

**Press Release**

October 8, 1996

*RED RIVER CROSSINGS—  
CONTEMPORARY NATIVE AMERICAN ARTISTS  
RESPOND TO PETER RINDISBACHER (1806-1834)*

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- Artists:** Arthur Amiotte, Rebecca Belmore, Brad Kahlhamer, Alan Michelson, Joanna Osburn-Bigfeather, Jolene Rickard, Jeffrey Thomas, Deron Twohatchet, Phil Young and Peter Rindisbacher
- Dates:** November 1—December 14, 1996
- Opening:** Friday, November 1, 5 to 8 pm
- Performance:** Saturday, November 2, at 8 pm  
“In My Dreams” by James Luna
- Artists’ Talk:** Saturday, November 16, at 3 pm  
with Brad Kahlhamer, Alan Michelson, Joanna Osburn-Bigfeather, Jolene Rickard, Deron Twohatchet, Phil Young, and others, moderated by Gregory Sholette
- Film:** *Views of a Vanishing Frontier* (1988, 60 min.)  
introduced by George Horse Capture  
(National Museum of the American Indian, New York)
- Gallery Hours:** Tuesday through Saturday, 11 am to 6 pm
- Catalogue:** A fully illustrated catalogue will be published after the exhibition, with artists’ statements and texts by Margaret Archuleta, Henry E. Bovay, and Gregory Sholette.

For more information, call Carin Kuoni at (212) 925-2035.

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175 years ago, a fifteen-year old Swiss boy arrived at the Red River Colony in Canada. On the date of this anniversary, the Swiss Institute will inaugurate “Red River Crossings: Contemporary Native American Artists Respond to Peter Rindisbacher (1806-1834).” The exhibition presents a selection of watercolors and drawings by this pioneering nineteenth-century Swiss painter—one of the first European artists to document America’s indigenous

populations—and site-specific installations which respond to Rindisbacher's work by ten contemporary artists of indigenous descent. This exhibition is the second ever to present such a large collection of watercolors and drawings by Peter Rindisbacher. Over twenty works have been obtained from the Gilcrease Museum in Oklahoma, the Joslyn Art Museum in Nebraska, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, and West Point Museum in New York.

“Red River Crossings” is an exceptional project, a multimedia exhibition that bridges the art of two continents and two centuries: On the one hand, there are the delicate watercolors of Peter Rindisbacher, one of the first Europeans to depict Plains Indians and their daily lives. On the other hand, there is a long overdue retort to Rindisbacher's work—and all such representations of native peoples—by ten innovative contemporary Native American artists. “Red River Crossings” stages what is only the most recent encounter between these two different cultures, continuing the dialogue first initiated in the last century between Native Americans and Swiss artists such as Rindisbacher, Rudolf Friedrich Kurz and Karl Bodmer.

“Red River Crossings” inaugurates a New York fall season exceptionally rich with programs about Native Americans. It is presented in conjunction with “Plains Indian Drawings 1865-1935: Pages from a Visual History” at the Drawing Center; “Contemporary Art of the Dine” at the American Indian Community House; and “Inscribing the Image,” at the National Museum of the American Indian. The four institutions—including the Swiss Institute—have organized several public programs in collaboration with one another.

Peter Rindisbacher (1806 -1834) was among the first European artists to document the indigenous peoples of northern America, whom he encountered on his journey from Canada down to St. Louis, Missouri. The artist was born in Bern, Switzerland, in 1806. His family emigrated to the Red River Colony in present-day Manitoba, Canada, in 1821. Rindisbacher moved to the United States during the turbulent era of expansion into the West. In his virtually self-taught, meticulous style, Rindisbacher documented some of these indigenous peoples in the last stages of their independence.

Striving for objectivity, Rindisbacher's seemingly journalistic images contrast sharply with the romantic visions of later, better-known artists who focused on the same subject matter, such as George Catlin and Karl Bodmer. Created by an artist who spent long periods in each place—five years in Manitoba, three in Illinois, and five in St. Louis—the works display an authenticity derived from extensive observation. The vision of a young man on his first trip abroad, they were painted before a common formula on how to represent “Indians” had been established, which, in part, accounts for their straightforwardness. Rindisbacher's youth also explains a degree of awkwardness and oddness in his depictions that is particularly appealing to today's sensibilities.

“Red River Crossings” will include the work of ten contemporary Native American artists that open a dialogue with Rindisbacher’s work, looking at issues such as the colonization of native lands, and the general representations of indigenous people by European “high culture.” Arthur Amiotte, Rebecca Belmore, Brad Kahlhamer, James Luna, Alan Michelson, Joanna Osburn-Bigfeather, Jolene Rickard, Jeffrey Thomas, Deron Twohatchet, and Phil Young’s contributions range from performances to architectural and video installations. On November 2, 1996, on the 175th anniversary of Peter Rindisbacher’s arrival in America, James Luna will perform “In My Dreams,” a one-hour piece in the Institute’s gallery.

