

## **Rick Bartow: Crow's Fear**

September 11 – October 19, 2024

Opening Reception: Friday, September 13th, 5:30 – 7:30 pm

First Friday Artwalk: October 4th, 5:30 - 7:30 pm

Karin Clarke Gallery is pleased to present *Rick Bartow: Crow's Fear*, a richly diverse selection of works from the Bartow Trust Collection. Included are large pastels, hand-colored lithographs, and small drawings, while Bartow's characteristic bird imagery (crows, hawks, owls, eagles) features prominently in monotypes, mixed media works on handmade Japanese paper, and some of the finest drypoint prints still available. The pieces, created between 1991 and 2015, have been freshly framed for this exhibit. Together, they provide a highly representative cross-section of Bartow's works and of his powerful mark-making, reaffirming his stature as one of the most important leaders in contemporary Native American art.

*Crow's Fear*, the large pastel on paper that lends its title to the exhibit, involves some of the artist's characteristic iconography along with several of his recurring stylistic and thematic motifs. It also reminds us that Bartow was a master storyteller. (*The Girl Who Married the Whale*, *Distant Thunder II*, *Burning Clown & Bird* are other obvious examples.) With *Crow's Fear*, we enter the narrative in medias res, at a pivotal moment when the protagonist (presumably a version of the artist himself) stares in fright at a source of danger looming outside the frame and gestures protectively with his hands, seemingly embracing and shielding another creature or being.

As usual, much is left to the viewer's interpretation and imagination. The nature of the danger is unspecified: it could belong to any realm, visible or invisible. Some areas are left blank, limbs and features are incompletely drawn, and this too contributes to the emotional as well as compositional impact of the scene. Only one of the man's eyes, widened in surprise and fear, is sharply and precisely drawn, making it the visual and emotional focal point of the composition, which is otherwise characterized by quick, spontaneous strokes and by sweeping curves that guide the viewer's eye around the picture plane.

Transformation, as has often been noted, is at the heart of much of Bartow's work, and he himself referred to his numerous representations of animal and human hybrids as "transformational images", instances of which can be found in *Anger*, *Me & Spegi*, *GC 4*, as well as *Crow's Fear*. This fascination was partially inspired by Indigenous shape-shifting stories, but Bartow also considered transformation to be part of the natural life cycle. He further knew from experience that transformation inexorably occurs across all personal domains, whether physical, psychological, relational, or spiritual. In the drypoint prints *Spegi* and *Me & Spegi*, the folded wings of a hawk are augmented with the ghost outline of wider wings, suggesting the potential for movement and expansion. Meanwhile, in *Me & Spegi*, the artist's head fully inhabits the body of the hawk, the two forming a dual being.

In *Crow's Fear*, a human face and a crow's beak are superimposed, the contour of the arm evokes that of a wing. At the same time, looking left, a coyote's profile appears to be outlined, the crow's beak possibly doubling as ears, the coyote's body held in a protective embrace by the human figure. The crow and the coyote were the two trickster figures with the most personal meaning for Bartow. While the man and bird appear to share a head, the crow's beak could also be a mask. Masks were another object of fascination, precisely for their power to enable transformation, and Bartow, drawing from multiple traditions from around the world, carved many.

Along with animal and trickster figures, Bartow often represented himself, and many of his works contain at least some self-portrait element. Sometimes, the self-portrait is clearly specified in the title or through the presence of wire-rimmed spectacles (*Me & Spegi*). At other times, we can only infer that the male figure stands for the artist, or at least some version of him (*Crow's Fear*, *Distant Thunder II*, *Anger*, *GC 4*).

Bartow viewed himself as a mark-maker first and foremost. If *Crow's Fear* is emblematic of his pastels for its bold colors and high value contrast, it is also characteristic of his unique mark-making in general – uninhibited and free, gestural and dynamic. He also reworked his marks with the same spontaneity: erasure and scraping off were part of the mark-making, as was adding marks over marks or welcoming elements of chance. His working method was itself an act of transformation. Through this process, the work on paper became a kind of palimpsest whose layers allow multiple readings.

Other types of mark-making in Bartow's works include the use of numbers and Roman numerals, the letter x, dotted lines, dashes, splashes, scribbles, geometrical shapes such as circles and triangles, words in various languages. Some marks may have been notations to himself, but all are an integral part of the composition. Bartow's approach to mark-making also imbues his works with a sense of rhythm and movement, a feeling of musicality. At times, he seems to draw motion itself.

Bartow made it clear that he used mark-making as a healing practice and his works – though they cannot and should not be reduced to the expression of emotions – have a powerful emotional resonance. They often elicit a shock of recognition within the viewer. This recognition is independent of what we know or understand about the content of his images: it is a response to the authenticity of what he was able to express about himself. Through his art practice, he dared to confront the more harrowing aspects of existence and his own trauma-induced feeling states, and we may be grateful that he didn't negate any part of life but represented honestly what is often unwelcome, hidden, or suppressed.

Aside from content, his work also carries a spiritual dimension by implicitly acknowledging the ultimate mystery of existence and by blurring the boundaries between self and other, non-human and human animals, body and spirit, the visible and the invisible. Bartow broke down barriers: in his world of perpetual transformation, there are no fixed entities or states, no immutable essence always identical to itself. His is a world of fluid states and forms. This is why even the pain, anger, or anguish he may represent are never just that: these emotions

too are in flux, on their way toward something else, and there is also joy, humor, and the possibility of love and hope (*Dignity/Grace II*). Ultimately, the very energy of his mark-making is life-affirming.

A resident of Newport, Oregon, where he was born, Rick Bartow (1946-2016) was an enrolled member of the Mad River Band of Wiyot Indians and developed close ties with the Siletz community. He graduated in 1969 from Western Oregon University with a degree in secondary arts education before being drafted and serving in the Vietnam War (1969-71), from which he returned with severe PTSD and alcohol addiction. Art and reconnecting to his Indigenous heritage helped him confront both predicaments, and later, personal loss. In 2013, he suffered a severe stroke and artmaking proved once more to be a curative process. He died of congestive heart failure in 2016.

Besides drawings, paintings, and prints, Bartow created numerous mixed media sculptures. He was also a songwriter, guitar player and singer, and performed regularly with his blues-rock band, the Backseat Drivers. He traveled extensively (Europe, Japan, New Zealand), meeting with other artists and studying traditional art forms as well as contemporary practices from around the world. He collaborated for twenty years with Master Japanese printer Seiichi Hiroshima. A voracious reader, he was also well-versed in literature and philosophy.

His work has been shown in more than a hundred solo exhibitions at national and international museums and galleries, including the traveling retrospective *Things You Know But Cannot Explain*, organized by the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon in 2015 and accompanied with a fully illustrated monograph. His work is also included in numerous prestigious private and public permanent collections, including the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian and the Whitney Museum, where four of his large pastels are currently being displayed.

-Sylvie Pederson