REAL INDIANS MAKING REAL ART: HOW INDIGENOUS ARTISTS STRUGGLE FOR CREATIVE SOVEREIGNTY AND IDENTITY IN THE CONTEMPORARY ART WORLD AND MARKET

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

American Studies

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

December 2021

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to all of the Indigenous artists who participated in this project. Without them there would have been no project. Their willingness to welcome me into their respective creative worlds in order to shed some light on the sometimes very personal issues they face as Indigenous artists making contemporary art was extremely generous, and I am eternally grateful.

It is also dedicated to Dr. Nate St. Pierre, who first sparked my interest in the topic of Native American art and pulled me down into the rabbit hole it may take me the rest of my life to fully explore. I regret that he passed away before I was able to complete the work, because I think he would have been pleased with the result.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I was surely one of the slowest doctoral students/candidates in the history of doctoral programs. For this reason, I am grateful that my committee was willing to work with me for as long as they did. Ten years is a long time to hang in there with a student on one project and I am profoundly grateful.

Foremost, I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Walter Fleming, for giving me the latitude to work in my own way and at my own pace, and for also being there with assistance and answers whenever I needed it.

The members of my committee, Dr. Robert Rydell, Dr. Brett Walker, and Dr. Rafael Chacón, all deserve abundant appreciation and recognition as well. They made themselves readily available to answer questions and provide support, as well.

Dr. Sara Jayne Steen deserves deep thanks for reading my chapters in real time and giving quick, immediate feedback that was invaluable as I progressed through the writing.

My husband deserves a big thank you for putting his life on hold along with mine for the ten years it took to do this work.

There are two people to whom I owe the greatest thanks: Sam Ore provided me with clear, objective advice that got me going again when I thought I might not finish, and Suzanne Fox provided me with support, writing advice, encouragement, truthful feedback, and an occasional shoulder to cry on. I do not exaggerate when I say I couldn't have finished this project without her.

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GLOSSARY of NOMENCLATURE

Native American, American Indian, Indian - Terms used interchangeably throughout this work to refer to Indigenous peoples of the United States, based on my experience in dealing with Indigenous people over the course of the last thirty years or so. In Canada, Indigenous peoples are referred to as First Nations peoples. My personal preference when it seems necessary to refer to the ethnicity or indigeneity of people or groups of people is to use their tribal affiliation, but that is not possible when referring to a group of people with different tribal affiliations. My recommendation to the reader is to always ask Indigenous how *they* prefer that you reference them, and then do as they ask. There is no one term that is correct, but if you don't know for certain what to say, and there is no one to ask, I recommend that you refer to them as Indigenous, Native American, or American Indian.

BLM - Black Lives Matter

CRT - Critical Race Theory

TribalCrit - The branch of Critical Race Theory that refers specifically to Indigenous peoples.

POC - People of Color

BIPOC - Black Indigenous People of Color

Indian Arts and Crafts Act (IACA) - "The Indian Arts and Crafts Act (Act) of 1990 (P.L. 101-644) is a truth-in-advertising law that prohibits misrepresentation in the marketing of Indian art and craft products within the United States. It is illegal to offer or display for sale, or sell any art or craft product in a manner that falsely suggests it is Indian produced, an Indian product, or the product of a particular Indian or Indian tribe or Indian arts and crafts organization, resident within the United States. For a first time violation of the Act, an individual can face civil or criminal penalties up to a $250,000 fine or a 5-year prison term, or both. If a business violates the Act, it can face civil penalties or can be prosecuted and fined up to $1,000,000."[1]

[1] Indian Arts and Crafts Board, "The Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990," United States Department of the Interior, https://www.doi.gov/iacb/act.

ABSTRACT

The problem presented is that Indigenous artists have been excluded from mainstream art venues and limited to exhibition in museums that only include collections of Indigenous art primarily limited to the pre-1890s era. Not having Native American artists' work regularly on display in contemporary art museums makes a powerful statement about the validity of contemporary Indigeneous art. This also limits the ability of Indigenous artists to exercise sovereignty over their own work and careers, by limiting their access to mainstream exhibition venues. Many modern Indigenous artists have found their work not taken seriously because of their ethnic identity and the expectations of the field of reception concerning the style of Native American art. Some contemporary Indigenous artists struggle to make a living creating the kind of art they choose to make, despite the general popularity of their work, because of these expectations. Limitations on marketability come from the modern art market itself and collectors who think of Indigenous art from an erroneous definition of "traditional," or from local tribal pressures to create only art that preserves the traditional culture of the tribe.

The methods employed in this study were two-fold: an investigation of museum practices and available literature on contemporary Indigenous art, and interviews with eleven indigenous artists which served as case studies, employing a central tenet of CRT (Critical Race Theory) by which BIPOC (Black and Indigenous People of Color) people are able to tell their own stories.

The results of this investigation are the identification, and legitimization of contemporary indigenous art by Indigenous artists residing in the northern plains, through legal definitions, cultural and ethnic identities, individual artistic identities, and traditional and contemporary art production practices. It also explores how genealogies of concepts as they relate to indigneous art, as well as cultural reception, contribute to diffusing theories of art history where indigenous art is concerned.

The author demonstrates and concludes through the findings of this study that the work of modern Indigenous artists qualifies as contemporary art by any definition, and that style is irrelevant when making that determination.

METHODS AND STYLE

One of the big issues in academic research on Indigenous topics is the antiseptic distance between the researcher and the subject, and the fact that the researcher is usually non-Indigenous (as in my own case). For several decades, there have been many academics (and non-academics) from the Indigenous community who have pushed for the introduction of Indigenous methods of research to tell Indigenous stories and report Indigenous data, because western methods do not capture all that is important, nor do they transmit it in a way that serves Indigenous people.

These interviews, the way I conducted them and also the way I recorded and reported them, were done in that spirit. Allowing Indigenous people to tell their own stories in their own way is of primary importance if we are ever going to make inroads toward true equitability in the academic literature concerning Indigenous people. I used a basic set of questions (my survey) to guide me in getting started. However, I allowed the interviewees to guide the conversation. As a professional artist myself, when I saw them struggling to express something that they had difficulty putting into words, I used my own experience as an artist to ask better, more specific questions that I couldn't have anticipated before our discussion. Additionally, the conversations frequently revealed issues faced by the artists I interviewed that I couldn't have possibly anticipated, and that led to more questions. Frequently, sharing a similar story of my own experiences as an artist created a bridge between the artists I was interviewing and myself that serendipitously produced even more unexpected and useful information.

These artists are all unique human beings with unique experiences, many of which they had never talked about before to anyone until I interviewed them. It was the spontaneous back-and-forth of our conversation and my admittedly unorthodox interview style that facilitated their willingness to be so open and honest about their experience. The conversational style of the interviewees allowed the artists to tell of the depth and reality of their struggles in their own voices. By allowing my own voice as the interviewer to be present in those chapters, I dispensed with the illusion that any research is actually objective, and simply reported what I learned about these amazing artists and their struggles and challenges in the most natural and honest way I possibly could.

INTRODUCTION

It has taken me nearly ten years to write this story. It's an important story but between the time I began to write it and now that I'm finishing it, BLM (Black Lives Matter) happened. What does BLM have to do with a dissertation on Native American artists and their work? Everything. They both are about identity politics and access to the American Dream: the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. On the BLM front it's about basic human rights. On the Native American artist front it's about the right to do the kind of work they choose rather than just that which the art community stipulates.

Additionally, CRT (Critical Race Theory)[2] now governs all aspects of American cultural interactions because of the BLM movement. CRT began in the 1980s as a critique of the judicial system as applied to Black people in America, but it was such an effective tool for re-examining ethnic, racial, and socio-economic disparities that it has had many spin-offs: Disability CRT (the most dominant of which is DeafCrit), CRT Feminism (CRF), Latinx CRT (LatCrit), Asian American CRT (AsianCrit), South Asian American CRT (DesiCrit), and American Indian CRT (sometimes called TribalCrit). I was once asked what the limitations of CRT are in American Studies and I ended up writing a paper about it.[3] In that paper, I put forth the fact that since

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[2] Delgado, Richard, Jean Stefancic, and Angela P. Harris. *Critical Race Theory: an Introduction*. New York: New York University Press, 2017.

[3] Of all the papers I have posted on Academia.edu, this one is the most widely read. Since the advent of BLM there has been an uptick in readership. I'm sure it's not a favorite of CRT subscribers, and it's "popularity" is likely because of my somewhat controversial stance on CRT.
https://www.academia.edu/17447822/The_Limitations_of_Critical_Race_Theory_in_American_Studies_Individual_Identity_v_Group_Culture

American Studies is about culture, and since CRT continues to have spin-offs as more and more marginalized groups seek to assert their own right to their uniquely defined identities, that CRT is greatly limited in its ability to operate as a functional critical theory when looking at culture. Culture is about groups. America is made up of multitudes of disparate culture groups. Within those groups are individuals with as many different representations of those cultures as there are individuals in the group. Identity can be about culture to a certain extent but, with the American emphasis on the right to individual expression, it is difficult (if not impossible) to point to any one person in any one culture group and say that person represents the entire culture group. No individual speaks for the entire group; therefore I put forth in that paper that CRT is probably not the best tool for examining issues in American Studies.

I may have been wrong.

As I made the full circle from the beginning of this project to the end, and as I struggled with how to write about it and stitch it all together into a coherent story, the first tool I reached for was CRT. I'm sure it is no coincidence that I am trying to pull this all together against the backdrop of four months of non-stop BLM protests across the breadth of the nation, in the middle of a pandemic. With everyone stuck at home, a literal captive audience for the BLM movement, it is impossible to not be aware of what BLM has been trying to get us to understand since the early 1980s, what the Civil Rights Movement was trying to get us to understand in the 1950s and 1960s, and what Black people have been trying to get us to understand since the dawn of this nation. They have been so successful at getting our attention this time around that People of Color (POC) from across the nation have chimed in and jumped on the bandwagon, dubbing it

a BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color) movement, to the dismay of many in the BLM movement who would prefer that, at least for the moment, the focus remains on Black people. The folks who would like for it to remain exclusively BLM (ironic, really) may have a point, but since the focus of my research is Indigenous artists I embrace the expansion of the movement to include the people I am writing about.

What does any of that have to do with me telling this story? Again, everything. I am a white woman writing about Native American artists, and that is one of the big pet peeves of the BLM/BIPOC movements: white people talking about BIPOC people. In all honesty, there were times when my conscience as a bleeding-heart-left-wing-liberal "do-gooder"[4] has been severely pricked to know that I am doing the very thing that will likely get me roasted by Indigenous critics, even though I think it's a good thing to shine a light on the work of these artists, as well as the challenges they face that non-Indigenous artists do not.

At this moment, Native American art is a hot item and wildly popular. The National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. just recently made its first acquisition of a painting by a Native American artist.[5] Jaune Quick-to-See Smith has been a well-known, prolific, highly successful artist for decades, but the National Gallery (an institution that is 196 years old) seems to have just now found her (or any Native American artist) worthy of collecting. There is very

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[4] When I was working on my MA in Native American Studies at Montana State University, Dr. Wayne Stein was my American Indian Education professor. One day, Wayne looked me right in the eye during a seminar when telling a story about the kinds of people who end up teaching on a reservation. He put them in three categories. 1) Retired professors who feel they still have more to give, 2) People who are too "different" to fit into mainstream society, and 3) "Do-gooders." He looked directly at me when he said that. Then he said, "Yes, you're a 'do-gooder'," and then he told me, "We need 'do-gooders' out on the rez." I took it as a compliment, and I believe he meant it that way.

[5] McGreevy, Nora. "National Gallery of Art Acquires Its First Painting by a Native American Artist." Smithsonian.com. Smithsonian Institution, July 9, 2020. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/jaune-quick-see-smith-national-gallery-native-american-180975270/.

little writing about Native American contemporary art and artists out there in the world. The focus in the world of Native American art has been primarily on "traditional" Native American art. I will explain later in this dissertation how the whole idea of what is and is not "traditional" Native American art is entirely fallacious from the point of view of Indigenous people. For now, I bring it up because it is that fallacious idea that has kept amazing contemporary artists like Jaune Quick-to-See Smith out of the National Gallery until now. It is also what makes creating an art career doubly difficult for Native American artists like the ones I interviewed for this dissertation. Are you a Native American artist who makes art that looks like the Native American art that was made in the 1890s? Terrific! You will have no problem getting attention for your work, selling it for high prices, getting into museums showcasing Native American art, and making a name for yourself in the Native American art world. However, if you are a Native American artist who wants to make contemporary work and do what every non-Indigenous artist is able to do without having the authenticity of your identity or your work questioned, you have a much tougher row to hoe.

