



Soul Connections

John Coleman captures the spirit of American Indian life in bronze, charcoal, and oil

BY NORMAN KOLPAS

AMIDST THE SOFT light and deep shadows of a teepee's interior, a young girl communes with her favorite doll, dressed like her in native garb and, also like her, with jet-black hair falling in two long braids. On the slanting wall of hide behind her hang other dolls, each possessing its own spirit and story waiting to be breathed into life in the girl's hands.

Entitled **POWOW WITH THE LITTLE PEOPLE**, the recent charcoal drawing by John Coleman presents such rich contrasts of tone and texture, such assured and harmonious composition, that it, too, seems to breathe with life. Absorbed in the scene, a viewer might forget that the work is in black and white—imagining a blush in the girl's cheeks, the buckskin browns of the dolls' clothing—only

to suddenly realize the absence of color. "That goose-bump factor is what I'm looking for," says the artist. "Whatever the medium, you have to create the illusion of life."

Coleman has been working professionally to create such convincing, absorbing illusions of life for almost a quarter of a century now. In that time, the 67-year-old artist has earned a stellar reputation



◀ **Powwow With the Little People**, charcoal, 25 x 16.
 ◀◀ **BFF**, oil, 10 x 14.



WILLIE PETERSEN

in the world of western art, achieving along the way memberships in the prestigious National Sculpture Society since 1999 and the Cowboy Artists of America since 2001.

Yet for all his status in his creative circle and among the many collectors and curators who prize his work, Coleman remains a man of remarkable humility. Indeed, he takes pains to express that his

success has not come easily and that it results from his resolute efforts to overcome challenges that others might have found insurmountable.

COLEMAN'S childhood began idyllically. He was born the middle of three boys to loving parents in Manhattan Beach, a coastal community south of Los Angeles. "It was Tom Sawyer-land,"

representation

Legacy Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ, Jackson, WY, and Bozeman, MT;
Plainsmen Gallery, Dunedin, FL;
InSight Gallery, Fredericksburg, TX.

upcoming shows

Solo show, **Legacy Gallery**, Scottsdale, AZ, November 4-5.
John Coleman: Past/Present/Future, Scottsdale's Museum of the West, through May 31, 2017.



He Who Jumps Over Everyone, bronze, 25h.

he says with a laugh. “I went around barefoot almost until I got to the eighth grade.” His mother helped foster John’s interest in art, especially on family trips down to Laguna Beach, where they’d “walk through art stores, and I first fell in love with the smell of oil paint.”

His father, meanwhile, developed another facet of the boy’s future calling. “He was a career salesman, and he would come home and tell me about his exploits as if they were a form of art, selling the value people would receive from the idea

of a product rather than just selling the product itself. It was like mythology.”

With such inspiring and supportive influences, young John developed “a sacred reverence for art,” he says. “My heroes were always artists, like Andrew Wyeth, whose prints my mother would buy me to hang in my bedroom.”

Art came easily to him, and that would be his saving grace in school as he faced a severe learning problem. “I have a type of dyslexia. To this day, I have trouble reading and writing,” he states matter-of-

factly. “Give me a piece of paper and tell me to write a couple of sentences, and I can’t do it.”

What he could do, however, was draw and paint—“and I think my ability to visualize things is connected to my learning disability,” he adds. Though testing revealed that he had a high IQ, he says he was “invited to leave Aviation High School in Redondo Beach because I wasn’t going to graduate.” Instead, his art teacher, Mr. Schick, invited him to hang out for four periods a day in his classroom. “Though I never did graduate, he gave me a refuge, and I had a beautiful time.”

An even more important bright spot shone during those years: Coleman’s girlfriend, Sue. “We met in junior high and started dating in high school,” he says warmly. “Right out of high school, we got married.” They recently celebrated their 47th anniversary and have two grown daughters and five grandchildren. “I married lucky and married the right woman,” Coleman says.

The young newlyweds moved to the small town of Parker, on Arizona’s desert border with Southern California, later settling near the central Arizona city of Prescott. They succeeded with a business providing awnings for mobile homes, then moved into real estate and contracting. They did well. Coleman’s art, meanwhile, “was something we were going to get around to, eventually,” he says, his voice tinged with regret.