Through diverse media, these artists question and cast doubt upon common perceptions of the West and the writing of the historical record itself. The artists make reference to Rindisbacher in their work, whether by visual quotations or by allusions to his life and times. Several of the artists use artifacts of modern day life, such as manhole covers, exercise bicycles, and surveillance mirrors, as a means of contextualizing the past.

Well-known for his artistic work, **Arthur Amiotte** (Oglala Sioux) has created a number of collages. As in Amiotte’s earlier series, they incorporate the works of his great-grandfather as well as his own earlier works and, in this case, reproductions of Rindisbacher’s paintings. Emphasizing continuity and change over time, Amiotte explores differing views of reality while offering an outlook which encompasses many voices.

**Rebecca Belmore** (Anishinabe) examines the process of compressing lives into singular images: “Images [which are] impossibly reductive.” Responding to Rindisbacher’s images and titles, the artist will present photographs—coopting the Swiss artist’s imagery—whose miniature size is contradicted by rich colors and opulent frames.

On first sight, **Brad Kahlhamer**’s sculptures are minimal tracings on the floor. Upon closer inspections, the fragile structures of wood and wire reveal a resemblance to the forts that Rindisbacher painted in Canada. Kahlhamer’s installation throws off balance our common notions about perspective and scale.

**James Luna**’s multimedia performance “In My Dreams” is comprised of video projections, sound, and props such as an exercise bicycle and a walkman with headset. It looks at the cultural identity of the Native American in the context of contemporary Western society. Using images from Rindisbacher’s work, American pop culture, and references to clichéd representations of Native Americans, Luna sardonically seeks to expose stereotypes. Luna is Luiseno/Diegueno.

**Alan Michelson** (of Mohawk descent) launches his “Chippewatches” on the occasion of this exhibition, a series of watches—the ultimate Swiss icon—which uses imagery from Rindisbacher’s works. The watch faces in Michelson’s “Chippewatches” depict “Indian time” and non-Indian time, using details from Rindisbacher images. The hands are rifles, arrows or human arms; time as told by these watches does not always move regularly or even necessarily forward.

**Joanna Osburn-Bigfeather** (Cherokee/Apache) creates impressions in clay of the manhole covers along the stretch of Broadway that connects the Native American Community House—where she is a curator—and the Swiss Institute. Osburn-Bigfeather unearths a history that the manhole covers symbolically cover up.

With her photographic collages, **Jolene Rickard** (Turtle Clan, Tuscarora Nation) constructs a conceptual environment by hanging her large-scale photographs from the ceiling to form an enclosure. In the gallery, the viewer moves from Rindisbacher's world to Rickard's world, travelling in a flash through 150 years of Swiss and Indian history.

**Jeffrey Thomas** (Iroquois), a Canadian photographer, spent six years in Manitoba, near the site of the Red River Colony where Rindisbacher lived upon arrival in America. His installation juxtaposes photographs of two Rindisbacher paintings with photographs Thomas has taken over the last two years of that area, focusing specifically on a family scene and powwow dancer portraits.

**Deron Twohatchet** (Kiowa) sees Rindisbacher as an ethnographer, and his works as documentary. As a filmmaker, Twohatchet turns the construction of history around: Using surveillance mirrors instead of a camera, he documents the art on display, the comings and goings of visitors and gallery staff, and other events that occur during the exhibition. The mirrors will be installed throughout the gallery.

**Phil Young** (Cherokee) contributes a naturalistic portrait of Rindisbacher, based on Rindisbacher's 1833/34 self-portrait. In reversing Rindisbacher's gaze, Young questions the relationship between artist and subject, and the subjective writing of history.

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A 90-page catalogue, documenting the exhibition, will be available in early 1997. With an essay on Rindisbacher by Henry E. Bovay, the author of the artist's catalogue raisonné, a text on the contemporary artists by Margaret Archuleta, Heard Museum, Arizona, and an essay by project coordinator Gregory Sholette, the catalogue is fully illustrated with both color and black-and-white photographs, and includes statements by the artists.

*"Red River Crossings" has been organized by the Swiss Institute. The exhibition's coordinator and facilitator is New York-based artist and writer Gregory Sholette. It has been made possible thanks to an advisory council of artists and scholars, Native Americans among them. They are Henry E. Bovay, the author of the catalogue raisonné of Peter Rindisbacher; Raymond DeMallie, Indiana University; Alvin M. Josephy, the author of the first monograph on Rindisbacher; historian and independent filmmaker Lisa Maya Knauer; curator and writer Lucy Lippard; Gerald McMaster, Canadian Museum of Civilization; Alfonso Ortiz, University of New Mexico; Joanna Osburn-Bigfeather, American Indian Community House, New York; and William C. Sturtevant, Smithsonian Institution.*

*For further information, please call Swiss Institute director Carin Kuoni at (212) 925-2035.*

The Swiss Institute is an independent and not-for-profit cultural center founded in 1986 to promote artistic dialogue between Switzerland and the United States. At the core of its mission lie questions about cultural identities, their parameters and their definition.