My examination of this issue began when I was teaching an online course that I created called American Indian Art Survey for the Native American Studies Department at Montana State University in Bozeman. In that course I toured my students through a different region of North America each week, sorted by Indigenous culture groups. The last week was reserved for contemporary American Indian art. The first time I taught that course I had a student say something like this in the discussion forum: "I think it is tragic that Native Americans have to compromise their traditional values to make this contemporary art." Wait--what? I was

dumbfounded. That was not what I wanted to teach them, and it had never occurred to me that that's what they would have taken away from my class. I thought through that question for a long time before responding. I am a studio artist with a BFA degree. I'm white and of mostly northern European descent, with a little Mediterranean, southeastern US Indigenous and Mezo American, and North African DNA mixed in there. If I were to apply the same limitation on myself as my student was attempting to apply to Indigenous artists, would that mean that I should only be making the art of my ancestors? And which ancestors? Only the ones that dominate my DNA (northern European)? I immediately dismissed the idea as silly, not only because I found it an unreasonable expectation to place on an artist (from my Euro-American cultural point of view), but also because I have little to no idea what kind of art my ancestors were making. Celtic knots, perhaps? Busts of Benin warriors, maybe? Because of the jolting question from my student, I realized that was exactly what Indigenous artists were expected to do. If they chose to just make whatever they wanted, something innovative and new, not something "traditional," they would be accused of being inauthentic Indians *and* inauthentic artists. What I learned through the course of nine years of interviewing Indigenous artists and researching this issue is that Indigenous artists were being deprived of their inalienable right to create the kind of art that they want to make, pursue the kind of life that they want to live, and as such were faced with an impossible conundrum and enormous identity crisis because hardly anyone understands what they are doing; and getting people to understand would take an enormous shift in the collective consciousness of the art world.

The BLM movement seems to have been the seismic event that is bringing on that shift in cultural consciousness, but we are far from arriving at the desired destination. The issue of equitable treatment of Indigenous artists is surely way down on the list from the primary concerns of threats to physical safety, socio-economic fairness, and tearing down the underpinnings of white supremacy that drives racial and ethnic inequality in our country. However, one of the repeated messages being communicated throughout the BLM movement is that we must attack all injustices simultaneously if we are to make significant meaningful progress. Additionally, inroads against injustice are often made by looking at less volatile parts of the problem. Focusing on the edges can sometimes give us a better understanding of the whole problem.

This is a look at the "edges." I will introduce you to a number of Indigenous artists who each have experienced specific challenges unique to their artistic choices, but not unique to Indigenous artists making contemporary art as a whole, as they have struggled in the art world to build their respective careers. One faces the challenge of being perceived as not Indian enough by white people to be a "real" Native American, much less a Native American artist. Another had his art rejected by his own tribe because it wasn't "traditional" enough (by that 1890s colonized benchmark). One of them has been fortunate enough to break into the a very prestigious Indian art market at a very young age, but finds that his biggest challenge is having to (in his words) "teach Indian 101" to all the people who make inappropriate comments out of ignorance, and who have inappropriate expectations of him and his art work. He's very good at this and gently educates the public in those situations. Four of these artists formed an

organization called the Creative Indigenous Collective (CIC) to formalize their efforts to take control of their artistic destinies and educate the collectors of Indigenous art in a meaningful and intentional way. There are several more artists and stories represented in this work, and each of them represents a different challenge faced in the Indigenous art market. All of them are typical of the kinds of challenges faced by all Indigenous artists who attempt to break out of the standard constraints of the Native American art market.

Before introducing you to the artists, I'll introduce you to the field of reception for their work. In the world of art collectors, museums, galleries, art history, and even peer reviewed journals, the term "contemporary Native American art" has been a bit of an oxymoron. When people think "Native American" they usually think "in the past." There is a style of artwork that is considered to be Native American but it denies modernity to the more than two million Indigenous people living among us in America in the twenty-first century. It is also a style that is brazenly appropriated by non-Indigenous artists because it is so popular, despite its being illegal to do so. It's illegal because of the Indian Arts and Crafts Act, which stipulates that only work created by Indigenous artists enrolled in federally or state recognized tribes can call their work "Native American Art," "American Indian Art," or "Indigenous Art." (There is a narrow exception to that rule that I will also discuss, but because anyone wishing to make money selling Native American style art does so by marketing to people who don't understand the concept of contemporary Native American art, it rarely applies.) Most people are completely unaware of the Indian Arts and Crafts Act (IACA), even in the world of art. My own art history methods teacher was unaware of it until I wrote a paper on the topic and she was glad to learn about it (although it

in no way applies to her field in ancient Greek and Roman mosaics and murals). Because so few people know about the IACA, there are many nonIndigenous artists who make money selling Native American style artwork that appropriates the culture of Indigenous people. I look at that phenomenon in the chapter called "Artists of the Tribe Called Wannabee."

One thing this examination of Indigenous artists making contemporary art does not do is look at the entire world of Indigenous art, or even the world of Indigenous art of the western hemisphere, or even just North America. I won't be talking about First Nations (the work of Canadian Indigenous artists), for example, even though there is a lot of cross pollination between Indigenous artists living on both sides of the 49th parallel. The reason for this is that First Nations artists in Canada do not operate under the same protections provided by the IACA. There is no such law or any sort of regulation of misrepresentation or misappropriation of First Nations art and culture in Canada.

Finally, I will look at the ways in which the IACA has been co opted within Indigenous ranks to narrow the competition between Indigenous artists. Many art shows, festivals, and other vending opportunities for Indigenous artists have changed the rules with the rise in popularity of Indigenous art to eliminate eligibility for Native Americans who are members of tribes with only state recognition and not federal recognition. Additionally, even at events that allow Indigenous artists from state recognized tribes to participate, Indigenous artists who do not look phenotypically Indian often find themselves at a disadvantage because they do not physically fit the bill in the minds of collectors for what constitutes true Indianness. Some of these artists even find themselves being harassed by the public because they don't "look Indian." This is an ironic

situation in juxtaposition with BLM: while Black people are experiencing discrimination and even physical harm or death because of the ethnic identities they cannot hide, Indigenous artists who look “too white” have a much more difficult time selling their work because of the disadvantage of not looking ethnic enough. It’s as if the American people cannot make up their minds about whether a non-white ethnic identity is a good thing or a bad thing.

In its entirety, this work will examine all of the most common issues and challenges faced by American Indigenous contemporary artists, as well as the context, settings, and attitudes which complicate those situations. It is my goal that this work not only contribute to the very thin to nonexistent body of knowledge on this topic, but also that it will inform those involved in the world of Native American art in any way, as curators, consumers, collectors, or those who provide venues for Indigenous artists, so that they can educate themselves and others, and make more informed decisions when interacting with Indigenous artists and their work.

THE STATE OF THE FIELD IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN INDIAN ART

In assessing the state of the field of contemporary American Indian art, the most astounding discovery I have made thus far is that it is not a "field" as far as "The Art Bulletin" is concerned. There are four "Art Bulletin" categories into which contemporary American Indian art might fall: Art of the United States, Contemporary Art, Art of the Twentieth Century, and Native American Art.[6] However, the only category that Art Bulletin seems comfortable placing contemporary American Indian art in is Native American Art, even though the span of Native American art in total can be tens of thousands of years. This might lead one to assume that contemporary American Indian art is not a legitimate category that deserves its own space at all, but I contend that it is indeed, and one to which more than a dozen academics have been contributing solid material for over a decade. One possible reason for the ambiguity of this subject may be as simple as the broader field of art history not having created a space for it yet, and there are probably many reasons for not settling on a single category yet, which could possibly lie in our discomfort with where to place American Indians as persons. Nevertheless, I leave it to actual art historians to sort out the reasons for the omission. However, this difficulty is one that rests solely within the field of art history, and not with the authors who have been writing about the Native Americans who have been making contemporary art for quite some time now. It is my hope that this chapter will not only assist in establishing a solid and clearly defined space in the field of art history for contemporary American Indian art, but will also provide a thorough overview as to the scholarship contained within the field.

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[6] College Art Association, "Dissertations," http://www.caareviews.org/dissertations (accessed October 5, 2014).

Before we can fully enter into this discussion, let us first do a little housekeeping concerning terms Indigenous to the field of contemporary American Indian art. Firstly, there are several ways of referring to American Indians, including American Indians, Native Americans, Indigenous peoples, Indians (depending on the setting and context), or by their specific tribal affiliation (which is my general preference, if I know it). My colleagues in Native American Studies tend to use the terms interchangeably (as will I throughout this dissertation).

Secondly, it is important to know what American Indian Art is, as it is the only art genre in the United States governed by legal definitions. As per the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990, Indian art is only that which is made by an enrolled member of a federally or state recognized tribe.[7] This law only applies in the United States, but it provides an excellent working definition of what American Indian art is: art made by American Indians. This can clear up any ambiguity concerning whether American Indian art might include art that depicts Native Americans that is created by non-Indigenous artists—it is not, plain and simple. Additionally, it also can also clear up an area of concern that may cloud the issue of categories: American Indian art can be contemporary—made today—and does not have to be of any certain style that "looks" Native American. If an enrolled member of a federally or state recognized tribe made it, then it qualifies. Though there may or may not be similar legislation in other countries in the Americas that specifically designates what Native American art is, this rule could be used to shore up the category if art historians feel more comfortable having a set criteria for determining such.

[7] Indian Arts and Crafts Board, "The Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990," http://www.iacb.doi.gov/act.html (accessed October 5, 2014).

Having now set some ground rules as to what constitutes contemporary American Indian art from a Native American perspective and legal definition, let us explore who has been publishing and what has been published in this field. In an exhaustive search through Art Bulletin, JStor, Art Abstracts, Project MUSE, as well as Amazon.com (whose database is so comprehensive that public libraries use it when their own internal database searches fail to produce desired results), I have identified the following topics around which academics have been writing concerning contemporary American Indian art: artist specific; genre specific; region specific; tribe specific; commodification of contemporary American Indian art; display, collectors and collections; intersectionality in visual culture; representational and identity politics; and shaking up the field of art history.

Within these topics, the following authors have dominated the space: Bill Anthes, Janet Catherine Berlo, Lois Essary Jacka, Nancy Mithlo, David W. Penney, Ruth B. Phillips, Jack Rushing, III, Lowery Stokes Sims, Paul Chaat Smith, Charlene Touchette, Edwin L. Wade, and Kay WalkingStick. Of those listed, only four are art historians (Janet Catherine Berlo, David W. Penney, Ruth B. Phillips, and Lowery Stokes Sims); two are anthropologists (Nancy Mithlo and Edwin L. Wade); one is an American studies scholar (Bill Anthes), one falls within the realm of Native American Studies and is an associate curator but has no credentials[8] (Paul Chaat Smith);

[8] This statement, that he "has no credentials" is not meant to diminish the qualifications of Paul Chaat Smith. He is most definitely one of the foremost experts in the field of contemporary Native American art through sheer volume of experience. He has been writing extensively on the topic for many years, and his placement at the NMAI is a testament to that expert knowledge and experience. However, he does not, indeed, have any professional credentials. By his own account, "I never made it past high school. Instead, I spent years in the shambolic American Indian Movement (AIM) until it disintegrated, then moved to New York, in order to, you know, move to New York. I started writing about artists, then finally wrote a book about AIM. When I interviewed at the Smithsonian in 2001, I was a temporary office worker. (It's almost impossible to get a job in this field without a college degree, and it took me decades to finally get one.)" Paul Chaat Smith is a great example of someone who, despite the absence of formal training, is absolutely an expert in his field, and should be taken every bit as seriously as anyone with a PhD in the

one is a working artist with an MFA (Kay WalkingStick), and one I will classify as "enthusiast" as I was unable to track down her credentials or expertise, which are nowhere to be found, despite her numerous publications (Lois Essary Jacka). Of all the authors in this list, Jacka is the only one whose work might not be considered scholarly because her work has not been published in any academic journals or museum retrospectives (although I have submitted an inquiry to her regarding her experience and education related to the field in which she has published). Additionally, Paul Chaat Smith has no credentials,[9] but is widely regarded as an expert on Native American art, and holds a curatorial position at the National Museum of the American Indian. Regardless of credentials, all of these artists created space for their work by publishing outside of the field of art history; and had they not, we would not know of the work of the American Indian artists about which they have written.

In addition to the dozen authors introduced to this point, there are a few dissertations listed (but not necessarily published) by "The Art Bulletin" that fall into the area of contemporary American Indian Art between 2002 and 2014. In the next section of this document are five tables that enumerate these dissertations.

Table 1 lists six dissertations in progress in the Contemporary Art category that include Native American art, but none were completed.

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field (and perhaps even more seriously because of his lifetime of immersion in the topic). He is also a prime example of the ways in which Indigenous people are reclaiming the ownership and direction of Indigenous knowledge. Staff writer, "Ask a public historian: Paul Chaat Smith," National Council on Public History, March 13, 2017, https://ncph.org/history-at-work/ask-a-public-historian-paul-chaat-smith/.

