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COMMENTARY

Talking Animals: An Interview with Murv Jacob

SEAN TEUTON

Murv Jacob is a Cherokee painter and pipemaker who, when he's not at home in Tahlequah, the Cherokee national capital, lives in a world of his own creation. Drawing on the oral tradition of his tribe, Jacob helps words come to life in his vibrant paintings. With color and intricacy, Mr. Jacob introduces Rabbit to Corn Mother. In his art, Jacob meets the challenge of representing a Cherokee worldview, which he often adapts from the iconography of ancient times, with his own unique and modern approach. He has won numerous awards, including Oklahoma Grand Awards, First Place Awards, and Heritage Awards. Jacob's illustrations grace the covers and pages of many historical novels about Cherokees as well as children's books, magazines, and videos. He is a joyful presence in Tahlequah, and can be found in the morning in his gallery, painting with tireless energy and talking all the while with those who stop in to say hello and watch the animals take shape. I met with Murv Jacob one July 2000 morning to view the completion of his Bear Dance painting and to hear his thoughts on stories and art.

Sean Teuton: Mr. Jacob, you've moved around some before making your home in Tahlequah. Is there a place you're thinking of when you paint?

Murv Jacob: Yes, but it's not necessarily an external place. I've spent all my life in the woods, but most of what I've been painting these days are the animals from the Cherokee animal stories, and then, sometimes, the Cherokee

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dances. I've evolved an imaginary little woods where the creatures and the people live, one that hasn't been tilted and messed up in the way all the woods are now. It's still a pristine forest. I usually picture an oak hickory forest, but it's not necessarily mountainous, because a lot of the stories took place down in the valleys and along the rivers, where the people and the animals live. You don't find arrowheads up in those mountains much; you find them down along the rivers. But it's more an imaginary place than an actual locale. It's an imaginary place in the Smoky Mountains of a thousand years ago.

ST: So would you say that painting takes you to other places and times?

MJ: My mind takes me there and then the paintings come from there.

ST: How does traditional Cherokee art influence your work?

MJ: The kinship between the humans and the animals of the old Cherokee philosophy is something I try to portray all the time. I guess the best way to do this is to look at a painting to see what's going on. Here is a painting with seven bears dancing counterclockwise around the fire, a sacred fire that represents God to the old traditional people. The bears are dressed with the finger-woven sashes, the round breechclouts, and the kind of beadwork that the old time Cherokees wore. So they're bears but they're also people. I'm trying to blur the line a little bit between the people and the animals, because in the ancient days the animals had equal status. To the old time Cherokee people, the bears were the bear people, and the wolves were the wolf people, the birds were the bird people, and on and on. Traditional Cherokee art would be the shell gorgets; it would be the baskets that people made. I try to adhere to the traditional principles in everything I do. Even if I'm painting the animals, they're distinctively Cherokee animals. They're not generic, like a lot of the animals in other stories.

ST: Which American Indian painters do you greatly admire? How have they influenced your painting?

MJ: I try to look at all paintings equally. Many who I consider to be Native American painters might not be considered so by somebody else. You know, Paul Gauguin was French on his father's side, but on his mother's side, he was half Inca and half Spanish, so I see Gauguin as a Native American artist. When I look at Gauguin, I see Woodrow Wilson Crumbo, who I also greatly admire. Crumbo, who also looked at the other art in the world, told me that he was most influenced by the Japanese woodcut artists. The art from the Orient influenced him as much as the art that was coming out of Europe. This is true of both Vincent van Gogh and Gauguin. They went down to Marseilles and would beg for the wrappings off the cargo shipped from the Orient. Those wrappings were patterned with designs from old woodcuts and prints. They didn't care if they were wrinkled up or messed up or just part of one, because they were interested in the way that the Oriental artists handled detail.

