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An Imaginary Battle Comes to Life at the Hudson River Museum

By SUSAN HODARA | MARCH 20, 2015



A depiction of the area at the center of the imaginary conflict. Credit Oren Eckhaus/
Morgan Lehman Gallery, New York

Bonnie Prince Johnnie, flamboyant pharaoh of New York; Francesca, a.k.a. Tisiphone, Native American assassin; Maurits de Wolff, former slave and soldier extraordinaire; Akosua Van Der Zee, wrathful feminist and malicious schemer.

These are a few of the characters in a wildly original telling of the fictional Battle of Yonkers in 18th-century New York; their portraits and those of other tattooed warriors, misled rulers and vengeful women are on display at the Hudson River Museum in “Frohawk Two Feathers: Kill Your Best Ideas, The Battle for New York and Its Lifeline, the Hudson River.”

The paintings, drawings and giant, double-headed wooden horse in the show are the work of Frohawk Two Feathers, the alias of the Los Angeles-based artist Umar Rashid. “Kill Your Best

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"Ideas" is the fifth and final installment of "The American Proteus: An Invocation and the Wars Between the Rivers," an alternative account of the colonization of northeastern North America that is both written and visual in form, epic in scope, and built around the imaginary Republic of Frengland (a combination of England, France and Ireland).

Works in the exhibition include "One," a 22-foot-tall horse. The wooden horse, a site-specific installation, stands 22 feet tall, its belly an illuminated opening that holds sculptures of soldiers, some black, some white and all made from glass to reflect the fragility of life in war. Titled "One," the towering animal embodies the artist's vision of a Trojan horse as a symbol of war's futility.

"Whenever two armies are fighting, they end up mirroring each other," Mr. Two Feathers, 38, said. "They become brutal and savage, a single tangled mass of carnage. They become the monster, the Chimera, that both sides sought to end."



Credit Oren Eckhaus/Morgan Lehman Gallery, New York

The war depicted in "Kill Your Best Ideas" pits contingents from Frengland, fighting alongside members of the Lenape and Huron tribes, against the Batavian (Dutch) army and the Iroquois. Museumgoers will find a whimsical map of the region at the center of the conflict, "Map of the Frenglish Kingdom of Novum Eboracum (New York) (We All Got to Have a Place We Call Home)"; several cartoonish yet violent battle scenarios, two of them painted on deerskin; and more than two dozen portraits, each accompanied by elaborate and entertaining label copy.

Bonnie Prince Johnnie, for example, is shown sporting a turquoise khepresh (an ancient Egyptian royal headdress) and a white fur cape over a high-collared yellow jacket. Part of the work's lengthy title reads: "On losing the love of your life to treachery, fighting a guerrilla war against a numerically superior foe, and still managing to keep your feet on everybody's neck. It's magic, baby!"

Akosua Van Der Zee's portrait is called "You can see my anger but you will *know* my vengeance." Wearing huge gold earrings and a turban around her hair, she glares sideways from the frame. In her left fist she clasps a golden band etched with the words "Ladies First."

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Portraits of the fictitious characters Bonnie Prince Johnnie and Lucretia Theroux. Credit Morgan Lehman Gallery, New York

Nearly half the portraits in the exhibition are of women; most of the characters are multiracial. Mr. Two Feathers, who is African-American with Native American ancestry, said he wanted to portray people who he believes are too often overlooked in historical narratives. Speaking of his research, he said: “I never saw myself. That was an impetus for a lot of this work.”

Working from life or from photographs, on paper or canvas, he completed images as black-and-white drawings before adding paint. “I’m a storyteller first, an illustrator second and a painter last,” he said.

While “Kill Your Best Ideas” is set in the past, Mr. Two Feathers adds contemporary references to his work. The base of the wooden horse is scrawled, graffiti-style, with phrases like “Achilles loves Zeus.” In the paintings, women wear modern-day clothing, and warriors clutch bottles of “purple drank,” a hip-hop term for a concoction of cough medicine and soda. Rap lyrics are used in titles. One portrait is called “Shorty, I’m there for you anytime you need me. For real girl it’s me and your world, believe me.” The line comes from “You’re All I Need/I’ll Be There For You,” performed by the rapper Method Man with the singer Mary J. Blige.

Interspersed among the works included in “Kill Your Best Ideas” are paintings from another era: four Hudson River School landscapes from the museum’s collection, idyllic scenes of the actual territory that would have provided the backdrop for Mr. Two Feathers’s Battle of Yonkers. “This is the land they were fighting for,” Bartholomew Bland, the museum’s director of curatorial affairs, said. “We are merging the real and the story.”

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Mr. Two Feathers's work asks viewers to examine the porous boundary between the two, and to reconsider the truth of recorded history. Among the quotations that adorn the walls of one gallery is Voltaire's statement: "History consists of a series of accumulated imaginative inventions."

"Yes, these are a fictional stories," Mr. Bland said, "but the larger question is: Is history just an accretion of moments recorded by victors and people with political axes to grind? This is a show about the malleability of history."

It is also about the promise of reinvention. Mr. Two Feathers has conceived his own narrative in place of one he finds untenable. "If I don't like what I see, I create something different," he said. "If I don't like a party, I change the party. If I don't like a meeting, I change the meeting. If I don't like a story, I change the story. Most people don't realize the power they have."

"Frohawk Two Feathers: Kill Your Best Ideas, The Battle for New York and Its Lifeline, the Hudson River" runs through May 17 at the Hudson River Museum, 511 Warburton Ave., Yonkers. Information: 914-963-4550 or hrm.org.