[9] Ibid

Table 1: College Art Association dissertations on contemporary art that include Native American art[10]:

Year:	Completed:	In Progress:
2013	0	0
2012	0	1[11]
2011	0	2
2010	0	1
2009	0	1
2008	0	0
2007	0	0
2006	0	1
2005	0	0
2004	0	0
2003	0	0
2002	0	0

Table 2 lists seventy-four dissertations on Native American Art *outside* the context of contemporary art, including all forms of art not limited to visual representation (e.g., dance and music are included), and most are *not* about contemporary art. Of those seventy-four dissertations, only fourteen were completed.

Table 2: College Art Association Dissertations on Native American Art *outside* the context of contemporary art, including all forms of art not limited to visual representation (e.g., dance and music are included), and most are *not* about contemporary art[12]:

Year:	Completed:	In Progress:
2013	1	4
2012	2	7
2011	1	10
2010	0	10

[10] College Art Association, "Contemporary Art," http://www.caareviews.org/category/7/dissertations (accessed October 5, 2014).
[11] This dissertation is actually about Indigenous art education, not the art itself. Dickenson, Rachelle, "A Question of Sovereignty: Indigenous Art Education in Canadian Universities" (York University, R. Hill)
[12] College Art Association, "Native American," http://www.caareviews.org/category/21/dissertations (accessed October 5, 2014).

2009	0	7
2008	2	4
2007	1	5
2006	3	6
2005	1	7
2004	2	6
2003	1	5
2002	0	3

Table 3 lists five dissertations on Art of the United States *outside* the context of contemporary art *or* Native American art, which include Native American art, none of which are about contemporary Native American art. Of the five dissertations in progress, all were completed, plus one.

Table 3: College Art Association Dissertations on Art of the United States *outside* the context of contemporary art *or* Native American art, which include Native American art, none of which are about contemporary Native American art[13]:

Year:	Completed:	In Progress:
2013	1	0
2012	0	0
2011	1	0
2010	0	0
2009	0	0
2008	2	1
2007	0	0
2006	1	1
2005	0	1
2004	1	1
2003	0	0
2002	0	1

[13] College Art Association, "Art of the United States," http://www.caareviews.org/category/3/dissertations (accessed on October 5, 2014).

Table 4 lists seven dissertations on Art of the twentieth century *outside* the context of Native American art, which include Native American art, and of which only six were completed.

Table 4: College Art Association Dissertations on Art of the twentieth century *outside* the context of Native American art, which include Native American art[14]:

Year:	Completed:	In Progress:
2013	1	1
2012	0	0
2011	1	0
2010	2	1
2009	0	1
2008	1	1
2007	1	0
2006	0	3
2005	1	0
2004	0	0
2003	0	0
2002	0	0

Finally, Table 5 lists only "The Art Bulletin" issues with published articles about contemporary Native American art, or reviews of the same—zero articles on contemporary Native American art, or Native American art of any kind, and only one review of an article on Native American art.

Table 5: Art Bulletin Issues with Articles about Contemporary Native American Art or Reviews of the same[15]:

Issue:	Articles:	Reviews:
September 2014[16]	0	0

[14] College Art Association, "Twentieth-Century Art," http://www.caareviews.org/category/31/dissertations (accessed on October 5, 2014).
[15] http://www.collegeart.org/artbulletin/past (accessed October 5, 2014).
[16] Although there are no articles on Indigenous contemporary American art, there is one article on the state of the field that points out that the field of art history continues to exclude Indigenous art. Interesting. Claudia Mattos,

June 2014	0	0
March 2014	0	0
June 2013	0	0
March 2013	0	1[17]
December 2012	0	0
September 2012	0	0
June 2012	0	0
March 2012	0	0
December 2011	0	0
September 2011	0	0
June 2011	0	0
March 2011	0	0

This is indicative of a relative vacuum in the world of art history where contemporary Native American art, or Native American art of any kind, is concerned. The journal is dominated primarily by Greek, Roman, and European art, with the occasional foray to Asia or Africa. Even American art does not figure greatly in this journal.

There are other journals, of course; but I chose Art Bulletin, because it is the official publication of the College Art Association, and that is where academic art historians in the United States "live."

Though I may have been the first to conduct such an enumerative study on the actual number of articles published on contemporary American Indian art in the premiere American art history journal of scholarly works, I am not the first to notice the underrepresentation of such works. In "Geography, Art Theory, and New Perspectives for an Inclusive Art History," Claudia Mattos makes this significant observation:

"Geography, Art History, and New Perspectives for an Inclusive Art History," *Art Bulletin 96*, no. 3 (September 2014): 259-264.

[17] Leo G. Mazow, "The Indian Craze: Primitivism, Modernism, and Transculturation in American Art, 1890-1915." Art Bulletin 95, no. 1 (March 2013): 169-171. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed October 5, 2014).

> Who has the voice in art history today? Another important question also came to mind: Who has a voice in art history in Brazil today? The main narratives of art history in Brazil present the development of the arts in the country exclusively as a process of transference and adaptation of European models into local contexts.[4] Although Brazil is also the scene of many different traditions, especially of Indigenous and African origin, these realities are incorporated only secondarily by art history as local elements that provoked occasional modification in the transplanted European models.[5] There is almost no effort to understand them in themselves, from within their own history, extending from the past into the present.[18]

Mattos is pointing out an issue of methods, and the way in which western traditions of doing art history are pervasive, and Indigenous arts (perceived by traditional historians as "local elements") are forced into that model, with detrimental results; or they are left out altogether because they do not fit. She goes on to say, "By insisting on the presentation of Brazilian art history exclusively from the point of view of the transference and adaptation of European art in the country, art historians continue to perpetuate discourses of Western colonial domination.[9]." [19] She also criticizes the traditional methods of linear chronology, the separation of culturally diverse art history narratives from the central field of art history, and suggests, "To expand the cannon means, therefore, to transform theory. I am very skeptical regarding recent attempts to develop a general theory of art and a unified methodology. The risk of imposing our own perception of the world on other traditions is too high."[20]

It is significant that Mattos' article appears in the most current Art Bulletin issue (September 2014), and that she was invited to comment on these issues (which is why I have

[18] Mattos, 262.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., 264.

quoted her so heavily--her scholarship and observations are "hot off the press"). She comments on the potential significance of this, saying:

> Living and working in "distant" Brazil, I was surprised to receive an invitation from the Art Bulletin, a journal that holds such a central position in the field, to share my perspectives on art history. Indeed, I considered what the invitation could mean. It probably signals that the field is becoming more inclusive and more global than ever before, but it also suggests that again, like the earlier artists, art historians situated at the center of the field are seeking new ideas outside the traditional boundaries of the discipline. Perhaps I would not have been asked to contribute if I were an academic in the United States or Europe.[21]

She could very well be right about the field becoming more inclusive, although it is interesting that she thinks she might not have been asked if she were an academic in the United States or Europe. With such a void in the area of Native American art, contemporary or otherwise, in *The Art Bulletin*, it seems that they might consider pulling from this burgeoning field of scholarship that most frequently finds safe harbor in anthropological journals, *American Indian Quarterly*, or *American Quarterly*.[22] Perhaps it is true that no one is a prophet in his own land.

Alternatively, perhaps this could be viewed as a ripe field of opportunity for new explorations in art history, especially Native American art history. Considering that Mattos' observations are freshly published in the current issue of The Art Bulletin, for all we know there could be a mad scramble going on right now to fill the next issue with new contemporary American Indian art scholarship. One can hope.

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[21] Ibid., 259.
[22] John Davis, "The End of the American Century: Current Scholarship on the Art of the United States," *The Art Bulletin* 85 no. 3 (September 2003):

Either way, there is an obvious gap in the scholarship where American Indian art history—contemporary or otherwise—is concerned. It would seem that an industrious academic in this field could surely find a way to fill that gap.

THE CATEGORY ERROR PREVENTING THE FIELD OF RECEPTION FROM UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY NATIVE AMERICAN ART

There are two concepts which greatly affect the difficulty that so many people have in understanding what contemporary Native American art actually is, and why so many people see the terms "contemporary Native American art" and "contemporary Native American artist" as oxymorons: the way in which Native American art is categorized (and minimized) outside of the canon of western art, and also the erroneous idea that the public has about what constitutes "traditional" Native American art (the 1890s snapshot of Native American art that exists in the American mind). The former is an issue of ethnocentrism, and the latter is an issue of cultural appropriation. Both of these concepts can be seen in the field of art history, but they do not originate in the field of art history. Rather, they influence the field of art history, and they also influence the way the masses view art, whether directly or indirectly.

The first concept is the one by which all art in the western world is judged by how well it fits into a completely imaginary construct that places European art at the pinnacle of art evolution. According to *The Art of Art History*: "To each people and place, its own true art, and to each true art its proper position on a ladder of evolution towards the modernity and presentness of Europe. Europe becomes not only a collection of artworks, but the *organizing principle of collecting*."[23] That concept from art history is a direct byproduct of European (and later, American) ethnocentrism. Art History, as we know it today, originated in Europe. It therefore makes sense that the

[23] Donald Preziosi, *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, New Edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 493.

Europeans developing the discipline would use their own culture as a measuring rod for the full evolution of art and artforms. Ethnocentrism is the first roadblock in the western world to understanding contemporary Native American art.

That same book of art history discusses the seminal contributions of Johann Joachim Winckelmann to the field of art history, and the extent to which he assisted in the formation of the idea that the history of art within cultures provides a deeper understanding of those cultures better than written or political accounts of the same histories:

> "Art, in other words, was made to bear the burden of being an emblem of the *totality* of a people's culture: its quintessential expression. To understand a people's art was thus to understand that people in the deepest possible way...Winckelmann not only transformed the idea of the history of art into a notion that art is the emblem of the spirit of an entire culture, but he also argued that it achieves an ideal moment..."[24]

In western art, that ideal moment became known as "classical." In the case of Indigenous peoples and their cultural representation in the form of art objects, that concept was applied to Native American art when it was first labeled as "art" in the eighteen nineties, with the advent of world fairs and the cultural exhibitions that accompanied them, followed by the museums that collected the remnants of their pavilions, and also traveling exhibitions like *Buffalo Bill's Wild West*. We got the label "Native American art" at that time because prior to that time what later became known as Native American art was just the collection of utilitarian objects of the daily lives of Native Americans, beautifully adorned. Once removed from their natural environment of daily use and prior category of simply beautiful utilitarian objects, and in some cases visual histories and contracts, these objects were elevated to the level of art by being placed *out* of context in

[24] Donald Preziosi, The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology, New Edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 17.

displays and exhibitions where they were suddenly appreciated for their *aesthetic* value. In that fateful historical moment, a snapshot was taken in the American mind which labeled all of that as "authentic" Native American art, and anything deviating from the styles and designs present at that moment have been called inauthentic by the field of reception ever since.

When thinking of cultural appropriation, we generally think of taking certain objects or aspects from another culture and applying them to our own purposes. A ubiquitous and readily available example of such appropriation (although one that is finally on the wane after a century of protest) is Indian mascots. In the American mind, the idea of "Indians" can embody certain characteristics that many people can admire and wish to attribute to themselves within the context of sports. Within the context of sports, even certain derogatory terms can have a positive meaning for the culture doing the appropriating. Among the collection of both positive and negative stereotypes embodied in such Indian mascots and their cultural appropriation, are the qualities of stoicism, fierceness, warrior nature, and even savagery--winners do not have mercy on their opponents on the battlefield or the football field, so even savagery can be seen by the appropriating culture as a positive trait in those situations, even if it is seen as derogatory by those to whom it is being attributed. Regardless of the intent, that doesn't make the representation of those traits through nomenclature, imagery, logos, and chants heard in the sports arena any less offensive to Indigenous people being caricatured by Indian mascots. It's a bad practice and its demise is long overdue. It's also just one example of cultural appropriation.

The second concept that contributes to a misunderstanding of Indigenous art, and which contributes to the way Indigenous culture is appropriated, is that snapshot in the American mind

of Indigenous people in the eighteen nineties, from which the preceding stereotypes are derived. All of the terms I used to describe those negative stereotypes could be summed up in another one: primitive. By labeling Indigenous art that looks like that which was created in the eighteen nineties as "authentic," it makes it easy for people to then label any way in which an Indigenous person participates in modernity with the rest of us as "inauthentic." And therein lies the rub: in that collective attitude and action, Indigenous people are prevented (if only in the minds of the dominant society) from evolving like the rest of us, and being perceived as fully modern people. This applies to Indigenous artists and their art, also. If their art is innovative (which is one of the definitions of art) then it can be considered inauthentic, simply because the field of reception does not understand that contemporary Native American art is not a contradiction in terms. In this way, the field of reception generally does not understand the art objects being made by modern Indigenous artists.

In terms of art, cultural appropriation begins with knowledge of a thing, and knowledge of a thing creates the thing, even if the knowledge is mistaken. The desire to possess a thing begins with the idea that one knows what it is and what its value is, even if that is a mistaken idea. Once that knowledge is created, the thing is created, ever fixed in the mind of the person creating it as an object of desire, even if the knowledge that created it did so out of ignorance. The knowledge of the thing attributes meaning to it that may only exist in the mind of the person possessing the created knowledge, therefore transforming the thing into something unrecognizable by its creator, in turn transforming its purpose as conceived by its creator, and also removing its agency as a created object. What it truly is can only be known by the creator of

it, since its existence emerged from within the mind of its creator. Once created, its meaning becomes subject to the interpretation of the viewer, who brings an entirely different knowledgebase to bear (one of their own creation) on the object.