Crumbo told me, "As a Native American, you should let your work be influenced by everything in the world, not just by one group of people." It's really hard not to be influenced by the Polynesian art, which is also having a renaissance. It's real difficult not to be influenced by the Aboriginal art of Australia. But as far as Native American influences, I am probably most influenced by Woodrow Wilson Crumbo, and probably Cecil Dick. Cecil Dick is a Cherokee painter, and the only artist who attended the Indian art school at Bacone as well as the studio in Santa Fe. Cecil Dick managed to adhere to what he called his "Woodlands principles." While others were painting these flat, stark backgrounds, he always put a chunk of wood into everything, because he felt that was where he was coming from, the Woodlands culture. Thomas Hart Benton influenced me greatly, though he wasn't a Native American artist. When he found out I was Indian, he said, "Explore those roots, man. Find out that stuff, and be specific, don't just do generic stuff. Dig in there as far as you can and find the specific details of who those people were." So I looked to the unnamed shell artists who lived down at the Spiro Mound here in Oklahoma five hundred years ago. Even though thousands of shell carvings came out of there, certain carvings are obviously by certain artists. Just by looking at them you can see in each the unique style of an artist. They influenced me. They anthropomorphized animals; they turned animals into people. I had always wanted to do that but I thought it was sort of Disneyesque, a twentieth-century thing, until I started looking at the real old shell carvings and then realized that



FIGURE 1

the people in the mounds had been doing that for probably thousands of years. They saw the animals as people and they treated them as such in their work. The animals would be wearing shell gorgets and decorated with beads and dressed up. They weren't animals anymore: they were animal people.

ST: Your paintings convey an incredible sense of motion. How important is movement to your work?

MJ: Well, painting is movement: painting a brushstroke. I try to achieve pure brushstrokes that move in a specific direction rather than blurry little splattered-on things. If you paint good, careful brushstrokes, the work is naturally going to convey a sense of motion. But everything is in motion, everything that you're painting. I don't understand what painting wouldn't be of motion. If you want things to stop moving, you take a photograph. If you want them to keep moving, you do a painting. Occasionally, I will use a photograph for reference, but not too often. I've been painting all week, and I don't think I've looked at any photographs of anything. Right now, I'm working on some paintings of post oak leaves and red oak leaves, and those are painted by memory, and they're specific. It would be really hard for me to just paint a tree, a generic tree with generic leaves, because there aren't any of those out in the woods. In a lot of my painting I try to convey the dances. In the traditional dances, it's all a swirl of motion, and it's almost universal, not just planetary.

ST: I sense the motion in your painting of the Bear Dance. But I also hear sounds. Could you explain how sound plays a part in your work?

MJ: Well, I know the sounds of the old dances, at least I know some of them. It's easy for me when I'm working on a painting like that to hear the men singing, to hear the women shell-shakers. I hear those sounds in my own head while I'm working on that piece. So I think the sounds do come through, but the sounds can also be heard in their faces, in the turn of their lips. The people are dancing not just around the fire but around each other, so everything is convoluted. Sound is even more ephemeral than painting: you hear a sound and then it's just gone. People who are musicians get really adept at storing sounds.

ST: Is silence ever necessary in your painting?

MJ: As I get older, I want to be more concise about what I have to say. So I use a neutral background color to represent silence. Anytime you're talking, silence is three-fourths of the conversation. Of course silence is important, but I don't know how to define it exactly.

ST: A critic once commented that your paintings are "dark." But your painting of the Bear Dance is filled with the light of a fire that radiates throughout the cabin in colors across the canvas. Does light in fact play an important role in your paintings?

MJ: The fire is the light in most of my paintings, so you see this light in every figure, in the way everything moves in the Bear Dance painting. I don't use a lot of black in my paintings; I use pure colors. I don't mix a lot of white with them, either. So the paintings might seem inherently dark to somebody who's not used to seeing everything turned into pastels. Pure colors are important to me; they must not be watered down with white or toned down with black. I like the way the colors work against each other, the way the colors play with each other, and it gets to a point when you're about done with a painting, when you've done literally tens of thousands of brushstrokes, where the color of that particular brushstroke gets really important, because there's an inherent harmony that begins to manifest itself. I can only imagine what it's going to look like when it's done, in its most vague, rudimentary form. What it does later on, it does on its own. There's a point where I sit back and watch the brush pick out the colors and go to the place on the canvas where they're supposed to be. And I don't think any of us has much control over that. That's deeper in the recesses of the mind than conscious thought.

ST: Your stomp dance painting seems to use a similar combination of motion and sound, but especially of light. Is there something about the firelight which invokes the power of ceremony?

