

# NEW YORK

## Pictures From a Genocide

By Jerry Saltz, New York's senior art critic | February 16, 2024



Art: Courtesy Donald Ellis Gallery and David Nolan Gallery

What does genocide look like? A plaintive, pathos-filled exhibition at David Nolan Gallery of 87 Native American ledger drawings — named after the ledger books that the artists appropriated as material for their work — from the 19th century offers an answer. Many of the drawings were made in a prisoner-of-war camp in St. Augustine, Florida, where dozens of members of the tribes of the Great Plains were incarcerated amid a brutal U.S. military campaign of relocation and displacement. The drawings depict, with a simplicity that belies their sophistication, heartrending scenes of imprisonment, isolation, and forced assimilation as well as glorious celebrations of a way of life outside the prison walls that was already receding into oblivion.

“Fort Marion and Beyond: Native American Ledger Drawings, 1865–1900” has been beautifully organized by genius obsessive Donald Ellis, a Vancouver-based private dealer who showed a handful of similar drawings at the 2017 Frieze Art Fair. The current exhibition is timed for Master Drawings New York in the hopes that curators might rectify the inexplicable and disappointing arm’s-length stance the art world has so far adopted toward this work. (Much of this work is found in ethnographic and natural-history museums and libraries.) The drawings may appear crude, featuring blank or ruled backgrounds that have been decorated with colored pencils — people, horses, and tepees. Encouraged by the prison’s commander, who attempted to assimilate these warriors by cutting their hair and stripping them of their traditional clothes, they drew these pictures to sell to whites and eke out a living. But what they made is visionary art, incorporating the traditions of semi-nomadic tribes, such as hide-painting, all under a sophisticated system of narrative and space.

Start in the gallery with the Fort Marion drawings, where you can see two hallucinogenic pictures of the trains that brought nearly 80 Native Americans to their new “home” in St. Augustine. One was made by Nokkoist (Bear’s Heart) when he was 25. (He died at 31 from tuberculosis contracted probably from colonists.) Another drawing by Bear’s Heart features a landscape of evergreens surrounding buildings with hills along one side: a nearby island. There is a ship manned by what at first seem like soldiers — in reality, they are prisoners outfitted in U.S. military uniforms, taught to sail and give white people tours of their prison camp. In another drawing, the fort’s interior is seen from a God’s-eye view. There are dozens of uniformed men, most Native American prisoners whose hair has been shorn. We see them marching two by two in the yard. It hits you with horrible force that, in the most ghastly sense, there had never been Native American art quite like this before.

There are also visions of the past. We see Native American ceremonies: the sun dance; a meeting between Cheyenne and Pawnee; a successful buffalo hunt; tribespeople in full warrior regalia, decked out in feathers. There’s a gut-wrenching warrior procession: dozens of fighters on horses arrayed in different colors, the line curving like a kind of snake to stay within the borders of the piece of paper. Two drawings depict Cheyenne warriors, each labeled with their names: Roman Nose, Squint Eyes, Making Medicine, Little Chief, Cohoe, and Shave Head. The format is formal, the figures flat, with subtle shifts between the foreground and background. Each horse is labeled, simply, “horse” — a word written by artists learning to communicate in English.

It is tempting to see subversion or resistance in these drawings, but I am more struck by their clarity and honesty. The great depth of this art comes from the witness the artists bore, the atrocities they lived through with the steadiest and truest of gazes. They ask you to open your eyes as they did so that you might see.