

# Dyani White Hawk

essay by

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Wičháŋpi Wakínyaŋ Wínyaŋ (Thunder Star Woman), 48" x 48", acrylic on canvas, 2015

## The Ties That Bind Us: The Painting and Printmaking of Dyani White Hawk

Candice Hopkins

Dyani White Hawk's paintings oftentimes appear stitched together. These threads, both representational and metaphorical, are sometimes loose and tenuous; at other times they are stretched taught. The brushwork in her paintings has replicated quillwork, beadwork, and the woven designs of Navajo textiles. It is this act of stitching, piercing, or binding different elements together via paint and printmaking that draws attention to the artist's personal history, what she describes as a "careful balancing act of often-competing value systems and aesthetics."<sup>1</sup> The competing value systems she references are those of Modern and Native American art, history, and aesthetic practices—each of which informs her practice. These practices, as she is quick to point out, are not mutually exclusive: they are contingent, entangled, and relational.

It was while White Hawk was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin–Madison that she started to see relationships between Native and Modern art. White Hawk received her undergraduate education at tribal colleges, Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas, and the Institute for American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. When she moved to Madison and was fully thrust into Western art history and practices, these congruencies began to reveal themselves to her. One example she cites, which has found its way into her recent paintings, is the striking similarity between the rich, saturated colors of striped Navajo blankets

and the similarly rich color field paintings of painters like Mark Rothko.

The aesthetic correspondences White Hawk uncovered are not entirely coincidental. Throughout the development of Modern art, artists found inspiration in things from outside their own culture (aside from formal or aesthetic appreciation, these were often things that they knew very little about). Jackson Pollack was famously inspired by Navajo sand paintings (paintings that are traditionally composed on the ground—it is this action of painting that is credited for the development of his "unique" style). Pablo Picasso collected objects from different African and Northwest Coast Native nations (it is no surprise that the faces of his cubist figures appear fractured and masklike, as though he had absorbed the so-called primitive style). The surrealists, particularly André Breton, were great collectors of the carvings of indigenous people (for them, these things represented the unconscious and the communing with spiritual life they found lacking in their own society during the rise of the industrial age). Even Marcel Duchamp amassed an enviable assortment of masks—although Duchamp was critical of understanding these objects solely as art as this ignored the ways that these objects functioned in their originating societies.<sup>2</sup>

In the United States, the complex relationship between Modern art and the aesthetic practices of artists depreciatively deemed "pre-modern" or "primitive" was most famously put forth in the 1989 exhibition *Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern* at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Placing non-Western objects alongside the works of Modern artists was an attempt to justify a formal affinity between

them. More than anything, it served to expose the irreconcilable and irreducible differences between them. The complexities, histories, and ideologies that shaped these *other* objects were quite purposefully lost in translation. “It is after all, the vocation of the modern art museum to decontextualize,” Hal Foster has astutely observed. “The museum is but one final stage in a series of abstractions of power—knowledge plays that [together] constitute primitivism.”<sup>3</sup> What none of the influential thinkers or texts critical of the problematic ways that non-Western objects were absorbed into the narrative of Modern art anticipate is the rise of indigenous, African, Pacific (Oceanic) contemporary artists now, and in turn, their increasing impact on the way their work as well as traditional practices from their communities are contextualized. The idea of multiple modernities has emerged in the past decade as a way to expand the rather narrow confines of Modern art history; artists are also coming to bear upon these histories, White Hawk among them.

The lithograph print *Understanding II* is awash with symbols, numbers, and signs—snippets of lined ledger texts with values inscribed, clusters of Lakota crosses, the outlines of tipis, medicine wheels, replications of ancient representations of human figures, loose sheets of paper, a trail of horse hoof prints, a thunderbird, a vintage leather shoe, the toe of an embellished moccasin, and running along the bottom left of the paper, outlines of city skyscrapers encroaching onto the picture plane. Looping through the image are threadlike lines—some look like strings of quills or stitches of beads—and in the background are more lines, in light blue, like horizons or perhaps rivers. The images are not ordered like they would be in a



Understanding II, 22.75" x 17.25", 4 color lithography print, Edition of 15, 2013

