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Fonseca's 'Coyote' breathes vitality into an old myth

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Not all natural history museums contain just old dusty bones and shards of pottery.

For proof, one only has to visit the exhibition of the cartoons of Gary Larson ("The Far Side"), on display at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County in Exposition Park.

And in the same spirit, not all Native American art is somber. The work of California's Harry Fonseca, on display at the County Museum through May 3, 1987, delightfully brings to life an American Indian myth about a magical being.

"Coyote: A Myth in the Making," traces Fonseca's incarnation of the myth from Coyote's emergence from an Indian reservation into mainstream American life. He adapts to urban life, participating in the art scene, appearing as Koshare (a Pueblo ceremonial clown) and dancing in the ballet "Swan Lake," thus exploring "Euro-

pean animal mythology."

Occasionally, the humor in the depictions of Coyote open people up to the more subtle messages in Fonseca's paintings and sculpture pieces.

But more often, his work evokes strong reactions.

"They either love it or they hate it," said the artist at a preview reception of his work at the museum.

One woman took a step into the first room of the exhibition, made a disagreeable face and abruptly left, he said.

But the vitality of Fonseca's work can't be dismissed.

He liberally uses bright colors and glitter in his acrylic paintings. His treatment of Coyote's face defies perspective by putting both eyes on one side, a la Picasso. But despite that resemblance, "I wasn't influenced by anybody," he said.

And Fonseca's attention to humorous detail (such as painting electrical outlets into the background) is inspired.

Fonseca, who began work on Coyote more than 10 years ago, is a native of Sacramento. With his heritage, a combination of Portuguese, Hawaiian and Maidu Indian, he became involved with Native American traditions through his uncle, Henry Azbill.

He obtained a formal education at Sacramento City College and California State University, Sacramento. Then he moved to Albuquerque to explore the Indian art market of the Southwest.

His experiences provided the background for paintings such as "The Artist as a Young Coyote," "Coyote Koshare" and "Swan Lake."

In the '80s, the Coyote motif is turning up more often in art, "and I'm really happy about that," said Fonseca.

In the tradition of the Maidu Indians of Northern California, the Coyote character plays the role

of the trickster/teacher.

One placard in the exhibit described him as "a vehicle of humor and education, a teacher of unacceptable and dangerous behavior. Coyote serves as a guide through life, offering us the opportunity to learn from his mistakes."

And Fonseca rarely misses an opportunity to mingle humor with the "dangerous behavior" perpetrated by Coyote and his female consort Rose.

Besides invading "Swan Lake," Coyote irreverently mixes contemporary clothing — including a tank top and high topped tennis shoes — with traditional dance regalia of the Maidu, in the lithograph, "Star Dancer."

When he and Rose go dancing at the "Pow Wow Club," his black and pink checkered suit and Rose's brilliant red dress

contrast sharply with his Native American background.

But his usual attire consists of jeans and a black leather jacket — a mainstream American symbol of rebellion.

And throughout Fonseca's work, the artist attempts to bring American Indian culture into the setting of late 20th century American culture.

In the "Final Scene" of the "Swan Lake" series, Coyote and Rose, who somehow manage to catch a ride on the swan's back, succeed in bringing two cultures together. "And the thing is," reads the description beside the painting, "they didn't kill themselves and they weren't overcome by evil. They didn't let outside forces take advantage of them."

They didn't compromise — but they laughed.



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HARRY FONSECA often depicts Coyote in a black leather jacket, but in "Coyote #1," pictured behind the artist, the mythical trickster is wearing a traditional Maidu feather cloak.