

Jim Denomie, Cedar Crest College, October 2013

Jim Denomie, an Ojibwe from Minnesota, introduces himself as "an honest painter—I tell the truth," and he means historical, personal and cultural truths about the brutal and oft-times murderous treatment of Native Americans rather than esoteric "truths" that exist only inside the art world. His current show at The Center for Visual Research at Cedar Crest College, *Slightly Disturbed*, features twenty-four vibrant, colorful, and expressive portraits. The title bears close scrutiny, for who can gaze at these faces and, knowing the awful story, not empathize and be disturbed. The understated title puts me somewhat at ease, though my comfort level continues to be challenged.

Denomie's self portraits grow out of his larger, satirical, history-based works. For instance, *Attack on Fort Snelling Bar and Grill* (35" x 49") is jam-packed with Minnesota history and art historical references. Edward Hopper's desolate, despairing, always-open cafe from *Night Hawks* is set inside the walls of Fort Snelling, the focal point of the Dakota War of 1862. (The building still stands today and is a painful symbol for Native Americans.) There's always some kind of "fun" cooking up at the ol' Fort--mechanical bull

rides, karaoke, endless alcohol and Freedom Fries. Outside under a nuclear sunset, Indians pose for tourist pictures while a happy horse head bounces along in the back of a cop car. Combining black humor and pathos, Denomie riffs on demeaning, actual events that befell the Dakota and the Ojibwe. (In 1862 starving Dakota were told to "eat grass" or their own dung, and in 1994 three inebriated native American men were dumped like cordwood into the trunk of a police cruiser and hauled to jail.) These images infiltrate Hopper's cool, sedate, and urban style, and suddenly, Hopper's world deflates like a balloon and is reduced to fantasy. After all, Denomie seems to say, isn't "Manhattan" an Algonquin name? "Smiling Indians" and grinning horses play their roles self-consciously, laughing at us yet hiding their pain behind clenched teeth, drawing us into their bitter "native" performance. Denomie's lacerating, illuminating humor equals anything by his contemporaries Enrique Chagoya and Robert Colescott.

Resembling portraits by Edward S. Curtis, an ethnologist and photographer of Native American peoples, the images of *Slightly Disturbed* are frontal and include only a head and shoulders. In an abstract expressionist style reminiscent of Bay Area Figurative

painters David Park, Elmer Bischoff and Joan Brown, these portraits steal back the authority to document Native Americans. The free brushwork and vibrant color is worked both inside and outside of the figures making them seem to reflect their environment rather than exist in opposition to it. I recognize Denomie's signature smile and/or guarded grin on a group of eight portraits each titled *The Disturbed (with teeth)*. A group of eight on the opposite wall, each titled *The Disturbed*, are open-mouthed, with teeth not showing and holes for eyes, reminding me of the sad-faced figures of Modernist Amedeo Modigliani. The interesting thing about this second group is that they may look weak and be droopy-eyed, but they are bathed in a beatific, pastel light and many have supernaturally shimmering hair. Those in the first group seem more self-possessed, heartier than their brethren since they're painted in jewel-like colors that balance extreme light and dark passages. It's important to notice their mismatched eyes, they seem stopped mid-breath about mutter or crack jokes through broken teeth.

Denomie's careful grouping of the portraits highlights his latest, more strident work. A triptych about the NRA titled *See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil* skewers gun rights activism. Four

Incredible Hulk-like portraits, *Man with Hay Fever*, *Duck Lips*, *Homeless Bound*, and *Killer*, come across as formidable, yet flawed individuals. *Artist*, *Slightly Disturbed* seals the deal. Here, a single subject, an aggregate artist-Native American-unknown, tilts his head naturally and studies me with wide, perfectly matched and empowered eyes.