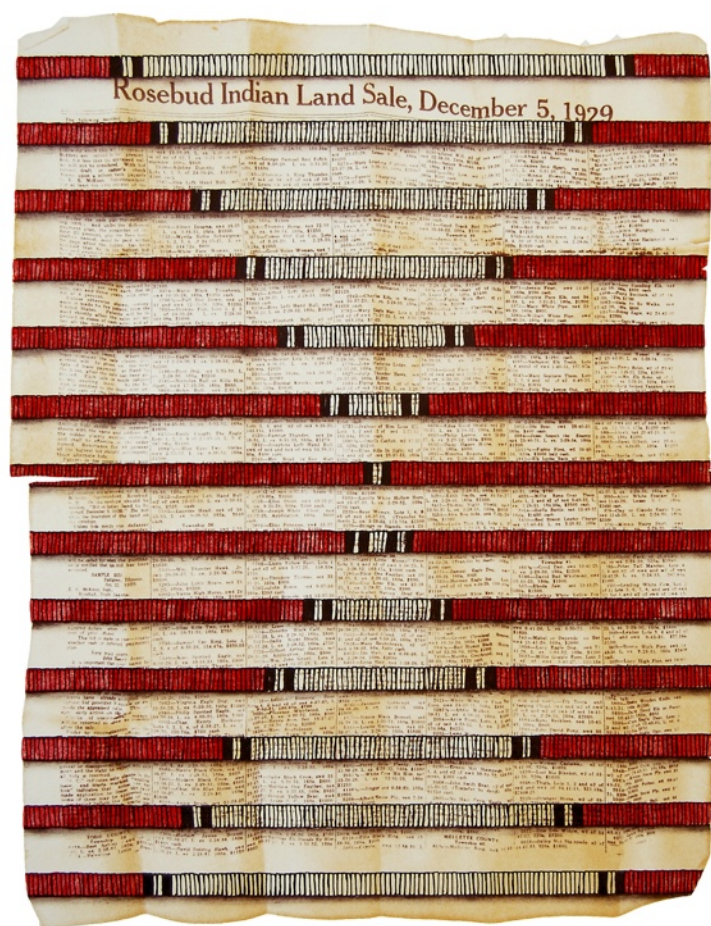
Lakota *waniyetu wowapi*, or winter count—symbols drawn originally on animal hides as a way of marking important events over the course of a year, from first snowfall to first snowfall—but their repetition is certainly a nod to this practice. *Understanding II* is instead a highly personal record, a rendering of what the twenty-first century looks like through the eyes of a Lakota woman. It is also something of a proposition, demonstrating the coming together of different knowledge systems and modes of inscribing history, and as the looming appearance of skyscrapers suggests, the ever-accelerating crush of Western-American culture, capital, and urban life.

The words “Rosebud Indian Land Sale, December 5, 1929,” are emblazoned across the top of a yellowed piece of newspaper. The paper is the background for another lithograph print,