What we so commonly refer to today as "Native American Art" is a prime example of this phenomenon. The category we call "Native American Art" was established in the 1890s as Native Americans became visible to the masses through world fair exhibitions, traveling entertainment such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, and through the wares offered for sale to tourists at trading posts throughout the west with the advent of the transcontinental railroad. As people were exposed to these items, the items transitioned from being what they were intended to be and to mean by the people who made them, to what they actually became as utilitarian, decorative, or spiritual items, to what the field of reception classified as art and interpreted as "authentic."

In the end, the art object becomes subject to the knowledge of the viewer, which changes its meaning. The viewer who has knowledge of the object ultimately feels himself to be an expert on the object and the genre from which it emerges, which is ultimately a genre of the viewer's own creation, since the viewer's knowledge of the thing creates its meaning.

Ultimately, we have two creators of art objects: the artist who conceived of the idea and then creates the art out of that conception, and the viewer of the object who believes they know the object and can appreciate its true value (which is entirely subjective to the experience and knowledge of the viewer). One object. Two creators. Two potentially entirely different purposes, and a conflict of cultural perspectives on the meaning and purpose of the object.

Later, you are going to meet Ben Pease, an Apsáalooke artist who talks about his intentions for his art. He will talk about imbuing them with power through words he writes on the art that people will never see, and the prayers and intentions that he sends out with the finished works. Ben has intention for the work he creates, but that intention may be lost on the viewer or collector. They may collect or appreciate the work because of the "traditional" imagery. This is a prime example of the kind of cultural conflict inherent in the transaction between the artist, the object, and the viewer.

The act of cultural appropriation that occurs in such a transaction results from the imposition of the preconceived, antiquated ideas about Indians and their cultures that non-Indigenous people apply to those transactions and interactions. By bringing preconceived, outdated cultural stereotypes (even those that might attempt to represent Indigenous people and their cultures in a positive light) to bear on the artwork, the viewer places a barrier between them and the intrinsic meaning of the artwork. If Native American art is to be truly understood as "the emblem of the spirit of an entire culture," the viewer must remove themselves and their own preconceived ideas from the experience, and do their best to earnestly attempt to understand what the artist, and the work itself, are attempting to convey. Only then will the viewer understand what is *actually* authentic for Indigenous people, and Indigenous art.

ARTISTS OF THE TRIBE CALLED WANNABEE

Before I introduce you to some of the "real Indians" I interviewed, I want to introduce you to a group of people who have profited from the misappropriation of Native American culture by making art they claim is Native American but isn't. As you have already learned in the chapter on the State of the Field, not just anyone making or selling art in the United States can call their artwork Native American because we have legal language and laws governing the sale of artwork subject to those legal terms. There are many reasons artists might claim their artwork is Native American, most of which have to do with it being a highly lucrative endeavor. They are either themselves enamored of Native American culture, or they are seeking to profit from those who are. Either way, I'm going to place people from both of those camps into the same category; the one we call "the tribe called Wannabee."

There is no actual Indigenous tribe called Wannabee. The Wannabee tribe is a nickname and catch-all phrase used to classify a category of people who glorify Native American culture in a generalized way and assume some identity associated with their idea of what that means. Native Americans, as well as non-Indigenous peoples closely associated with them and their issues, are well aware of the concept of the tribe called Wannabee. This non-existent tribe is enamored of "Native American culture" to such a degree that they attempt to emulate what they perceive to be "authentic Native American culture" in the way they dress, their spiritual practices, and even (for some) in the art that they create. I set "authentic Native American culture" in quotes because there is really no such thing as "Native American culture." As of this writing, there are five hundred and seventy four federally recognized tribes in the United States,

and among those tribes, there are one hundred and seventy five Indigenous languages spoken.[25] There can be no one cultural representation of so many different tribes, language groups, and cultures. Despite this reality, many non-Indigenous people join the tribe called Wannabee, either unaware of or unconcerned with this misappropriation of Indigenous culture at scale. This is one version of a phenomenon generally described by Edward Said in his book, *Orientalism*,[26] that later became known in Native American Studies circles as Pan Indianism.

The practice of misappropriating Native American culture by artists is such a problem for Indigenous peoples that the Indian Arts and Crafts Act (IACA) was created to prevent the outright theft of their intellectual property. Even with the IACA in place, white people passing off their artwork as Native American is still a common practice and difficult to dissuade. I, myself, have frequently seen art at shows and fairs being sold by white people who labeled it as "Indian Art" when they were quite obviously not Indian. However, appearances can be deceiving (as I point out in the chapter on DG House), and even knowing what I know, I have been hesitant to publicly call those people out for fear that I might be doing them the same injustice that has been done to DG House by people who don't know any better. Not all Indigenous people fit our phenotypic stereotype of what passes for Indian. Even so, after researching this topic for nearly seventeen years, I'm no novice and am usually right about what I suspect to be cultural misappropriation. I, like most other people, am also reluctant to cause a public spectacle, so if I suspect that's going on I just quietly take their card and look into the matter later, and then report

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[25] Public Information Office, "Census Bureau Reports at Least 350 Languages Spoken in U.S. Homes," United States Census Bureau, November 3, 2015, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-185.html

[26] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1st edition. (New York, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), https://www.amazon.com/Orientalism-Edward-W-Said/dp/0394428145/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1615543919&sr=8-2.

it, if I am able to confirm my suspicions.[27] Unfortunately, I am frequently unable to make confirmation because the persons misrepresenting the art are usually doing so under a technicality or loophole in the IACA.

To illustrate the prevalence, complexities and subtleties of this problem, I will present to you two fictional composites of actual artists that I have been acquainted with in real life who exploit the demand for Native American art by catering to the ignorance and indiscriminate tastes of collectors who don't know any better, or who just don't care whether the work they are buying has been culturally misappropriated, or meets the legal requirements of the IACA. The first composite represents many artists I have encountered over the decades who have blatantly and flagrantly assumed a Wannabee Indian identity and used it to enrich themselves and their bank accounts by promoting their artwork as Native American. I will call the first composite artist Red Eagle Stone. The second one, who I will call Grace Michaels, is someone who is in no way a member of the tribe called Wannabee, and who exploits the same market opportunities as Red Eagle Stone without any attempt at pretending to admire or respect Indigenous people or their culture. Where Red Eagle Stone tells himself a story (a lie) that makes what he is doing okay in his own mind, Grace Michaels is in it strictly for the money. Native American art is hot and she has no scruples when it comes to taking advantage of a lucrative trend in the art world to enrich herself. Even though she is not trying to pass herself or her work off as in any way authentic, she does appropriate the images, culture, and regalia of Indigenous people because they are popular subject matter. I include her here even though she's not a Wannabee because she

[27] This is exactly what I recommend that you do, reader, if you find yourself in a similar situation. Assertively confronting someone at an arts and crafts fair will likely just get you thrown out of the show, and not accomplish your well-meaning objective.

profits from her blatant cultural theft and her collectors can (and often do) misinterpret her intentions as reverential of Indigenous culture. Even though she is not a Wannabee herself, many of her collectors are.

The first artist, Red Eagle Stone, is a very talented caucasian artist who actually does have great respect for Indigenous peoples and their culture, as he understands it. He has let his hair grow long, and perhaps he has dyed it black because it fits with the persona he chooses to project and the stereotypical image of Indians he holds in his mind. He collects "authentic" Indian artifacts for their spiritual value, and enjoys dressing in "authentic" Indian clothes.[28] He generates stories about how he comes up with his ideas that fit with his own mythical ideal of the innate and superior spirituality inherent in all things Native American. His ideas on these topics are broad and generalized, and nonspecific to any particular tribe or culture group. He has learned bits and pieces from this Indigenous person from one tribe, or that Indigenous person from another tribe (and maybe many people from many tribes). He is the living embodiment of Pan Indianism, which is reflected in his clothing, his collection of artifacts and his language around the subject of anything Native American (particularly found in his emphasis on the term

[28] Dr. Nate St. Pierre, now deceased, told me a story years ago of a trip that he and the other professors of the MSU Native American Studies department took to some Indigenous conference in Germany. At the end of one of the days of the conference, the hosts of the conference (all Germans, non Indigenous to the western hemisphere) hosted a "talking circle" in a teepee. Nate was invited to join them. Nate was Chippewa Cree, from the Rocky Boy's Reservation in Montana, and phenotypically Indian--you would not question his Native American identity when observing his appearance. It was summer and he was wearing cargo shorts, a Hawaiian shirt, and Teva sandals. When he showed up at the "talking circle," there was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed man dressed head to toe in buckskin welcoming people at the entrance of the teepee. He said to Nate, "I'm sorry, but you must dress authentically to enter the "talking circle." Nate very gently took him aside and explained to him his error. One does not tell an actual Indigenous person that they are not dressed authentically. The man welcomed Nate into the "talking circle." Later, in the "talking circle," apparently feeling sheepish, the man who had greeted Nate at the door suddenly said, "Does it bother you that we dress like you?" Nate answered, "No. Does it bother you that we dress like you?"

Native American over specific references to individual tribes represented in his collection of ideas and artifacts), and the symbolism he inserts into his artwork. Additionally, all of his references to Native American culture are idealized, antiquated, and refer primarily to the past. He is generally unconcerned with contemporary issues or real hardships faced by Native American peoples, primarily because he is unaware of them, for the most part. If he is aware of them, his awareness is tied to his complete rejection of his own Euro-American culture, and his desire to disassociate himself from all of that, thereby disentangling himself from any responsibility for the hardships faced by the people whose culture he is misappropriating and, subsequently, any guilt he might otherwise feel for stealing their culture. He is different from a tribal artisan (as described in the chapter, "The State of the Field") in that he has not consulted anyone in authority in any tribe, in any official capacity, to seek their counsel or gain their permission to represent them or their culture in his artwork. In fact, he likely actively *avoids* any such contact so as not to be confused by any uncomfortable facts that may shine a light on the inappropriateness of his actions and misappropriation of their culture for his own economic gain.

Red Eagle likely has a sweat lodge in his backyard, and might participate in a select collection of Indigenous spiritual rituals that he has learned from someone teaching workshops on Native American spirituality. The person teaching the workshops was most likely not authorized by any tribe to teach them, and is most likely not Native American. Red Eagle may have actually participated in a tribal ritual at the invitation of someone he knows, and then appropriated what he learned for his own personal edification. Either way, he is in possession of sacred knowledge without full understanding of its meaning or significance to the tribe. He then

uses that knowledge to inform his artistic process. When promoting a new painting or doing a gallery talk, Red Eagle will use his experiences with these appropriated spiritual practices to explain the meaning of the work to his audience and collectors.

Red Eagle has a large following of collectors who also fit this profile. They are well-versed in the glorification of Native American culture set by Red Eagle's example. Their views are reinforced by their association with Red Eagle and others like him. They create a self-reinforcing circle of individuals who validate their mistaken understanding of traditional Indigenous culture and practices.

I actually had a conversation with one of the artists on whom I have based this composite profile about how he came up with his ideas for his work. He told me a long, rambling story about participating in a sweat, then walking along the river, and then being visited by his spirit guide, who told him what to paint next, and what the meaning of that painting would be. It is interesting to contrast that conversation with the interviews I conducted with the artists featured in this work, because *none* of them--not even one--shared a similar story to that of Red Eagle Stone's. They all talked about the actual craft of making the work, the imagery in the work, the materials they used and why they chose those materials, their artistic process, how their work has changed over time, and what they do to keep themselves motivated to keep working and making art in such a highly competitive market. Only when I asked them specifically how their tribal culture influenced their work did they mention anything about that. Rarely did they mention a direct spiritual influence. My take-away from those interviews was that if there was a spiritual influence, it was deeply personal and something the viewer would not likely understand, not

even if they were from their tribe. Talk of spiritual influences, such as what Red Eagle Stone freely volunteered, never comes up except from non-Indigenous artists who are looking for an angle to promote their work and make it more "special."

The spiritual angle is, in and of itself, cultural misappropriation. In 1996, a documentary film entitled *White Shamans and Plastic Medicine Men*[29] laid out the problem of white people stealing Indigenous spiritual practices for monetary gain. It described the process by which white people would befriend someone in the tribe, use that friendship to attend and learn about the spiritual practices of the tribe, after which they would create workshops that they would sell tickets to and teach other white people about these practices, making lots of money in the process. That is a betrayal of the tribe and the people in it who befriended the persons who ultimately stole their religious practices and sold them for profit. It is also a perfect example of cultural appropriation.

