Philip J. Deloria. *Becoming Mary Sully: Toward an American Indian Abstract*. University of Washington Press, 2019. 324 pp. ISBN 9780295745046.
https://uwapress.uw.edu/book/9780295745046/becoming-mary-sully/

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the walls of the narrow enclosure called "Modernism"—a structure with rooms designed principally for denizens of New York City and Western Europe—have been blown apart by a global re-evaluation of the many modernisms that have co-existed and flourished in the last one hundred years. Prominent scholars of modern African art (Mercer 2005, Hassan 2010, O'Brien et al., 2012) as well as scholars of Latin American modernism (Ramírez and Olea 2004) have been documenting this phenomenon for two decades. But with few exceptions (Anthes 2006), scholars of Native North American art have turned to this phenomenon only recently (Phillips 2010, 2015, Harney and Phillips 2018).

Philip Deloria's study of the remarkable work of his great-aunt, Mary Sully (born Susan Mabel Sully, 1896-1963) adds depth and nuance to our understanding of the many forms that modernism takes outside of the metropolitan mainstream. Sully's legacy to the art world was a box of more than 100 colored pencil drawings that she called "personality prints." Each of these is a vertical triptych, the ostensible subject of which is often a figure from popular or highbrow culture. Film impresario Florenz Ziegfeld, actor and dancer Fred Astaire, and writers Eugene O'Neill and Gertrude Stein (Plates 4.8 and 4.9) are among them. In other instances, she grapples with something more abstract: "Easter" (167-172), or "Children of Divorce" (82-83).

Trained in History and American Studies, Deloria gets high marks as an art historian in this book, successfully and persuasively reading these images iconographically, stylistically, and socially. In addition to the expected reading of each triptych alone, he cleverly deciphers them across the horizontal registers, concluding that their meaning as a collected *oeuvre* is to be found in the way that Sully defined the top-most image as the "signifying abstract": generally representational designs in which the iconographic clues have the most clarity. The middle registers contain the "geometric abstract" in which Sully uses all of her draftsmanly talents for pattern, symmetry, and repetition. The bottom registers, the "American Indian abstract," generally contain what the author describes as "overdetermined images that want to leap out of any categorical box that might try to contain them" (114), sometimes drawing from what we might think of as Native imagery—beadwork, quillwork, hide-painting, and the like—as well as from the broader visual realm that, over the last century, Native people have incorporated as deeply as the rest of us.

Deloria explains the haphazard way that these survived the artist's death, first forgotten in the archives of her distinguished sister, the writer and Dakota linguist Ella Deloria (1889-1971), then nearly destroyed, and eventually passed on to the author's mother, who gave them to him (4-5). His scrutiny of these astonishingly complex works, which veer from the representational to the abstract and decorative, wrestles not only with family biography but with the cultural history of modernism in art, as well as what modernism meant to twentieth-century Native people. In part, it is a logical continuation of his previous well-received books (Deloria 1998, 2004) that shake up received truths about Native people and others; in part it is also a loving family memoir.

Sully's work sits comfortably within the American art historical canon with which she was certainly familiar, and Deloria compares her favourably with Marsden Hartley, Charles Demuth, John Sloan, and others, reminding us that "one did not need a passport to breathe the air and drink the water of modernism" (147). Sully was her sister's driver and companion during the many summers of Ella's ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork across the Plains; during the academic year the sisters principally lived in New York City, at least during much of the 1930s and 40s. Here Sully was exposed to a panoply of modern popular culture, from which she drew much of her subject matter. In the museums of New York, as well as within her family and during the long trips across the Plains, Sully's eyes were filled with the Native imagery that rubs shoulders so comfortably in her work with the popular, the modern and the cosmopolitan.

While Deloria does not compare Sully with artists who have principally been understood within the vexed categories variously known as outsider, visionary, or self-taught art, her life and work has much in common with some of them. She was a socially uneasy and reclusive commentator on popular culture, like Joseph Cornell and Henry Darger (Hartigan 2015, Bonesteel 2000); her work reflects turbulent inner emotional and spiritual states as well as a reckoning with the larger modern world, like that of Josephine Tota, Theora Hamblett, and Minnie Evans (Berlo 2018). The author speculates that today Mary Sully might be diagnosed with depression, anxiety disorder, or bipolar disorder, and treated pharmaceutically (85). Her art was clearly her refuge, and we are the better for it. She provides a brilliant nuance to our understanding of the many modernisms that flourished in the mid-twentieth century, and her great-nephew is a most worthy interlocutor for her art.

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