MJ: The fire is sacred to most of the ancient people, and the fire itself represents God. So when God's in the center of the painting like that, it inherently invokes a sense of ceremony. But, like I said to the last question, it's something beyond mortal discernment and manifestation. You just have to go with the flow of such things. I'm more interested in trying to tell that story, and even though this process looks really complicated and overblown to some people, it is very abbreviated compared to reality. My paintings are very codified and abbreviated statements compared to the experience of actually standing and looking at something; it's so complex that we really can't fathom it at all.

ST: How do you go about the sensitive task of depicting tribal ceremonies?

MJ: You first have to try to understand what they're doing. I asked Pat Moss, who's sitting outside right now, and should probably be part of this conversation, "When did the people do the Bear Dance?" And he said, "Well, the people did the Bear Dance when the acorns and the food in the woods wasn't doing too good, when there had been a drought and there wasn't a lot of nuts and stuff that the bears eat out of the woods." These are also the foods that Cherokees eat. So they would do a Bear Dance to invoke that power of the bears to bring back food in the forest. Cherokees would also do the Bear Dance when they were planning to embark on a bear hunt. Because the bears were so closely related to the people, they did the Bear Dance to understand that bond. And they also did the dance out of a sheer exuberance. They really enjoyed the Bear Dance; certain aspects were very fun. It had a lot of interactions between the men and the women. The people would not just dance together but dance in opposite directions.

The Cherokees don't allow people to come and photograph their dances, but I don't think it's because they're trying to hide something there. I think it's because when you're at a stomp dance, and you're out there at night, and you look up from where you're dancing around the fire and you can see the Milky Way and you can see all the stars and then you look down and you see the fire itself, and you can see all the people going around it perfectly, just imagine how obtrusive a flash camera is in a situation like that where the people are in such low light circumstances that they can see the individual stars of the Milky Way, if somebody's flash camera goes off in the middle of that, then everyone's lost for a minute. In the midst of the song they're singing, everything's lost in a really obtrusive burst of light. All the dances are done at night, so for them to photograph the dances, they'd have to be intrusive and use flash equipment, so I think they just banned them. They usually have the ball play before they have the dances, and that's an interaction between all the kids and it's mainly a fun thing. It's good healthy activity, but it's mostly for fun, and I just think they don't need somebody stepping on their tails while they're trying to have their little ball game. They don't need some clownish photographer type out there in their midst. It just interferes with what they're trying to do. There's a lot of flirtation and stuff going on, and those things just put everybody ill at ease. I need to clarify that with Pat Moss a little bit but unless you're actually talking about the magic formulas, and how the magic formulas are done in Cherokee, I don't think there's much that wants to or needs to be hidden at all. I think it's all pretty out in the open stuff. I think they're glad to have anybody that's interested enough to come along and preserve it. They're proud of it and it's threatened all the time.

ST: The Dine people believe that making pictures can alter the physical world. Do you believe paintings can do this?

MJ: Well, one of these days when I'm old and my soul is abandoning this body like rats from a sinking ship, I'd like to be able to just wander off into one of my paintings and live there forever, because they're not just a manifestation of me, they're a manifestation of all the people that I've met and all the people around me and I really have created my own little world in those paintings. It isn't the outward physical world at all, and I think I'd rather be there for eternity than stuck in this mess, shit. [Laughs]

ST: Do you have a favorite color?

MJ: No.

ST: Do you use Cherokee colors?

MJ: Well, what color's not Cherokee? [Laughs] Show me a color that's not Cherokee.

ST: Who do you paint for?

MJ: My father. My children. My great-great-grandchildren that haven't even been born yet. My friends, their fathers, their children, their great grandchildren. . . . I paint for the people around me that I know. I paint to tell a story; I paint for anybody who's willing to sit down and listen to that story about the traditional culture, because all the little traditional cultures in the world are being wiped out with a universal world culture that's very generic and not necessarily any better at all. If you look at the twentieth century, you can see: as the little tribal cultures got replaced with the world culture, things got more and more and more brutal. I just don't know how much more brutality the human race can stand. So to try to preserve some of these little tribal cultures is maybe a way to stem that tide of generic universalism that seems to want to sweep us all away. Cecil Dick told me, "I respect those Christians, but I sure wish they'd have kept it on the other side of the ocean, so we could be who we are without being embarrassed or ashamed about it."

ST: Does Tahlequah and the Cherokee Nation offer a supportive environment for your work?