What Red Eagle Stone does, telling a story about participating in a pseudo Native American ritual and then being visited by a spirit guide who tells him what to paint, is basically the same kind of cultural theft. He isn't selling the appropriated religious practice, directly; but he is using the story of that experience to sell his art to people who look for that kind of provenance in the art that they collect.

Another aspect of Red Eagle's work is that it features images of Indigenous people who all look the same, and are all dressed in a mishmash of Indigenous regalia not specific to any particular tribe. The faces are stoic and indistinguishable from the other faces in the same

[29]StoneBoneAndFire, "White Shamans & Plastic Medicine Men [1996]," Jul 30, 2013, 25:17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=19JAMhAzXms

painting, or in other paintings. Sometimes the faces are completely blank and the indigeneity conveyed in the images is done so strictly through other supposedly Indigenous elements. Although the artistic skill it took to paint them is considerable, the persons in the paintings are not treated as individuals with individual identities. They only possess the broadest of romanticized Indian identities. They are the embodiment of the noble savage; a generic, stoic, tragic figure from a hundred and fifty years ago, with no place in modern society. Such images are the hallmark of the tribe called Wannabee.

Contemporary, realistic representations of Indigenous people in art are not as collectible as Red Eagle's work, because they tell that uncomfortable truth that Red Eagle and his followers don't want to acknowledge: Indigenous people have real, modern, individual identities that contradict every aspect of the insulting noble savage stereotype that diminishes the people they claim to revere and underscores the idea that Indigenous people do not exist in the present. This presents a marketing problem for the "real Indian" artists, because the demand for the artwork that emphasizes the lie that Indigenous peoples belong in the past is what most of the well-funded collectors are looking for.

Now let's look at Grace Michaels and her work. Grace is a caucasian artist who may or may not be professionally trained. She has considerable talent and skill at rendering realistic images. However, she had a lot of difficulty finding her niche in the art market, always attempting to paint what would sell rather than developing her own artistic vision. Her primary focus is always on the business of art and making it financially viable. While she may enjoy painting, that's not why she creates so many paintings. She does it to maintain enough volume to

sell and hit the numbers that she needs to accomplish her financial goals. Grace has struggled for many years trying to find the perfect subject matter that will give her a following of collectors who will finally provide her with the financial success she so desperately seeks. In the art world, Grace is what we many would call a hack.

She finally began experiencing some marginal success in the western genre, but the market was glutted with talented artists doing the same thing, and it was highly competitive. Then, one year she got accepted to a big, regional western art fair. She noticed that there were quite a few Native American artists there, and that they received a lot of attention and prestige. Their paintings were priced in the tens of thousands of dollars and they sold *out*.

Grace began painting images of Native Americans from photos she found in various museum archives on the Internet. She added a flair of color to them that (in her mind) brought the images to life in a way that the black and white photos lacked. She had no idea what colors to use, because she had no idea of Indigenous cultures, and she didn't bother to consult with anyone who would know. She didn't ask anyone for permission to paint the portraits because any copyright on the photos had long since expired and the photos were in the public domain.

Her colorful portraits of Native Americans were an overnight success! She made nearly a quarter of a million dollars in her first year of adding these Indigenous portraits to her portfolio. She drew the attention of many collectors with deep pockets, as well as gallery owners, and others in the art world who saw that they, too, could profit from this new artist's colorful reinterpretation of old photos of Native Americans.

She also drew a lot of criticism from people in the art world who recognized what she was doing as blatant cultural misappropriation. Her friends explained to her why it was not okay for her to be doing what she was doing. People who didn't know her but recognized her work for what it was told her the same thing. She ignored them all because her work was selling and she was making a really good living as an artist for the first time in her career.

Many of the same people from Red Eagle Stone's field of reception also collected Grace's work. She didn't have as good a story to tell, and primarily relied on a more vague backstory for her paintings. The collectors didn't mind that, and simply found her paintings and process more mysterious and, ironically, more spiritual.

Grace continued to be hounded by her critics because it was so obvious to them what she was doing; especially those who were closest to her. She eventually started painting other historical western photos (also in the public domain) in the same style as her Indian portraits, and slowly transitioned out of her "Indian phase" and into her newly reimagined western phase. She didn't really care that her Native American portraits were seen by those in the know as cultural appropriation, because she found the validation she was looking for in the financial rewards and professional recognition she received for her work. However, as the criticism continued, she began to be concerned about negative publicity; thus the shift into more broadly western work and away from the potentially troublesome area of cultural theft.

Even though Grace did abandon the practice of cultural misappropriation in her work, she still built her career on it. Grace produced artwork that the tribe called Wannabee was looking for. Without knowing anything about the people she was painting, her collectors admired the

subjects in Grace's portraits. Neither Grace nor her collectors knew anything about the people she was painting, and they were never even curious enough to try to find out who they were. Although Grace's portraits were highly realistic and each face was unique and distinguishable from all the others, no one really cared about their individual identities. What they did care about was the name of the person and whether it sounded traditionally Indian. Beyond that, they were just Indian. In this way, Grace's paintings were very much like Red Eagle Stone's. While Red Eagle's Indian faces either all looked the same or were entirely blank, and Grace's paintings were different in that the faces were unique and looked exactly like the photos they were painted from, both Red Eagle's and Grace's paintings respectively robbed their Indigenous subjects of their unique identities, and relegated them to the general category of Native American. Also like Red Eagle's works, Grace's paintings represented Indigenous people as the noble savage: generic, stoic, tragic, and belonging in the past. This, of course, greatly appeals to the art collectors of the tribe called Wannabee.

You may wonder why I opened a story entitled "Real Indians Making Real Art" with two false, composite identities. I did this so that you can see what the "real Indian" artists are up against in their attempts to visually express their own cultural identities in their own visual languages. It might be tempting to dismiss that reality in the same way that people dismiss racial strife and discrimination with the phrase, "I don't see color." However, to do so would deny the fundamental problem that these artists face.

With the majority of collectors of Indian art looking for things that are "authentic" and "traditional," which, to them, means representing Indian people in that noble savage stereotype,

it is extremely difficult for Indigenous artists to tell a different version of their stories and their histories that contradicts that romantic and misguided imagery. Doing so forces the viewer to deal with uncomfortable truths that they may not be ready to face, and will *never* be ready to face if the majority of the work representing Indigenous peoples merely reinforces that tired old stereotype. In the same way that early abstract artists tried to tell new visual stories with new ways of mark-making, juxtaposition of objects, rearrangement of elements, and intensity of colors, and they were met with outrage or (perhaps worse) indifference to their honest, innovative way of looking at old things in a new way, Native American artists are dealing with the same dismissal of their honest retelling of Indigenous stories in Indigenous voices using Indigenous imagery. Complicating matters further is the fact that Indigenous people only make up only 1.6% of the United States population, and many non-indgenous people operate under the false idea that Indians were wiped out and really only *do* exist in only the past. This makes it easier for them to deny the uncomfortable realities faced by Indian people, in both the past and the present. It also makes it easier for non-Indigenous people to tell stories about Indigenous peoples that reinforce their own mistaken assumptions without challenge.

Contemporary Indigenous artists are actively challenging those assumptions. I have interviewed nine of them in the course of writing my dissertation, and have dedicated this space to them so they can tell their stories in their own words. I would encourage you to listen to what they have to say with an open mind, and allow your own assumptions to be challenged without becoming defensive. The world of art these artists occupy is full of beauty, humor, and intelligent commentary. They are well worth watching and listening to.

BUNKY ECHO-HAWK'S "WAR WHOOPING WITH COPE'S": THE CONTROVERSIAL DEPICTION OF A MODERN PAWNEE WARRIOR

Bunky Echo-Hawk is a contemporary artist with hands and feet planted in several different areas of the art world, and both mainstream and Indigenous America. A graduate of the Institute of American Indian Arts, he paints, performs (poetry, music and live painting), and educates a variety of audiences. He states on his website, "It is my goal to truly exemplify the current state of Native America through art."[30] By that goal, one could consider him a political activist, as well; and it is unlikely he would argue to the contrary.

Echo-Hawk is an equal opportunity educator, not limiting his wisdom to those outside the Indigenous world. His relatively recent painting, "War Whooping with Cope's," is a prime example of the actual lived experience of what he has dubbed "the modern warrior." This is such a strong theme in his work that it is featured in a two-year exhibit at the Field Museum in Chicago entitled "Bunky Echo-Hawk: Modern Warrior."[31] So it is more than just a little bit ironic that he was "hired" to paint a warrior image for the front of the 67th annual Pawnee Indian Veterans' Homecoming powwow program in 2013, and then fired because the committee did not like the image.

This chapter seeks to examine the painting, "War Whooping with Cope's," from a postcolonial point of view, employing genre analysis as a primary method for evaluating its

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[30] "Bio." 2014. BunkyEchoHawk.com. Accessed December 3. http://bunkyechohawk.com/bio/.

[31] The "Modern Warrior" exhibit runs from September 27, 2013 through June 17, 2015. Peterson, T. 2013. "Bunky Echo-Hawk: Modern Warrior." Text. The Field Museum. July 18. http://www.fieldmuseum.org/at-the-field/exhibitions/bunky-echo-hawk-modern-warrior.

success as a popular piece of contemporary art by a popular, well-known Native American artist. We will also consider its subsequent failure as a piece of art commissioned to be a work of cultural representation for the Pawnee tribe, juxtaposed against its success as a contemporary representation of what it means to be a Pawnee warrior. This exploration delves into the politics of this event, which includes a glance at the history of the Pawnee tribe and their proud, long-standing tradition as warriors. Perhaps in examining these events, one of many ways in which Native American people live in and between the mainstream of American society and the traditional worlds of their Indigenous roots, we can understand why a well-intentioned piece of artwork could meet with the disapproval of the tribe members it was meant to honor.

According to a brief description of the "Bunky Echo-Hawk: Modern Warrior" exhibit in Chicago Magazine, "The Native American artist uses cheeky pop culture references to highlight Pawnee artifacts drawn from the vaults of the Field."[32] The Chicago Tribune described the exhibit as "a pop, political and historical journey into the Pawnee artist's cultural vision." These could very well summarize the bulk of the body of Echo-Hawk's work, excepting that he does not limit his "cheeky pop-culture" references to Pawnee artifacts. Additionally, Echo-Hawk's references are not always so cheeky, and can take a more somber and serious tone. Concerning one of the paintings in the Field Museum exhibit which features a Pawnee woman in her modern kitchen, he makes this observation, "Her lifestyle has changed to one of convenience…She's kind

[32] Foumberg, Jason, and Elly Fishman. 2014. "The Top 18 Exhibits to See at Chicago Museums in September." Chicago Magazine. Accessed December 3. http://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/C-Notes/September-2013/What-to-Do-in-Chicago-Museums/.

of mourning that transition."[33] While some topics can lend themselves to humor, others may not, and Echo-Hawk definitely knows the difference.

That point may be up for discussion, however, as far as the Pawnee Indian Veterans' Organization is concerned. In early 2013, they asked Echo-Hawk "to create a painting for this year's Veterans' Homecoming powwow program."[34] However, just a few months later they declined acceptance of his submission. Apparently distraught by the decision, Echo-Hawk issued a statement on his Facebook page that explained how he was asked to do the painting and was honored by the request. He included his line of reasoning behind the image he chose to create, how it connected to the idea of homecoming and warriors as specifically related to Pawnee history and traditions. He then went on to describe how he was "fired" from the project, and apologized to anyone who might have been offended by it. The entirety of his statement is included here, because it is as succinct a summary of those events from the artist's point of view we could want:

> A few months ago, I was asked to create a painting for the cover of this year's Pawnee Homecoming powwow program. It was like a dream come true, to be asked. It was a huge honor!! Since I began painting years ago, this has always been one of my goals.
>
> So, I thought about what I wanted to paint. I thought about what "homecoming" means, and about all the veterans that have gone off to war, who have returned. I thought [sic] about all the warriors that never returned. I thought about all the family, friends, tribal members, the community that is left behind when our warriors have gone off to train, to go to battle, to serve. I thought about all the prayers that are said, day to day, for our warriors. I thought about all the dances

[33] "MUSEUM GUIDE: Bunky Echo-Hawk: Modern Warrior at the Field Museum of Natural History." 2014. Chicago Tribune. Accessed December 3. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-10-02/news/ct-ent-1003-museum-hawk-20131002_1_field-museum-pawnee-vision.

[34] Bunky Echo-Hawk. 2013. "How I Got Fired!" June 2. https://www.facebook.com/notes/bunky-echo-hawk/how-i-got-fired/10151411533707343.

we've had, all the ceremonies...all the meals that have been prepared for these dances, ceremonies, prayers, and people.

This lead [sic] me to understand, in a small way, why our warriors used to tie an ear of corn to their gear when they would head off into battle. The corn they used was an ear of corn unique to that family, designed over centuries, different colors, patterns, etc. I'm sure they carried it to represent their families, to identify themselves, and also, because those ears of corn were prayed over.

