

Jane B. Katz, ed. *This Song Remembers: Self-Portraits of Native Americans in the Arts*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980) 202 pp., \$8.95.

"This song remembers him
They remember."

--Simon Ortiz

Through literature, music, and the visual arts a people remember who they were and who they are. Jane B. Katz has effectively brought together the "rememberings" of twenty-one Native American artists who tell briefly of their lives, their work, and the influence of their Native American heritage on all that they create.

Katz has done well what is difficult to do; she has integrated autobiography, photographs, and history in such a way as to produce a unified collection. It is appropriate that she combined the various genres, for life *is* art for most Native Americans. As Katz points out, Eskimo people do not even have a word for "art" or "artist." (p. 9) Art is not seen by Native Americans as purely decorative, but rather as integral to survival. Traditional artistic expression in pottery and weaving produced necessary goods for physical survival; kiva murals and ceremonial songs guarantee survival of the soul. Ojibway painter George Morrison says, "My art is my religion." (p. 60) And Aleut sculptor John Hoover recognized the special gift given to the artist: "Like the shaman, the tribal artist communicates with the spirit world, not just through the finished product, but during the creation of it." (p. 37) Clearly these artists do not see the practice of art as something separate from living. They serve as links between the past and the future, drawing on the symbols of their various cultures to create contemporary works.

Helen Hardin, Tewa painter, has used traditional images to create paintings in acrylics and oils, and, in another genre, John Kauffman incorporates ceremonial dances and stories into modern theatre. In her paintings Mary Morez integrates the old and the new, art and religion, living and believing. Grace Medicine Flower tells of praying to the Clay Lady for inspiration. Over and over these artists speak of their dependence on the past, on their ancestors, and on their belief in the power of creation and transformation to provide the inspiration for their work.

The brief selections recounted in Katz's collection represent the variety of Native American experience. Some artists, such as author N. Scott Momaday,

have extensive formal academic training; others, such as woodcarver Tony Hunt, learned their craft through lengthy apprenticeship. These artists have travelled throughout the world, but their hearts have remained close to the land of their origins. Allan Houser writes, "I visit the Apache reservation to stay in contact with the way things are and to remember who I am." (p. 107) In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*¹ N.S. Momaday wrote, "Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind on the remembered earth. . . .He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands. He ought to imagine the creatures there. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of dawn and dusk." (p. 113) In the same spirit Helen Hardin writes in her autobiographical selection, "My imagination is the soul of my work. Every painting sings its own song." (pp. 122-123) It is this superimposition of imagination on reality that produces art, whether it is a story or a piece of pottery, a blanket or a symphony.

Katz's collection could be used in art classes to introduce students to the lives of artists and to the various explanations of technique and style which are in the book. It could also be used in philosophy classes, to demonstrate clearly the integration of the creative spirit and Native American world-view. Teachers of literature will find the last section which includes selections by Gerald Vizenor, Jamake Highwater, Simon Ortiz, Leslie Silko, and N. Scott Momaday particularly useful in teaching both the oral tradition and contemporary literature. In *Ceremony*² Leslie Silko wrote, "You don't have anything if you don't have the stories." (p. 2) Indeed, the ancient stories are still alive, and they guarantee survival. Many life histories focus on what has been lost, how things have changed. These stories tell of what has been gained and of what continues to exist.

Gretchen M. Bataille
Iowa State University

Notes

¹N. Scott Momaday. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. (New York: Ballantine, 1969).

²Leslie Marmon Silko. *Ceremony*. (New York: Viking Press, 1977).