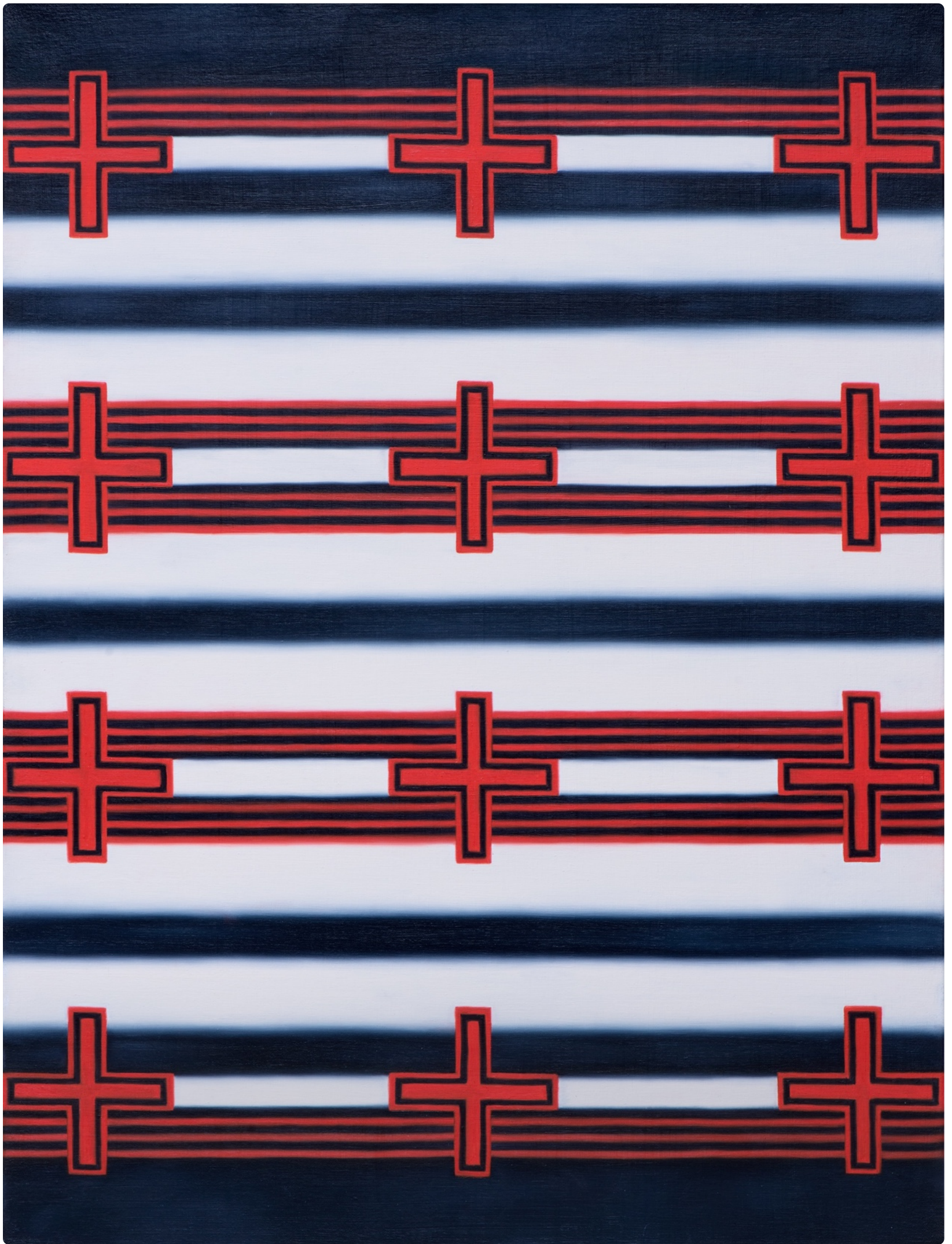
titled *Trust and Loss*. White Hawk discovered the original piece of newspaper by chance. When researching Lakota objects in the collection of a museum, she noticed something stuffed inside a tobacco bag. When she pulled out the small square of paper and unfolded it, she was immediately taken aback: there in her hands was a list of the traditional lands sold from her people. The moment is a reminder of the sentence of the past, how it can reach out and take hold of you in the present. Overlaid on top of the document is the reproduction of a large red-and-white beaded X. The X has two immediate connotations. The mark was frequently used in place of a personal signature in treaties and other legally binding documents between Native people and government officials. When treaties were first struck, many Native people did not sign their names in English. This practice also led to gross misunderstandings; when documents were orally translated into Native languages, there were inevitably mistranslations. In the end what was recorded on paper was oftentimes very different from what was spoken aloud. For Lakota people this symbol—of two mirrored triangles, similar to the shape of an X—is deeply resonant. A complex conceptual symbol, it represents “the mirroring of the worlds”—the skyworld and the earthworld. It also signifies interrelatedness, the necessity to exist in harmony and in balance with one another and the natural world. The X in *Trust and Loss* is a salient reminder of what was signed away: with the loss of land, there is the inevitable loss of culture as well.

White Hawk describes her work as a mix of Modern abstract painting and Lakota abstract symbols. As the print *Trust and Loss* indicates, it is important to note the distinction between

abstraction in the modern sense and in the Lakota sense. While a Lakota symbol might appear abstract to those outside the culture, from those inside the culture it is deeply resonant. It is this gap—the distance between different cultures, histories, and aesthetic traditions—where White Hawk’s work oscillates. In certain works, the gap is so wide you could lose yourself in it; in others, it is so slim that it takes a trained eye to identify. Like this generative gap, what is not represented is as important as what is represented. Sections of the designs replicating porcupine quillwork are deliberately left without color. For the artist, this, combined with the lost land plots, is a way to call attention to the “trust relationship” that is meant to exist between the federal government and tribal nations with regard to land. “This piece



*Trust and Loss*, 29.75" x 22.25", 4 color lithography print, Edition of 15, 2013