Our corn, our agriculture, was at the center of our universe back in the day. We had elaborate ceremonies from the beginning of time that were held to prepare the earth to plant, and ceremonies around harvesting. Our agricultural calendar was tied directly to the placement of the stars...and much of our warrior life was a direct result of protecting those crops from other tribes.

So, the painting I decided to paint depicts a modern day warrior, war-whooping. His mouth is open, he is hollering... I did this because you hardly ever see a painting, or a photograph, of an Indian with their mouth open. They always seem to be stoic. And, instead of an ear of corn, I have my subject wearing a bag of Cope's Dried Sweet Corn tied to his bear claw necklace. Today, at every single gathering our tribe has, we use Cope's corn. We no longer plant our own corn (except for my Aunt Deb and a few others!), we no longer live off the land, we no longer look to the stars to guide our diet. We use Cope's corn to feed at dances, ceremonies, gatherings, when we gather and dance and pray for our veterans, for our warriors.

Anyway, after I presented the final painting at the Memorial Day Dance (right after we all ate Cope's Corn), I was told my painting would NOT be used after all. For some reason, a few people think that this painting is too controversial to use at all. I've been told that this painting doesn't have anything to do with the veterans or homecoming. I couldn't disagree more. This painting was done with humble intentions. It was done with our veterans and tribal community in mind.

If I offended you with this painting, I apologize. It was not my intention at all. I am disappointed; like I said, this was an opportunity I had been looking forward to for many years. Anyway...moving on and moving up.[35]

[35] (Bunky Echo-Hawk 2013)

Unfortunately, there is no written statement published anywhere, on either the Pawnee Indian Veterans' Organization Facebook page, or on the Pawnee Nation website with the reasons for the rejection of this piece for their powwow cover; and as of this writing I have not been in contact with them to get their side of the story.[36] In an email response from Echo-Hawk to me on November 3, 2014, he indicated his uncle was in charge of the committee, and was the one who gave him the bad news.

That a family member delivered the news is symptomatic of the kind of politics that can surround art created for community display by a member of the community. Clearly, Echo-Hawk is a valued member of his community and is recognized for his artistic achievements. As a result, he was invited to paint the annual powwow program cover. However, when the product was not to the liking of the committee, they sent a family member to soften the blow. What happened between the presentation of the painting to the committee, and Echo-Hawk receiving the news that they would not use his work on the program after all, is the primary point of interest here. Though very little time passed between these two events, a *lot* of cultural conflict occurred.

Perhaps what makes this cultural conflict a particularly compelling point of interest is precisely that it occurred within the confines of a tribal community, rather than between the tribal community and the larger mainstream culture (which is where we have become accustomed to seeing such conflicts occur). Typically, these rifts result from a stereotypical view of who Native American people ought to be, either pseudo-positively (e.g., the "noble savage"), or negatively. While we can hope that most people have moved beyond negative stereotypes of Native

[36] I attempted to contact them multiple times, always receiving a promise to call back, but never did.

Americans, the truth is that many have not. However, the dubiously positive stereotypes glorifying Native Americans as noble though vanquished peoples, enduring and surviving in modern society by clinging to their ancient traditions and spiritual practices, can be just as harmful to them, inhibiting their ability to be fully-realized modern individuals in their own right. It can be especially harmful when Indigenous people buy into these outsider views of who they are, or who they ought to be. This is what happened to Bunky Echo-Hawk over the powwow program painting.

Let's begin this exploration by looking at the purpose for which Echo-Hawk was "hired" to produce a painting which was to ultimately find its home on the cover of the 67th annual Pawnee Indian Veterans' Homecoming program cover. If this transaction had been completed, and Echo-Hawk's work had indeed been printed on the powwow cover, it would have become a souvenir item of the event for attendees. It is likely and probable that people collect and keep these programs, as commemorations of both their attendance at the events as well as a memorial to their veteran loved ones who are honored therein. The evidence of this fact can be seen on the Pawnee Indian Veterans' Homecoming Powwow Facebook page, where recent updates to the relatively new page include the addition of powwow program covers from years past.[37] Overwhelmingly, the covers feature illustrations of Pawnee warriors in traditional dress. Only one of the traditional images does not feature the warrior accoutrements, and instead displays a traditional dancer. The two paintings of warriors are done from photos of warriors, with very little interpretation. One painting from a photograph takes a sort of post-impressionist/Fauvist

[37] "Pawnee Indian Veterans Homecoming Powwow." 2014. Facebook. Accessed November 30. https://www.facebook.com/pages/Pawnee-Indian-Veterans-Homecoming-Powwow/185938678110323.

approach, while another simply adds color in such a way as to suggest a painting on black velvet from the 1970s—meticulously detailed, vibrantly colored, and accurately rendered, but a painting from an old photograph, nonetheless. In every other respect outside of the style of the paintings, they are obviously meant to be traditional representations of actual Pawnee warriors from history. The original photos of these warriors are catalogued on the Pawnee Veterans' Facebook page as well.[38]

Conversely, Echo-Hawk's "War Whooping with Cope's" takes an approach that is much more contemporary. If we were to look for similarities to other modern painters, we might find them in the works of Fritz Scholder from several decades prior (which hearken back to the abstract expressionists), if only in themes, concepts, and use of color.[39] Regardless of any potential similarities to other contemporary Native American artists, Echo-Hawk's work is distinctly original in its painterly execution and interpretations of modern Indigenous people. The modern warrior he depicts in "War Whooping with Cope's" is no exception, which is probably the root of the controversy over it.

There are several potential points of controversy related to this work, converging on semantics and the multiple meanings of the words "modern," "traditional" and "warrior." As Echo-Hawk himself explained in his Facebook post, the word "warrior" carries multiple meanings for him: first, the traditional warriors who lived before and after European contact, and later served as scouts for the U.S. Army; second, the warriors of the present day who serve in various branches of the U.S. military; and third, the "modern warrior" he sees as those Pawnees

[38] Ibid.
[39] Fritz Scholder. "Fritz Scholder | Official Website | Gallery." Gallery. http://fritzscholder.com/gallery.php.

who live in the modern world, while holding to and carrying forth the good traditions of their ancestors.

For the committee "hiring" the artist to paint the powwow program cover, however, the meaning of the word "warrior" is apparently much more limited to the conventional traditional. According to the Pawnee Nation website, "The Pawnee Indian Veterans Organization has honored service men and women since 1946 with the Pawnee Indian Veterans Homecoming and will continue the tradition though many dances designed to honor Native American culture and veterans from all military branches." This suggests a more mainstream interpretation of "warrior" that is rooted in modern U.S. military service. The Pawnee Indian Veterans' (Official) Facebook page has this to say about what "warrior" means to them:

> Warfare has long been and [sic] elementary force in Pawnee lives, but in the latter 1800's [sic] it became a force for our very survival as people. Our struggle against hostile tribes led us to a partnership with the U.S. Army in an effort to preserve our existence against the invading tribes. It may seem paradoxical to some that our Pawnee warriors, who fought hard to protect our people from extinction, were also some of the greatest allies ever known to the U.S. Army on the plains frontier. In the ten years serving as Pawnee U.S. Scouts, we never lost a man in battle. Our ancient homeland was in Nebraska. This proud heritage accompanied the tribe whence were [sic] removed to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) in 1874-77. Pawnees have fought in all of America's wars since that time. Today, warriors continue to play an important role in our culture and tradition. The Pawnee people have been involved in every war since the Indian Wars. There are eight stars on our tribal flag representing each of these wars we have been involved in: The Indian Wars, Spanish American War, WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Desert Storm, and now Iraq.[40]

This statement suggests that the official stance of the Pawnee Indian Veterans' Organization is that to them a modern warrior is one which serves in the U.S. military, not one

[40] "Pawnee Indian Veterans Organization (Official)." 2014. Facebook. Accessed December 7. https://www.facebook.com/pages/Pawnee-Indian-Veterans-Organization-Official/304726282959883?sk=info

who is thinking about the history of corn and its connection to Pawnee traditions, warrior or otherwise.

Let us now address the reason quotes keep showing up around the words “hired” and “hiring”: because traditionally being hired for a job means the artist gets paid. This is not the case regarding the powwow cover programs for the annual Pawnee Indian Veterans’ Homecoming powwows. As Echo-Hawk mentioned, he considered it “a dream come true” and “a huge honor” to be asked to do a painting for the cover. As of the date of this writing, I have not verified the probability that Echo-Hawk (nor any other program cover artist) was not paid for his work. However, the fact that the powwow is free to all attendees would suggest that he was not. According to the poster for the 67th annual homecoming powwow, admission and parking are free, as is camping and “rations.”[41] Not only is admission free, but the hosts of the powwow feed the attendees, as well. On their official Facebook page, the Pawnee Indian Veterans’ Organization mentions the many ways in which the annual powwow supports the local economy:

> The Pawnee Indian Homecoming Powwow is the largest free ceremony of the year to honor the military veterans of our tribe. We do not charge for; [sic] admission, parking, camping, nor do we charge for any of the dancers and singers. Rations are given out to the campers on Saturday and if funds are available on Fridays as well. The Pawnee Indian Veterans Organization depends solely upon monetary donations from tribal members whose families wish to honor their family veterans. We are a non-profit organization chartered with the State of Oklahoma. The first dance was held in 1946. Frank Young Eagle, Walter Keyes, Herbert Morris, Jim Sun Eagle and others, all WWII veterans, originated the plan for a grand homecoming celebration to be held at the close of WWII to honor those returning veterans. The first annual homecoming began on July 4, 1946.

[41] “Pawnee Indian Veterans Organization (Official) 67th Annual Homecoming July 4, 5, 6, 7 2013!” https://www.facebook.com/304726282959883/photos/a.401403476625496.1073741826.304726282959883/401403613292149/?type=1.

> The dance is currently held on the Pawnee High School football field. Many bring chairs and sit around the arena. Other visitors can sit in the stadium bleachers. There are many in attendance with having around 135 camps and 300 dancers from all tribes. The visitors and general overall attendance to the Homecoming Powwow benefits the city as well as the tribe in the way of motels, groceries, supplies, gasoline, cigarettes, and various kinds of refreshments. Drugs and alcohol are prohibited at the powwow and campgrounds. We have tribal police as well as tribal police from surrounding tribes to ensure the safety for all.

With so much at stake economically for the community, it is not hard to understand why a potentially controversial image might not be embraced by the committee. The event is old and established, and one could easily assume that there are established protocols expected by attendees in their annual celebration of veteran loved ones, both living and deceased. Even though the powwow event itself does not generate revenue, it is clear that the economic impact on the community is great. A poorly attended event could be devastating for members of the community counting on the income generated by the annual influx of attendees.

Still, could putting "War Whooping with Cope's" on the cover of the powwow program really have been so poorly perceived? Without the specific testimony of the committee concerning their reasons for rejecting the work, and without the work having actually been used, we cannot know for sure. Perhaps we can gain some insight from responses to Echo-Hawk's post concerning getting "fired." Admittedly the comments are one-sided—these are Echo-Hawks friends and fans, some from the tribe and some from outside. Taking that into consideration, the comments are also overwhelmingly positive.

Nancy Pitt said: "Looks so much like you…fight on good warrior..I can't fathom why this was rejected, it wasn't because of the painting…must have been something else…perhaps you could post a photo of what they chose…well, if you are upsetting people, I guess that means

you did something right…anyway I am so sorry it came down to this. This is an awesome depiction of what it takes to be a warrior. Carry on."[42]

I would like to see "a photo of what they chose," too. Interestingly, it is not posted on either the Pawnee Indian Veterans' Organization (Official) or the Pawnee Indian Veterans' Homecoming Powwow Facebook pages, nor the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma web page. There is a photo of a drawing that was used for the back cover of the program posted on the Pawnee Indian Veterans' Organization (Official) Facebook page. The specific comment made by the organization's page manager concerning this work (apparently a submission to a contest that is not mentioned elsewhere on the page) was this: "Congratulations to Lauren Bynum for 1st place. It has been selected for the back cover of the 2013 Homecoming Program."[43] Since Echo-Hawk did not learn until June 2, 2013 that his work would not be used for the front cover after all, it makes sense that they would not have posted an alternate work for the cover on April 15, 2013. Whatever artwork they did choose is posted nowhere on any of their sites. Perhaps Lauren Bynum's work made the front cover as a result of Echo-Hawk's work *not* making the cover. As of this writing, this is unknown.

The only detractor in the entire thread, identified as Red Savage, had this to say: "Love the sentiment, but those veterans are soldiers. They defend the rights & properties of corporations. Those are the same corporations that want to exploit Indigenous people's rights.

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[42] Bunky Echo-Hawk. 2013.
[43] Lauren Bynum. 2013. Honor. Graphite and colored pencil on paper. https://www.facebook.com/304726282959883/photos/a.317406448358533.66868.304726282959883/408306112601899/?type=1.

You will probably delete this or take me off your list. I understand but before I go one last thing. Never apologize for your Art. Peace."[44] Echo-Hawk did not delete his comment.