MJ: Oh sure. You know, it's a small town with lots of really smart people. Oklahoma City is the biggest city in Oklahoma, but it's just a state capital. Tahlequah is the capital of the Cherokee Nation, so it's a little world capital, and I think people with brains come here and treat it that way and act that way when they're here and really get to enjoy it and learn a lot. If you're part of something bigger, it's not necessarily that good of a place, but if you're interested in Cherokee things, it's the perfect place. My daughter moved off to Austin to work for a big website designing company. The kids have this Wayne's World universal culture that they're creating, and I don't really blame them for that. If it's a friendly culture that includes everyone, then that's good. But if it's a world culture where a few people try to dominate everybody else, then that's bad. In Tahlequah, the people I hang around with are very intellectual and very educated and they're typical of Cherokees of any age. I'm sure it was that way a hundred years ago here: there were colleges in Tahlequah when there weren't any high schools in Arkansas.

ST: Do you see your paintings as part of the recent outpouring of American Indian art?

MJ: No, I think my stuff just stands off by itself. I think a lot of that stuff is really sort of. . . . If I could describe it in one sentence, I would say it is a generic pan-Indian neo-mysticism. A guy thinks that if he paints a picture of a guy with a spear on a horse revering the sun, then somebody's going to come along and buy that, which is probably true. But I don't think 99 percent of what's being euphemistically called American Indian art has any value at all, any more than 99 percent of all the rest of the art that's being done in the world has any value at all. When you do art, you open up your head; you show people what your deepest thoughts are inside your head, and sometimes what I see there in those paintings is pretty empty. It's what they learned, what they

were interested in. There is this other mentality around here, an Indian art mentality as far as I'm concerned, which is, the deadline for the show is Friday. So on Wednesday, you better get to work and get something done. But I'm usually pulling out something I did six or twelve or eighteen months ago that I think is suitable for that show, and usually I do show up at the last minute with the artwork, but it's been painted for a damn year. They need to be putting a lot more thought and energy into what they're doing. But it also seems to me that Indian artists have a whole lot of support systems that don't exist for everybody else. Artists with a good education are very likely to get a good paying job at the Talking Leaves Job Corp. or at the university or somebody comes along and offers them a great paying job that doesn't have anything to do with art. If they're hard working, intelligent, Native American people, they may not end up doing art because there are so many other good paying opportunities for them out there, especially if they've got a little education.

ST: The Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990 is said to protect that community of Native artists. But others find the federal government's regulating of Indian art through the control of tribal identity to be oppressive and in violation of the sovereign rights of indigenous nations. How do you feel about these political issues, which no doubt affect the reception of your work?

MJ: Well, I don't have a tribal membership card, and it would have been fairly easy over the last few years to accept a membership in some small group of Indians and protect myself; I've had several offers from several different tribes. But I feel that as long as there's one kid out there who's being threatened by the whole existence of that law, then I'm not going to go running to the shelter of one of those tribes. I was at first incensed by the whole thing, and then later a sort of euphoria came over me because it really gave me something else to battle against. That kind of ignorance doesn't really come along very often in a person's life, but it was right in front of me, where I could batter it around on a daily basis. [Laughs] There are a thousand reasons why a kid doesn't have a tribal membership card. If his ancestors were outlawed during the enrollments, they couldn't show up and sign or they would have been arrested. Also, if they lived outside the fourteen counties, they couldn't get a membership card at the Cherokee Nation. There were hundreds of reasons. When Redbird Smith and his followers refused to be enrolled, officers threw them in jail, shaved their heads, and then forced them to sign the rolls. They took them down to the rolls at gunpoint and made sure they signed before they let them go. And Redbird said he didn't really mind being in jail much, but he really hated it when they shaved everybody's head, because it made them look and feel like a bunch of criminals. With that Allotment Act, they were dividing up the nation into little privately owned pieces of land. They were destroying the Cherokee Nation by that act; that's why those people were so violently opposed to it. My Cherokee ancestors, however, are from Kentucky. They made an agreement with the commonwealth of Kentucky a long time ago to treat them as citizens and leave them alone. That didn't happen in many places in the United States, but it did in Kentucky. On the flag,

there's a picture of a Kentuckian shaking hands with a Cherokee, so it's a different place. In North Carolina it didn't happen that way; and in Georgia, it was a nightmare for the Indian people. In Tennessee, Andrew Jackson made it a nightmare for those Indian people. But up in Kentucky, people went on with their Indianness. But if you darted across the border into Virginia, if you were any part Indian in those days, you were "colored" and your children were forced to go to a colored school, and everything that happened to you from then on was determined by your second-class citizenship.