Master's Study II, 30" x 22.5", acrylic and oil on canvas, 2013



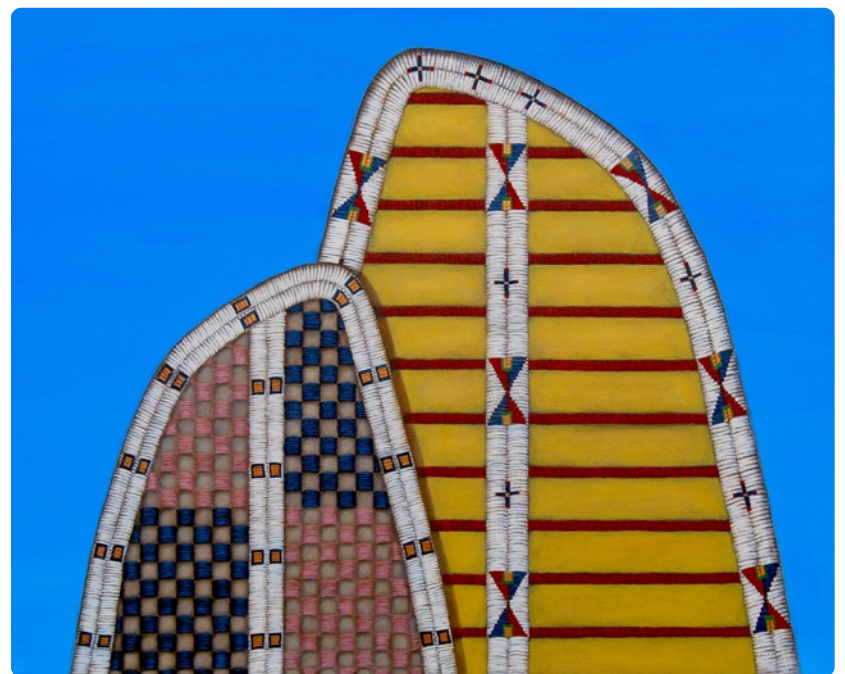
Master's Study, 48" x 48" acrylic and oil on canvas, 2011

speaks to the loss of culture that is inherent with the loss of land. It also speaks to the loss of trust between governments and people.”<sup>5</sup> *Master’s Study* and *Master’s Study II* comment on how “Native artists are not recognized in the pool of ‘masters’ in academia, yet many western ‘masters’ took influence from Native art forms.”<sup>6</sup> The paintings, which replicate the expertly woven Navajo chiefs’ blankets, recognize “the mastery of composition and the agency of some of our ‘masters’ works.”<sup>7</sup> To those unfamiliar with Native art, these works might be perceived as only an extension of the lineage of stripe and color field painters; to those familiar with Native art, they are clearly painted representations of Navajo weavings. They do something else as well: through the act of exposing this gap, they begin to remedy it.

White Hawk’s paintings challenge the blind spots of art history. True to Lakota ideology, this challenge is founded in beauty and tradition. *Been Seeing You for Awhile Now*, *Dream*, and *Canté Skuya (Sweetheart)* each represent either one or two toes of embellished moccasins. The moccasin tops emerge from the bottom of the picture plane like the peaks of mountains. In each case, the beaded, quilled, and embroidered forms are the most ornate aspect of the compositions. That they are removed from any other signs of the body emphasizes the formal qualities of the moccasin tops; these three paintings are yet another experiment in perception. On one hand, the moccasins are appreciated for their beauty; on the other, they establish a presence and quite literally step into the picture plane to stand between the impulse to appreciate these images only as abstract compositions. These paintings, like all of White Hawk’s works, are a testament to how the

continuance of traditions and the very presence of Native American people today are forms of resistance.

The painted lines in White Hawk’s works serve as a reminder of how stitches are also sutures, the threads that close up a wound. This is not to imply that the genocide that was the conquest of the Americas, the imperial gestures that operate today in the form of broken treaties, the industry that runs full throttle on and near Indian reservations (coal mining, uranium mining, forestry, hydroelectric projects, nuclear plants, and so on), the traumatic residue of boarding school experiences, contemporary social and economic injustices, and so on can and should be reconciled. The first step is to acknowledge them. White Hawk’s works also take another, less obvious path and expose subtle injustices, the perilous biases lodged within art history forged within the definitions of mastery, and the unequal power relations implicit in the appropriation of aesthetic forms.



Cante' Skuya (Sweetheart), 24" x 30", acrylic on canvas, 2012



## Notes

1. Cited from an undated artist's statement by White Hawk published online at [www.dyaniwhitehawk.com](http://www.dyaniwhitehawk.com); accessed 20 June 2014.

2. As Duchamp perceptively stated in an interview, "There isn't any society without art because those who look at it say so. I'm sure that the people who made wooden spoons in the Congo, which we admire so much in the Musée de l'Homme, do not make them so that they can be admired by the Congolese. . . . It is we who have given the name 'art' to religious things. . . . We have created it for our sole and unique use; it's a little like masturbation. I don't believe in the essential aspect of art. One could create a society that rejects art"; Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971).

3. Hal Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art," *October* 34 (Autumn, 1985): 47.

4. Cited from an undated artist's description of the paintings published online at [www.dyaniwhitehawk.com](http://www.dyaniwhitehawk.com); accessed 23 June 2015.

5. Cited from an undated artist's description of the paintings published online at [www.dyaniwhitehawk.com](http://www.dyaniwhitehawk.com); accessed 20 June 2014.

6. Ibid.

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