In direct response to that person, Joe Hawkins had this to say:

> This red savage seems to have never served. Eithe [sic] way I don't believe they were in existence way back when, when we as a people were trying to be exterminated by the US Government. I myself am a Combat Veteran. Something the Pawnee People have prided themselves ever since our existence as a people. I truly represent the People and served with Honor, Loyalty, Courage, Dignity, along with other virtues so many tend to forget. All it boils down to is one view against another, and I am truly sorry idadi[45] for bringing this upon your page. Veterans have fought and died for the views and opinions of those who take for granted everyday those things we see people eradicated for in third world countries. Not saying America is perfect but there are reasons why so many flock to our borders, to live in the land of opportunity. If you cannot see it from your narrow minded view, try living in one of those countries and expressing your opinion on their terms and see how far you go, and who listens to your babble. Idadi! I applaud your courage and although I did not stay for the entirety of the dance, I sorely wish I had now. Whomever said or expressed a concern on their views from a nations standpoint forgot why and whose Homecoming dance it is. It's for veterans by veterans... And if it was someone on or in the veterans organization who decided not to utilize it on the cover , now it would be known why I am not apart of the organization along with other personal reasons. I fear if the leadership continues on not knowing or listening to those who dont [sic] realize what being a veteran means.. The organization might fail to exist. Hopefully that day doesn't come while I'm still here...[46]

It is interesting to see the contrasting viewpoints on what being a veteran means. To the sole detractor in the comments thread, Red Savage, it seems to mean that a veteran is a tool of the state, working against the interests of the people. To Joe Hawkins it seems to mean being an upholder of the constitutional rights of the citizens of the state, which he interprets as something Pawnee warriors have been doing long before their association with the U.S. military. He also

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[44] Bunky Echo-Hawk. 2013. Ibid.
[45] "idadi" is a Pawnee word, the meaning of which I know not. The commenter used it twice in this post.
[46] Ibid.

disagrees with the decision of the committee, seeing their rejection of Echo-Hawk's work as an act of censorship and violation of his right to free speech.

Concerning the work itself, Tho Kohn Ghou Daw said, "Someday they're going to look back at this and regret it! Keep painting! Every artist goes through this!"[47]

Along the same lines, Susan Feller said, "The next time they ask for art, and you know they will, perhaps you should suggest that they give you a "paint by number" kit so they can be assured of controlling your work."[48]

Chris White, a military veteran, had this to say, regarding the work as an act of cultural representation for the tribe: "I really like your all of your works [sic], including this. Creator gave you a talent in such a good way and, I feel, that you say things in your work that many of us are unable to express. As a Marine Corps Vietnam vet, this piece made me think about my boyhood friend, Tommy Littlesun,. We both went and we returned, but we were different. He in one way, having made the ultimate sacrifice and me…I'm not even yet sure how I am. But, you will move forward, as you said and I know that you will continue to make most of us very proud for you. Thank you for your work."[49]

An elder clearly seeking to affirm and comfort Echo-Hawk, George D Shields Jr [sic] said, "Young Bunk…just be that man in the painting (the Echo-Hawk name is you'rs [sic] and you are Pawnee). I admire your work and I like this painting. Don't apologize any more [sic], once is enough."[50] Another Pawnee tribe member, Sonny Howell, underscored this sentiment,

[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

saying, “I’m a Pawnee, Veteran & artist, that painting says a lot, [sic] Pawnee people have been through a lot of changes, from back in day, [sic] from the lands of Nebraska to where we are now. I like the painting, again, change even in Pawnee works of art. Keep on, Keeping on, Irare.”[51]

Deborah Miranda reminds Echo-Hawk to keep things in perspective: “What is that saying? A prophet has no honor in his own land?”[52]

Again, concerning the strength of the work, Chris Hall said, “Keep on doing what you do. Your art is STRONG, that sometimes makes people feel things. Art that makes people FEEL is the most powerful and provocative kind.”[53]

Concerning the statement Echo-Hawk was attempting to make about warriors and corn in traditional Pawnee culture, Marsha Chapman said, “SO? I wonder how many Pawnees actually knew the corn story? And how is the painting not depicting tradition or true warriorism – fighting for what’s right – honoring and representing the most important factor in your life – FAMILY – isn’t this what Natives have to do everyday of their life – FIGHT – and stand up for what’s right….the painting is the depth of true belief and honor…….”[54]

Finally, Tim WoZny got at the heart of an issue that plagues Native America, and complicates otherwise simple things like cover art for a powwow program: “My My My. We must never offend those who still believe that the Nobel Savage be seen, but not heard.”[55]

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[51] Ibid. And “Irare” is another Pawnee word, the meaning of which I know not.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.

That final comment helps us make a full circle back to Echo-Hawk's desire to represent a Pawnee warrior in a pose that is *not* "stoic." His reasoning behind the war-whooping image was to paint "a modern day warrior, war-whooping. His mouth is open, he is hollering…I did this because you hardly ever see a painting, or a photograph, of an Indian with their mouth open. They always seem to be stoic."[56] This idea is affirmed by the few photos and paintings included on the program covers we have access to, and the Pawnee Indian Veterans' Organization (Official) and the Pawnee Indian Veterans' Homecoming Powwow Facebook pages—stoic Indians, all.

At this point, the central question remains one of economics and cultural representation. Was the reason Echo-Hawk's painting was rejected one of cultural representation or economics? Is the latter dependent on the former? If so, why? The answers to these questions may seem obvious to some, while remaining elusive to others. The comment thread in response to Echo-Hawk's Facebook post in which he tells the story of "War Whooping with Cope's" provides us with clues that would suggest the issue is one of cultural representation, and who gets to say what a true Pawnee warrior is. But perhaps the committee would have something else to say about it. Perhaps to them it was indeed an issue of economics, and they did not want to risk negatively impacting attendance to the annual Homecoming powwow, subsequently negatively impacting the local economy. Perhaps further inquiry of the committee members can provide some additional insight.

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[56] Ibid.

One thing that we do not have to speculate about, however, is whether "War Whooping with Cope's" is a successful painting from the point of view of Echo-Hawk's fans. They see it as the kind of strong, edgy work that they expect from this "modern warrior" artist. As a popular work of art from a popular Native American artist, "War Whooping with Cope's" is likely to attain status as one of Bunky Echo-Hawk's signature pieces, underscoring his place in the world of contemporary Native American art.

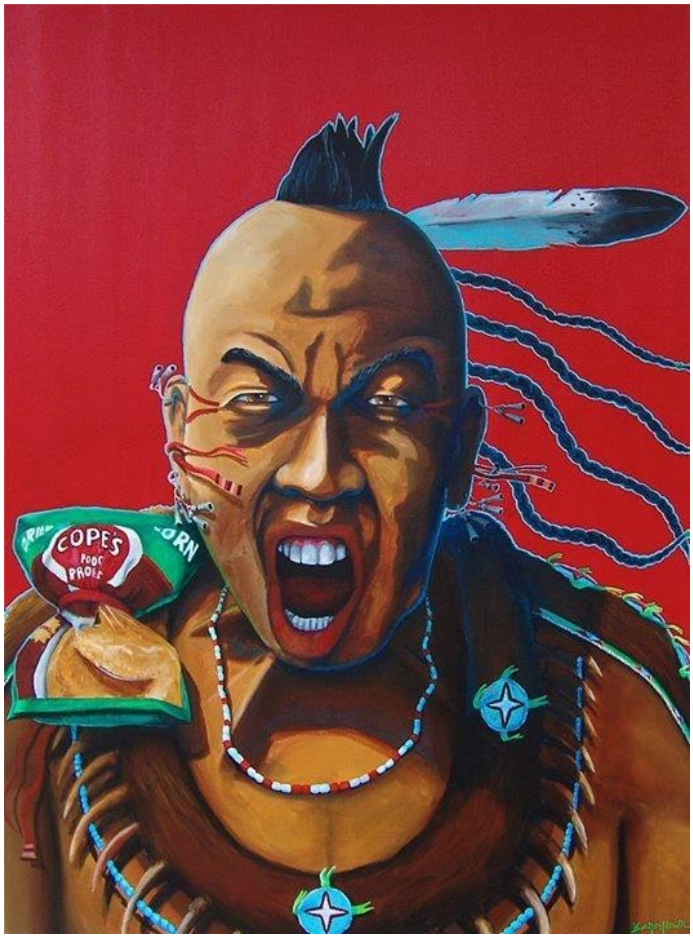


Figure 1. Bunky Echo-Hawk. 2013. *War Whooping with Cope's*. Acrylic on canvas. https://www.facebook.com/notes/bunky-echo-hawk/how-i-got-fired/10151411533707343

DG HOUSE: NOT INDIAN ENOUGH

DG House is an artist living and working in Bozeman, Montana; her home for the last thirty years or so. She is originally from Cincinnati, Ohio, where she was born. Like 78% of all Native Americans, she did not grow up on a reservation and does not live on one now.[57] She also doesn't look phenotypically Indigenous, like many Native Americans. However, looks can be deceiving. DG is an enrolled member of the Cherokee Tribe of Northeast Alabama, a state recognized tribe.[58] Alabama has no federally recognized tribes, but it recognizes nine tribes at the state level. State recognized tribes have many, but not all, of the same rights and benefits as federally recognized tribes. They are subject to a government-to-government relationship with the state instead of the federal government. For a tribe to be federally recognized, it has to have had a treaty with the federal government, or receive official recognition through an act of Congress. State recognized tribes can be recognized by state governments without treaties, through legislation, as a way of acknowledging their historical and cultural histories and contributions.[59] Regardless of whether the tribe is recognized by the federal government or the state government, the members of the tribe are recognized as real Indigenous people by virtue of their ancestral relationship to the tribe (which they must prove through descendancy); and

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[57] Joe Whittle, "Most Native Americans live in cities, not reservations. Here are their stories," The Guardian, September 4, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/04/native-americans-stories-california#:~:text=It%20also%20intentionally%20placed%20Indian,Those%20policies%20had%20devastating%20effects.

[58] Cherokee Tribe of Northeast Alabama, "Cherokee of Northeast Alabama," https://cherokeetribeofnortheastalabama.org/

[59] Martha Salazar, "State Recognition of American Indian Tribes," National Conference of State Legislatures, October 2016, https://www.ncsl.org/research/state-tribal-institute/state-recognition-of-american-indian-tribes.aspx#:~:text=State%20tribal%20recognition%20does%20not,the%20state%20or%20federal%20government.&text=Federal%20recognition%20remains%20the%20primary,tribes%20seek%20to%20be%20recognized.

indigneous artists who are affiliated with state recognized tribes are protected under the Indian Arts and Crafts Act, just as federally recognized Indians are. DG House is a real Indian.

Despite this, she is frequently judged based on her appearance when at art shows and fairs. She has been confronted numerous times over the years by people who don't know any better, challenging her right to display her work and participate in the Indigenous section of the show and call her work Native American, simply because she is not dark-skinned, doesn't have long hair worn in braids, and is not wearing some sort of traditional tribal regalia. Many of these people have been quite rude when doing this, causing a bit of a spectacle. DG, however, is a kind and patient person who gently educates them as to their error. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn't. DG sees it as part of her purpose at these shows to assist people who may have a gap in their understanding about what it means to be a real Indian. She came to this through hard-earned experience that might have caused others to quit their art careers. DG is made of sterner stuff.

DG has had a long and varied career. For many years, she was a professional photographer who traveled with famous rock bands and major league sports teams. During the late 1980s, she decided to try her hand at painting and found that she not only loved it but had a real passion for it, as well as talent. Her work has evolved over the years, but it has always been focused on wildlife; and since she started painting in Montana, her focus has been primarily on the wildlife of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Her style is distinctive and quite colorful. When I was new to Bozeman back in the early nineties, I remember seeing her work in downtown galleries and being struck by the boldness of her portrayal of blue bears, purple moose, and other non-traditional interpretations of animals in her wildlife paintings. Her work

was not the standard for western wildlife painters, which tends to lean toward the hyperrealistic. In contrast with that more traditional type of work which filled (and still fills) galleries all over the Rocky Mountain region, DG's work was both serious and whimsical at the same time. Her renditions of the animals she paints communicate both deep respect for the animals and their place in the world, as well as pure fun and enjoyment of them. That was something new back then, and still remains fresh today. There are those who have attempted to copy her, but it doesn't quite work, and DG still dominates this artistic space and style.

DG's work is distinctive, and there are several elements that you will find in the vast majority of her paintings, regardless of the subject matter: a colorful border made of geometric shapes, spiralling swirls, dragonflies, and red outlines around the subjects in her paintings. These symbols can be seen throughout the artwork of a variety of Native American tribes throughout history, and generally represent life energy, our connection to all living things, and (in the case of the spirals) the path of our lives on this earth. While DG is Cherokee, she has spent most of her adult life on the Northern Plateau in the company of Indigenous people from this region. You can see those influences in her work. In Plains Indian culture, "dragonflies are admired for their speed and agility, and in the historical past were often seen on the designs on shields, clothing, and bodily adornment of Plains Indian men who desired to emulate such traits when they engaged in warfare and in horse raids."[60] She had this to say about the specific meaning of some of those elements in her work: "The border is a tribute to all who came before me. It's a remembrance of my place in the story. It is based on the designs of parfleche. It's also used to

[60] Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998),112.

repeat the colors, and compositionally. I only paint in the colors that appear in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem."