If you go back to the writing of the Indian Arts and Crafts Act, Ben Nighthorse Campbell sat down and penned the law because he was in the jewelry business and all this fake jewelry was coming in from the Orient, and he wanted something to protect his jewelry from these items that were being imported. Gayle Ross talked to him about my case, and he told her to tell me that he would come to my defense. We're all opposed to that law; that law just divides and conquers. It separates more people from our ranks who we would like to have in our ranks. Tribal membership is something that's unattainable for a lot of people because of some physical limitation, or the way things were written. It's just another way for the government to limit the number of the Indians. Some of the best speaking proponents were artists who were excluded by that law. When somebody shuts a door before me, it just makes me want to go around that door and find another opening—because they've stepped on who I am.

ST: So are you saying that your painting is, in one sense, an assertion of indigenous nationhood and your right to determine yourself?

MJ: I don't know if it's anything that lofty: I love the old stories. From the time I was a little kid, I wanted to be an artist, an illustrator, and tell the stories. When I heard some of those stories, I felt like they needed to be visually represented, and they weren't.

ST: How do you begin a painting? Do you proceed from a special view of things?

MJ: Sometimes I have an idea of what I want to paint in advance, and sometimes I just like to paint. I'll get out a bunch of canvases and paint them a bunch of wild colors, then when an idea that I like manifests itself, I'll sit down and I'll sketch in more concrete landscape elements or people or other things. I think the scariest thing in the world is just a blank canvas. So I usually begin by painting in some color. I hardly ever use white as an embarkation point, unless I'm planning to paint a snow scene or something. [Laughs] Things aren't usually white in the world unless it's snowing.

ST: Would you say it's a Cherokee view?

MJ: I think I've been cajoled and teased and educated and elevated by the people around me, into *having* a Cherokee view. I don't think that my work

started out with a really Cherokee view, but due to the many writers and the many philosophers and the many medicine people I've been surrounded with for years, it's taken on a Cherokee perspective. But a Cherokee perspective isn't something you necessarily start out with, even if you're Cherokee. Probably 95 percent of the people don't speak the language. They've got Cherokee blood flowing in their veins, but what makes them Cherokee? They're a bunch of dark-complected people living in brick houses and driving around in Camaros and drinking Coors beer and watching the same shows on TV that everybody else watches, unless they go out of their way to discover what is Cherokee. Once you find out what it is to be Cherokee, then you have to live up to that. The Cherokees are fierce fighters, but they're the funniest, friendliest, most giving people that you're ever going to find yourself around. So anybody would have to live up to a Cherokee perspective, whether they're a chief or a cop or a doctor. It's something you have to keep moving toward. I think... the culture is an ideal, although it's not blatant; it's very humanistic and really very universal. The Cherokees are just people. Most of their customs and ideas came as a result of harsh reality, intercessions. You learn to see things from a certain perspective because if you don't go by the old customs you don't survive.

ST: Is your vision organic [relational], or do the forms live [only] in your mind?

MJ: I try to help these things to emerge. I don't try to impress my vision. My vision is a shared vision; I share it with a lot of people, and I try to do that rather than be on some big ego trip about what I'm doing. I'm in the right place at the right time to get an extraordinary amount of criticism. But Cherokees aren't necessarily critical people; they don't necessarily criticize what I'm doing in a way that's helpful. They're looking at what I'm doing and they're enjoying it more than trying to be critical. They're willing to overlook the flaws in my work, a lot of them, because they like me. [Laughs] They're not being very stiff about this at all. The Cherokees are really singular even among Indian tribes. It's very possible that even the other tribes don't *get it*. They don't understand what being Cherokee is. If you go to a powwow, you can sort of pick out the young Cherokee guys through there because they're the ones, the kind of good-looking long-haired guys standing off in the corners *not* wearing a bunch of feathers, not getting out there doing organized activities, but more or less flirting with the prettiest girls there. It's a different mentality. I think a lot of what we consider Indianness is really what has become generic. Like the "war dance," what the hell is that about? When Cherokees did a war dance, the man with the mask, with the rattlesnake carved on his forehead, would go out and dance around the fire with his turtle shell rattle and he would sing the songs to call the warriors, and the warriors were not obligated to go and fight; that was something that they elected to do, mostly because they enjoyed it. [Laughs] But he represented the possibility of death. Cherokee men were attracted to the war dance because nothing was revered so highly as being a good warrior. But the Cherokee war dance was not the kind of war dance that you're going to see at a powwow. The

