Artist Statement: Mike Bristow

My piece is called Trail of Tears. It was executed in the mid-nineties; around that time, I was commissioned to illustrate the 1993 Folklife Festival poster, and it very much stylistically related to that piece. Trail of Tears is owned by Sandy Hankins, who was sympathetic to its anti-nuclear theme.

Trail of Tears is not specifically about Hanford, but rather Los Alamos, New Mexico. At the time I made the piece, I had been reading a lot about the Southwest, and daydreaming of my early childhood in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Among the books I read were “In the Spirit of Crazy Horse” by Peter Matthiessen, “The Book of the Hopi” by Frank Waters, “The Southwest” by Alex Shoumatoff, and “Great Plains” by Ian Frazier. I had seen the great and somewhat forgotten film Desert Bloom. I was also looking at two wonderful picture books that I have had since childhood: “Cowboys,” and ‘Indians,” both by Holling C. Holling.

My dad was in the Navy and we lived on the base at the Naval Air Station in a small house much like the ones pictured in my piece. The Sandia Mountains were bare, our lawn was brown, and miles and miles of desert surrounded us. Los Alamos was just down the road, but I was concerned only with playing cowboys and Indians with the neighborhood kids. Perhaps due to the Holling C. Holling books and a family trip to Mesa Verde, I developed a profound interest in Native American life, and consequently I gave myself an Indian name: Broken Arrow. (My mom was pregnant with my sister at the time, and in response to my new identity my dad renamed my mom Morning Sickness. When Neil Young released his song Broken Arrow in the late sixties, I thought it was just for me.)

The Holling book is meticulous in its portrayal of the details of Native American life, the margins overflow with diagrams of teepees, houses, cliff dwellings, hunting devices, etc., and intermittent full-page illustrations. A particular page showed a boy climbing a ladder from the valley floor to his home; its mixture of danger and coziness was quite appealing to my sense of adventure. In my mind I was that boy.

Of course I was somewhat aware of military activity, living as we did on the base, and by age seven I had developed a full-time dread of nuclear weaponry. I brooded and listened for sirens. One evening during the Cuban Missile Crisis, I climbed up the grape arbor which formed a sort of tunnel between our property and the neighbors’. I sat on top and looked at the sky, trying to imagine why anyone would want to end the world on purpose. “How could they do this to a nine-year old?” I wondered.

Adulthood is distractingly complicated, but I still wonder.

I don’t really do political art; my current work tends towards abstraction and dreamlike nostalgia. The piece can be easily interpreted, calling into question the cruelty and waste inherent in the Western notion of progress, and contrasting it with the more ancient stasis
of a traditional agricultural society. A shamanic figure hovers over the desert, rain falling from his cloud-wings. Is it the rain that will nourish corn, or the rain that brings fallout? The sun and moon have become rusted can lids; the flower of our town was the atom. The shaman seems to be both Uncle Sam and a Kachina, perhaps suggesting a common humanity. Understand that I’m interpreting my piece as if I were an outside observer, and with tongue slightly in cheek. I was not so conscious of all this when I made the thing. It was simply a childhood memory, revisited with adult awareness.