Guerilla Fashion

PATRICIA MICHAELS IS NOT NEW TO FASHION, BUT SHE IS NEW TO SANTA FE’S CELEBRATED SOUTHWEST INDIAN ART MARKET, A PROVING GROUND FOR NATIVE AMERICAN ARTISTS, WHICH TAKES PLACE IN AUGUST OF EACH YEAR. MICHAELS MADE HER MARK AT LAST YEAR’S 88TH SHOW WITH “WEATHERED TEXT: NO TRESPASSING BY THE TAOS WAR CHIEF,” A STUNNING, PROVOCATIVE NON-TRADITIONAL PIECE THAT TOOK FIRST PRIZE IN THE TEXTILE CLASS. THE METICULOUSLY TAILORED JACKET MADE OF HAND-PAINTED SILK AND VELVET, IN HUES OF PURPLE, BLUE, AND REDDISH BROWN, STOOD OUT AMONG THE MORE FAMILIAR NAVajo RUGS AND EMBROIDERED PUEBLO MANTAS. IT SURPRISED AND INSPIRED JUDGES AND AUDIENCE ALIKE IN ITS ABILITY TO TRANSCEND FAMILIAR CONCEPTS OF INDIAN ART.

MICHAELS IS FROM TAOS PUEBLO, A NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITY AND UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE, IN NORTHERN NEW MEXICO. SHE SPEAKS THE TIWA LANGUAGE FLUENTLY AND IS IMMERSED IN THE TRADITIONS AND VALUES OF HER PUEBLO CULTURE. THIS YEAR MICHAELS JOINS HER COMMUNITY IN CELEBRATING THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE RETURN OF TAOS’ SACRED BLUE LAKE AND SURROUNDING LANDS, THE SUCCESSFUL RESULT OF A 64-YEAR STRUGGLE WITH THE U.S. GOVERNMENT TO RECLAIM RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND PROTECTION OF SACRED PLACES. I SPOKE WITH HER DURING MARKET, AND SHE OFFERED THE FOLLOWING WORDS:

At Taos, the way we live allows us to see that the environment is always changing, and we are always adapting to those changes. We truly do live with nature, and this fundamental idea is alive in my work. To create “Weathered Text: No Trespassing by the Taos War Chief” I took a photograph of a No Trespassing sign, a manmade thing. Nature had found its way to alter and affect and destroy the text of the sign. In addition to the rust and weather-beaten qualities, hunters had shot at the sign, frustrated they could not hunt on our land. Here we see that the nature of human beings is to destroy and fight. As an artist I do not do that.

Patricia Michaels’ interest in bringing change to Indian art is part of her activism and ongoing contribution as an America Indian. In her own words:
Native Americans are too often equated with a few ideas and images, such as sitting on a buffalo robe or smoking an Indian pipe. But native people are so much more than that. So much thought goes into how we live our lives and how we preserve our culture. Those are the moments I want my work to be about. We are perceived as still living like the famous photographs by Ansel Adams or Joseph Sharp or a mannequin of a Native American with a panoramic prairie in the background. We are so much more than those romantic images. When I do my work I try to represent those other moments or little vignettes or scenarios of the richness of our culture. Mother Nature is so strong, and that gives me strength in my design work. As a female, I want to show the nurturing side along with the strength of women. Silk is a natural, soft, beautiful and delicate fabric, yet it is the strongest fabric there is. This is why I use it in my work.

Michaels grew up in Santa Fe where she trained at the Institute of American Indian Art. She studied fashion design at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and worked in collections at the Field Museum. She apprenticed with the Santa Fe Opera where she learned to design clothes that move with the body, and lived in Italy for two years where she trained with an Italian designer to learn sophisticated construction techniques. Most recently, Patricia has worked with the Kellogg Foundation to support indigenous fashion designers in Santa Fe and South Africa.

Her newest line for Fall 2010, which debuted at New York City’s Fashion Week, takes the bald eagle as its central theme. Symbols of strength and connection to the spirit world, eagle feathers play a role in many Native American and Pueblo religious practices. On the runway, her printed feather images on silk layer and cascade in empire dress forms, and her stunning eagle feather cape evokes the majestic bird’s wingspan in flight.

The fashion industry is always changing as it defines and responds to current trends. Patricia Michaels has deliberately chosen the artistic medium of fashion as a metaphor that embodies a fundamental Pueblo cultural theme of movement. For hundreds of years, basic tenants of Pueblo cosmology, religion, and art have emphasized movement, change, and the breath of life. After receiving her award, Michaels initiated a classic “guerilla fashion show” to make a statement and to encourage change in Indian art. Her entourage of 18 tall and slender black-haired models donned her jacket and some of her other clothing designs and literally stormed the Santa Fe Plaza en parade. In motion on the runway, whether in Santa Fe, at her home studio in Taos, or in New York City’s fashion houses, Michaels’ designs embody her message that Native Americans have always had to embrace change in order to survive. In so doing, she wants to encourage Pueblo arts that thrive and change. That creative energy is her sanctuary. Art and fashion express her creativity; she is not going to let others trespass into her world.

Additional award winners in the Textile Division included Diné artists D.Y. Begay, Alberta Henderson, Charlene Laughing, Mona Laughing, TaNii Naataanii, Barbara Ornelas, Michael Ornelas, Sierra Teller Ornelas, and Penny Singer; Pueblo embroiderer Isabel Gonzales; and Haida fashion designer Dorothy Grant.

Lucy Fowler Williams is the Jeremy A. Sabloff Keeper of American Collections at the Penn Museum. A specialist in textiles, she served as one of three textile judges at the 2010 Santa Fe Indian Art Market. Williams is working on Native American Voices, a new exhibition at the Penn Museum.