Cherokee war dance is much more serious. What the heck are fancy dancers? Explain that to me. I've been watching them for all my life and I still don't understand what fancy dancers are. I can't imagine tying that many feathers to myself. Cherokees revered the eagle feather so much that only the medicine men would be able touch them. And they kept them and dispersed them: maybe a single feather. More likely, they might hand out feather fans to the men who are dancing, but the feather fans were designed in a way that you didn't even touch the eagle feathers; you held the feathers by the sourwood branches that held the fan together. To me, it's really alien to see a guy covered from head to foot with eagle feathers. Even when the Cherokees went out to get eagle feathers, they were very reticent about it. When they would kill the eagle to get the feathers, they would apologize to the eagle and tell them they were Spaniards; they didn't even want to reveal that they were Cherokees taking that eagle's life and that eagle's feathers. They were very shy about it.

ST: Would you talk about how the Cherokee oral tradition informs your painting. Do you have a favorite story you like to paint?

MJ: There is a story that has become central to me. It is the story of the stick ball game between the birds and the animals, and I like that story for personal reasons. I like all the animals; I like all the birds. In painting that story, you get to portray all those guys. It's a battle for supremacy between the mammals and the birds. In the story, the animals don't want two little mammals, but the birds adopt them and take them onto their team—I really like that part of the story. These creatures become Bat and Flying Squirrel.

ST: The anomalies.

MJ: Yes, the ones that aren't. Okay, these are obviously mammals—but they fly. [We laugh] So how do we explain that story? Well, the story of the game between the birds and the mammals is a convenient explanation. But I think it explains a lot more than that. I think all the stories are—like an onion: every one of them is like a singular onion, and there are layers and layers and layers to that story. You begin to understand one layer when you're a little kid, and then when you get a little older, you see another, but these aren't "Children's Stories": this is one of the great confusions of people who have relegated the Indian animals stories off to Children's Literature. It's the old grandmas reading those stories to the kids who really get them; they're the ones that understand them. You build understanding by layers. You build layer upon layer of understanding, and then, I guess, there's some point, when you understand it all, then you die. [Laughs]

ST: Is there a natural connection between pictures and words for Cherokees?

MJ: In a lot of cases, as in the naming of the birds, onomatopoeia creates that link. Take the sound of Woodpecker: "Delala, Delala." You hear that sound in

the woods, when the woodpecker is pecking on a tree, delalala. The martin is, "Tulutulu, tulutulu." That's the sound that the martin makes. A lot of the visual images come from the onomatopoeia of the names. In telling stories with pictures, that painting right there can be translated into a hundred languages, but they'll still use the same picture. The painting itself appeals to a more universal part of the brain than speech. Speech is a colloquial, local custom whereas the visual is universal. Music is universal. I think you can only go so far with the linguistic aspect of things. But with painting, I get to tell that story to anybody. Anyone living in the world could look at that picture and see the story, whereas with the oral you might have to translate it into a hundred different languages.

ST: Do the figures in your pictures have their own stories?

