the black for those that can afford it."

Skabelund's next show will be in November at Cochise College, down on the border of Mexico. He's working in collaboration with Damman on an installation that deals with the Apache, as a semi-nomadic people who lived a semi-nomadic life until "their lands were taken over by the Mexican and European-American cultures." Because of that their economy changed from semi-nomadic to one of "raiding" he explained. "That's why they are given such a bad name because of their raiding economy and culture," he added. He hopes to tie contemporary issues into this show—both border and migratory.

To learn more of Shawn Skabelund and his art, or if interested in contacting him for an installation please visit his website: shawnskabelund.com, or email: shawn.skabelund@nau.edu.

The "Stigmata at Wounded Knee" installation runs until November 9, 2007 at the South Dakota School of Mines and Technologies Apex Gallery Classroom Building 211at 501 East St. Joseph Street in Rapid City. Please call Director Debra Mitchell (605) 394-1254 for hours of viewing.