A HISTORY RECONSTRUCTED: The Paintings of Jim Denomie

Native American history - past and present - is raw material for many stories and for many voices. When Jim Denomie tells a story in pictures it becomes a much larger and varied story as he weaves fact and fantasy, one kind of reality for another mythic one amid the cultural chaos of contemporary American life. Woodrow Wilson Keeble was a World War II and Korean War hero who was honored for his service and strength as a soldier but he was never awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor that he deserved and that was given to all the others who served with him. This is the background story of the painting A Beautiful Hero, Woody Keeble from 2009 by Jim Denomie.

But there is more going on in this landscape of ghosts and spirits and rabbits and crows and the hero on horseback vividly colored in war paint. We are witness to multiple stories and many vantage points, though the painting has a traditional landscape format based on an Iwo Jima Island battle in the Pacific following the Pearl Harbor attack.

Woody is very good at throwing grenades (we know that from factual history) but he through Denomie’s vision confronts us with a different kind of battle of conscience and moral imperative in war and peace. Is Keeble triumphant or comical? Does he feel revenge or acceptance of a certain situation?

I like a quote from Denomie: “Even when we have a culture, we imagine beyond it.” As a painter Denomie has found a way to involve us in the immediacy of the act of painting and in a style like a cartoon model so that he can freely add any number of references and details that add up to a rich field of imagery.

Jim Denomie was born in 1955 and is an artist from the Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Ojibwe and he is a 1995 graduate from the School of Fine Arts at UMD.