MJ: That's a continuous process. There is a cycle of people stories that the Cherokees tell. In most of these stories, the animals are secondary creatures. And then there is a whole cycle of bird and animal stories in which the people are almost secondary creatures. But three or four years ago, I decided it was time for Rabbit to meet Selu, who is Corn, the Corn Mother. It's time for these two to get together; they're not together in any of the old stories. It's time they finally came together, and my painting is the place where the creatures from one cycle of the stories can come together and be in the other cycle of the stories. And then there's this fascination with Rabbit, who's the trickster with anything that the people do, especially in their ceremonies and their dances. He likes to be there, he likes to watch. And that's led me to hide Rabbit in most of my people paintings. Rabbit is hidden somewhere watching what the people do, especially if it's a dance. You know the story of Rabbit at the dance. Rabbit sees a guy at the dance who has all the girls just flocking around him. So Rabbit becomes intrigued with this guy. Rabbit follows this guy home and Rabbit sees that this guy is wearing a mask, and that he takes it off and hangs it up. So Rabbit sneaks into the guy's house, steals the mask, and at the next dance, *Rabbit* wears it. And it doesn't take the women very long to figure out that this isn't the usual guy: this is Rabbit. But it all turns out good. The guy who was wearing his mask to the dances goes without it, and all the girls see him and like him anyway. And he realizes he doesn't need the mask to be cool. So there are places where the people and the animal stories do tie together. I think that we humans emulate the animals. I didn't realize people laughed the way they do until I kept ferrets for a while. The ferrets were running around and laughing like this millions of years ago. They didn't learn it from people; people learned it from them. People learned how to go out and hunt as a group from watching the way that the wolf people interacted. People would learn what they could eat in the woods by going and watching the bears. If the bears could eat it, they could eat it. They began to emulate the animals in a lot of ways. Of all the hunters, we're the least adapted. We're the slowest runners. We've got the worst claws, these horrible little crappy fingernails. We have teeth that are not that good compared to any of the other hunters'. So by taking on the aspects of the animals, we become more powerful hunters.



FIGURE 2

ST: You envision a new project that seems daunting even for an artist with your energy. Is it true you hope to paint huge pictures in the hills of Cherokee Nation?

MJ: This thing has taken on the working title of the “Rural Mural Project.” I have seen great murals but they always seem to be in some horrific city center. I’ve gone to Mexico City and braved my way through this throng of people to the middle of town to the national palace to look at Diego Rivera’s murals. It occurred to me that it might not be the best place to put them. Maybe the best place to put art would be in a more natural setting, because Cherokees were country people before they even realized what country was. If you look at an ancient Cherokee village, it’s not condensed. It sprawls for a couple of miles along some river. Everybody had some yard; everybody had some garden; everybody had some room to play some ball. Things weren’t jammed together. The people never were jammed together; they never did want to live that way. You’re more likely to find twenty or thirty or fifty people, enough to defend themselves. They were off by themselves, where they are more in harmony with nature, where there’s more firewood, where there’s more food, where there’s more room to move around, and where there’s a little stretch of that river where the animals are going to come down for water so they can hunt them right there. I think the whole idea of the rural murals

has to do with taking people out of the cityscape, where they have conditioned themselves to go see art in the middle of a metropolis. Instead of seeing it in the middle of a metropolis, they're seeing it out on the edge of a river. They're seeing it up in a forest. I was going to try to recruit some of these guys that build Ferro cement boats to come in and build me some sort of amorphous walls so that they're not just straight up and down square structures, but they flow with the shape of the woods. I can envision hundreds of different shapes and structures, but then the structures are decorated with paint. While the cement is still wet, they're decorated with pottery stamp designs or scratched. People who write in Cherokee can come in and write their words in the old Cherokee alphabet right into the cement of the structure. If they're down in the woods and you use pure acrylic paints, they will last for a long time. They might need touching up in a hundred years from now, but the structures would last a long time, unless we all kill each other off by then, which is where we also seem to be headed. Somebody is interested in the Cherokee people could fly into Tulsa, grab a rented car, and drive around for a couple of days visiting the murals, talking to the people. I envision putting a circle of rocks in front of the mural in the woods, and having the caretakers leave some firewood so people can come in there at night and build a fire and look at these murals by the light of a fire. But even in the daylight, in the forest, you have constantly changing light: you have the sunlight coming through the trees, the wind moving the trees. No two people who go there are ever going to have the same experience. If you put a mural in a city center and thousands of people go there, they share a common ugly experience highlighted by the art itself. It was worth it to me to go to the middle of Mexico City to see Rivera's murals, but how much sweeter if they had been off in the woods somewhere. I could have sat down and really contemplated what he was trying to say instead of literally being herded along by the masses of people.

ST: In a statement you said you have more fun painting than anyone else you know. Why?

MJ: I think the whole interview explains that better than I can say in one simple explanation. I feel like I'm doing what I'm supposed to do, what I was put on this planet to do. Painting is not hard work. The thought processes, the ideas that go along with it are what help us to grow. We don't leave this planet as the same people we were when we arrived. We've learned something or we've failed. What are we doing here? I have fun every day.

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