That sadness stems, Coleman offers, from another obstacle that had loomed ever larger during the first decade and a half of his adult life: his alcoholism. “My father died from it,” he says. “When I was 35, I came to realize that my 12-year-old self was making my decisions for me. I decided then that I wouldn’t play that role anymore but live my life based on the reality of things as they were at that moment. That’s when I quit drinking.”

His decision to give up alcohol helped clear the roadblock, perhaps, on Coleman’s pursuit of his true career calling. “My expectation wasn’t necessarily to be an artist,” he says, “but just to get involved in the process and the world that other artists were working in.” In the early 1990s, he combined his interest in sculpture with his knowledge of the home-building and remodeling trade



Summer Blossom, oil, 36 x 24.



▲ **Legacy, bronze, 20h.**
▶ **Monarch of the Buffalo Nation, oil, 45 x 28.**



to produce cast-resin bas-reliefs of Native Americans as decorative items. They began to sell “right out of the gate,” he says. Within a year, he began creating his first fine-art bronze sculptures, drawing on principles he learned from studying greats ranging from Bernini to Daniel Chester French, who’s best known for the Lincoln Memorial.

From the start, Coleman’s own works were devoted to American Indians. But he has always regarded his subjects from a broader viewpoint. “The idea of portraying American mythology was the key for me,” he says. “These are the tribal stories

of the country I come from. They embody morality tales that are very visual and accessible, regardless of your background. I’m Irish-American myself. But Native American stories explore what might be the idea of spirit in a way that is universal. I feel the need to communicate something deeper than the subject alone. We all want and need to feel connected, and it’s that connection I’m interested in.”

Coleman’s fine art quickly connected with collectors. Early on, one in particular became his most devoted supporter. In 1994, he was contacted by Chicago businessman and philanthropist Howard

Alper, who had seen Coleman’s work in a magazine. “He asked me to FedEx him some photos of my bronzes,” the artist says. Two weeks later, Alper paid a visit to Coleman’s studio, where he asked the artist to reserve for him the number-one casting of every sculpture he ever made. “Now, 23 years later, he hasn’t broken the chain. Howie and his wife Frankie own everything I’ve ever done.” The Alper collection is part of a major exhibition of Coleman’s works currently on view in the Alper Coleman Gallery at Scottsdale’s Museum of the West. More than a retrospective, the show is as current as can be.

“I’m taking new pieces to the museum as I finish them,” Coleman says, noting his recent works are also showing at the nearby Legacy Gallery in early November.

DESPITE HIS success, Coleman seems

far more interested in the future than in resting on his laurels. Over the past five or six years, for example, he’s been exploring two-dimensional art in addition to the 10 or so new bronzes he creates each year. “I’ve always felt it’s almost a sin to

work in another medium if you can’t do it as well as the one you’re known for,” he says. He needn’t have been concerned. “I started with a couple of charcoal drawings of my sculptures and put them up in my shows to get people used to my work hanging on the wall. They’ve been successful.” Then he moved on to oils, producing richly engaging impressionistic works that conjure the same magical connection with viewers as his bronzes and drawings.

Success in all three mediums has allowed Coleman to continue his passion for collecting the Native American artifacts and reference books—a “nice little library of about 5,000 volumes,” he says—that help bestow gripping verisimilitude upon all his works. They fill the 2,500-square-foot museum-like studio and a couple of outbuildings a short stroll up the hill from the house on two pine-shaded, boulder-strewn acres where he and Sue live in Prescott.

Coleman regards the accuracy he achieves in his works as a sign of “craftsmanship that speaks to the mind,” while he strives for a richly atmospheric, eloquent impressionism that leaves room for the viewer to be drawn in. “I want people to see things that are not there, to create a romantic, artistic side to my work that speaks to the soul,” he says.

Aspiring always to achieve such an impact leaves Coleman limitless room to continue growing as an artist. “I believe that I’ve been evolving all my life, and the evolution is right on track,” he says. “If I knew I was going to die tomorrow, I’d feel satisfied. But I really celebrate life. I can’t wait to see what’s next. I believe in endless possibilities.” ❖

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See more of Coleman’s work at
www.southwestart.com/featured/coleman-j-nov2016.



Bride of the Chief, oil, 50 x 33.