When I asked her about the meaning of the spirals, she told me that those symbols were present in her culture for as long as she could remember, and that they meant "life" or "life force." I did a little digging and learned that in the art of Mississippian culture groups of what is now the southeastern United States, spiraling lines may indicate winds, seasons, or the spinning motion of the cosmos as a whole."[61] I found it compelling that certain cultural symbols could be so ingrained over such long periods of time that even though their specific meaning might not be able to be conveyed by word or definition, the intrinsic concept has been maintained and is still recognized and understood by those within those culture groups, no matter how modern they may be.

Suffice it to say that DG imbues her paintings with as much life as she possibly can. They are already lively and vibrant through the use of color, but she goes a step further and paints symbols from her culture into them, as if to add a little visual prayer to each piece, blessing the recipient.

The geometric designs in the border of every one of her paintings adds another dimension of symbolism. According to Berlo and Phillips, "Innu (Naskapi) women of Arctic Quebec and Newfoundland painted geometric designs on the caribou-skin coats worn by male hunters, for 'animals prefer to be killed by hunters whose clothing is decorated with designs.'"[62] DG does not kill animals in the making of her paintings, obviously; but there is a reverence in the treatment of

[61] Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998),84.
[62] Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998),33.

the animal subjects (and even the human ones she so rarely paints) that is attended by the geometric borders. She did not say whether that was the reason for the geometric borders, but I couldn't help but make the association upon seeing the designs in her work.

Even without those symbols added to each painting, DG's paintings are electrifying and vivacious. Her bold treatment of bright blue bears, purple moose, colorfully painted war ponies, and (in at least one case) bright red bison, accompanied by swirling spirals, dragonflies, and bold geometric patterns, all highlight DG's understanding of and reverence for the interconnectedness of all of our lives, whether human or some other species. Life is not limited to the human world; it is abundant in the animal kingdom as well.

When DG was first building her career, she rented a little studio in the newly established Emerson Cultural Center in Bozeman, which had been an old elementary school prior to its reinvention as an incubator for local artists, musicians, writers, and dancers. DG thrived there, building a following and a reputation for her work as an Indigenous artist. She frequently burned sage (known as smudging) in her studio, a traditional Indigenous practice observed by many tribes throughout the country. Smudging is a sort of blessing ritual that usually accompanies a prayerful attitude, for the purpose of setting right the spirit of the person and the space in peace and harmony. It is a spiritual practice protected under the first amendment of the constitution.[63]

In a nearby studio to DG's was an artist who took issue with her doing the smudging. She complained. When DG explained that it was a practice protected under the first amendment, the neighboring artist accused her of pretending to be Indian. As the conflict carried on over many

[63] DaShane Stokes, "Sage, Sweetgrass, and the First Amendment," Religion Online, https://www.religion-online.org/article/sage-sweetgrass-and-the-first-amendment/.

months, the artist accusing DG of being a fake enlisted supporters who joined her campaign of harassment. DG politely and quietly stood her ground and ignored them. But, in keeping with the role she later assumed as teacher of the ill-informed, she also set out to educate them. She was quite hurt by their unwarranted attack on her character, so she wasn't feeling up to confronting them directly. So, she took a photo of her tribal enrollment card, enlarged it to about 18"x24", collaged it into a painting about her Indian identity, and mounted it on an easel at the entrance of her studio. From that point forward, all she had to do was point to that painting any time anyone questioned her authenticity as an Indigenous person or Indigenous artist. It has been hanging in every studio she has occupied, ever since.

It turns out that the real beef the other artists had with DG was about competition. They perceived her as having an advantage over them in terms of sales because she marketed herself as an Indian artist (which she is). They were not exactly wrong, as many of the tourists streaming abundantly through Bozeman, Montana are very much interested in what they perceive as an authentic western experience, and that experience includes meeting real Indians. Faced with what her artist neighbors at the Emerson perceived as a disadvantage, they chose to tear down her image as an Indian artist by attempting to dismantle her Indian identity.

This brings to my mind some disturbing parallels between what those non-Indigenous artists did to DG and what early American colonizers did to the Indigenous peoples of North America. Faced with someone who seemed to be standing in their way, they simply made up a story that made it OK for them to take what they wanted without feeling guilty about it. In the

case of the early American colonizers it was land. In the case of DG House it was her actual identity as an Indigenous person.

It didn't work, because she didn't allow them to be successful in their intimidation tactics. She continued on with her work, making her paintings and a name for herself, and she has become quite successful. The biography page on her website states:

> Contemporary Native American Artist DG House is artist in residence in Grand Teton National Park, Yellowstone National Park and the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art in Indianapolis, IN. Her work has exhibited in the finest Art Museums including the Holter Museum of Art, the Missoula Museum of Art, the Yellowstone Art Museum and the CM Russell Museum in Montana as well the Phippen Museum of Art in Prescott, AZ, the Heard Museum in Phoenix, AZ, the Eiteljorg Museum of Indians and Western Art in Indianapolis, IN, the John Clymer Museum in Ellensburg, WA, the Western Art Museum in Kerrville, Texas and the Indian Market at the Autry National Center in Los Angeles, CA. In 2020, DG House will participate in the invitational Cowgirl UP! Exhibition at the Desert Caballeros Western Museum in Wickenburg, AZ.
>
> Over her 26 year career, House has painted a life-size fiberglass buffalo bull and calf for the City of West Yellowstone, MT, participated in the CM Russell Museum Art Auction and mastered the quick draw on the square for the Jackson Hole Fall Arts Festival in Jackson, WY. House has also created the album art for the, "If I Were an Otter," CD, created a kite which is travelling the Buffalo Jumps nationwide and flying during special presentations and lectured on the history of Native American art throughout the United States. DG House's work is in permanent collections worldwide including Grand Teton National Park and musicians Sir Elton John, Sir Paul McCartney and Michael McDonald.
>
> House is represented by Kicking Horse Gallery, Polson, MT, LeeAnn Ramey Gallery in Bozeman, MT, Kindred Spirit Gallery in Sheridan, MT, the Eiteljorg Museum Gift Shop, Indianapolis, IN, Yellowstone Gift Shops, Yellowstone National Park, WY and Glacier Gift Shops, Glacier National Park, MT.
>
> DG House is an associate member of the Women Artists of the West and American Women Artists. She was named the first Honorary Ranger for Grand Teton National Park, WY. House is an enrolled member of the Cherokee Tribe of

> NE Alabama and lives in Bozeman, MT along the Gallatin River, with her husband Dan and countless wildlife.[64]

If "success is the best revenge," then DG has certainly had hers.

She has also gained the support and admiration of her Native American peers in the art world. DG shared stories with me of other Indigenous artists providing her with moral support at art shows and fairs when they witnessed her being verbally attacked by people challenging her Indigenous identity. One of them even humorously suggested that she should dress up in buckskin, beads, wear a black wig, and put feathers in her hair to deter the folks who are so easily fooled by appearances. Another artist admitted that the reason he dresses in Plains Indian clothing, styled as if it is from a hundred and fifty years ago, is precisely because he knows that a lot of what people come to these shows to see is "real Indians." He may not agree with the idea, but he understands what he must do to make his presentation appealing to the field of reception in the Indigenous art world.

Although DG has found her place as a Native American artist and has overcome those early setbacks, she still faces challenges that have nothing to do with her appearance. The practice of minimizing, or attempting to erase, someone's Indigenous identity is not limited to white people. In recent years, Native American art has become so popular among collectors that the numbers of Native American artists turning out at the most popular Indian art venues has increased to such an extent that the venues have imposed limitations on which artists can apply for the display space. The Santa Fe Indian Art Market now limits its artist application to

[64] DG House, "About DG House," DG House Art, https://www.dghouseart.com/about.

federally recognized tribes, only. They no longer accept state-recognized tribes. This is the exact language from their application:

> All US and Canadian Federally Recognized Tribe / Nation / Alaskan Corporation members are eligible to apply. You may select up to 3 different Tribes / Nations / Alaskan Corporation...All Artists MUST submit an image verification of their tribal enrollment. Please include a copy of your CIB/CDIB or front and back of your enrollment card. You must include an image for both sides of you [sic] enrollment card if you are uploading your enrollment card. Any artist providing alternative documents MUST request Board review or be disqualified.[65]

Because of this limitation, Native American artists from tribes with only state recognition are excluded from the largest American Indian art market in the United States. For many state recognized artists who participated prior to this change, the Santa Fe Indian Art Market was their largest source of annual earnings. Now it is unavailable to them.

Santa Fe isn't the only art market that changed its rules. In 2017, the Oklahoma legislature passed a law called the Indian Arts and Crafts Sales Act that prohibited anyone from a state recognized tribe from calling their artwork Native American.[66] The law was immediately challenged by a woman named Peggy Fontenot, and was subsequently struck down by a federal court on April 1, 2019. U.S. District Judge Charles Goodwin ruled that "the State Act diminishes 'the market for the products of Indian art and craftsmanship'."[67] He cited the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1996, and found the state law to be unconstitutional as it was in direct conflict with the federal law. This was a big win for state-recognized tribes wishing to sell their work in

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[65] Southwestern Association for Indian Arts, "SWAIA 2020 Santa Fe Indian Market Artist Application"Santa Fe Indian Art Market, "https://swaia.org/standards/swaia-application.pdf.

[66] Caleb Trotter, "Why won't Oklahoma let American Indian artists say they're American Indian artists?" Pacific Legal Foundation, January 8, 2017, "https://pacificlegal.org/why-wont-oklahoma-let-american-indian-artists-say-theyre-american-indian-artists/

[67] Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar, "Judge rules Oklahoma law on Native American art too restrictive," PBS News Hour, April 1, 2019, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/judge-rules-oklahoma-law-on-native-american-art-too-restrictive

Oklahoma. However, the ruling striking down the state law does not prevent private venues from limiting who they allow to participate in their shows.

The limiting of privileges to only federally recognized tribes is a way of robbing Indigenous people from state recognized tribes of their Indian identity in the same way the white artists at the Emerson Cultural Center tried to rob DG of hers. The people doing this are simply trying to eliminate their competition, and they are doing it by claiming that people from state recognized tribes are simply not Indian enough. Ironically, they are using federal rules to determine who they consider to be authentic Indians. To make their case they have taken on the language of their own colonizers and have also taken advantage of their own federally recognized status to claim that they are more Indian than the state recognized Indians.

In these tumultuous times of racial discrimination and strife in our country, there are very few advantages to being a BIPOC person. However, the rise in popularity of Native American art has emerged as a unique advantage for Indian people. Coupled with the ignorance of the average American about what Native American art is and the legal definitions defining what makes someone Native American, this has created a lot of infighting in the Indigenous art community, resulting in this sort of "land grab" for the best position from which to market Indigenous art. It has also resulted in a lot of white people choosing to make art that misappropriates Indigenous culture. As long as the white artists don't call their artwork Native American, they can create lucrative careers for themselves, even if they can't participate in Indian art markets. As long as the Indigenous artists are enrolled in federally recognized tribes, they have access to the largest and most lucrative Indian art markets in the country. It's the Indians enrolled in state recognized

tribes, and the Indigenous artists with direct descendancy from either federally recognized or state recognized tribes but not enough blood quantum to actually enroll in those tribes, who are at the greatest disadvantage in the Indian art market.

I entitled this chapter "DG House: Not Indian Enough" because that's what DG is told over and over again when people confront her about not being a real Indian because of her appearance, or when she is excluded from applying to an Indian art market because she is "only" a member of a state recognized tribe. I want to make it perfectly clear that DG, and all the other Indian artists like her, are more than Indian enough. They are real Indians making real art.

DG House.



Figure 2. DG House, *In the Morning*, 1990-2021, acrylic paint on canvas, private collection.



Figure 3. DG House, *With the Right Prayer,* 1990-2021, acrylic paint on canvas, private collection.



Figure 4. DG House, *Sunrise at the Grand*, 1990-2021, acrylic paint on canvas, private collection.



Figure 5. DG House, *Untitled*, 1990-2021, acrylic paint on canvas, private collection.



Figure 6. DG House, *All Along the Madison*, 1990-2021, acrylic paint on canvas, private collection.



Figure 7. DG House, *Near the Madison*, 1990-2021, acrylic paint on canvas, private collection.



Figure 8. DG House, *Little Big Medicine*, 1990-2021, acrylic paint on canvas, private collection.

FRANK FINLEY: CREATIVE INNOVATION IS OUR TRADITION

Frank Finley is an enrolled member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes on the Flathead Indian reservation in western Montana, just north of Missoula. I met him at one of DG House's Christmas open studios, which she hosts every year to close out her annual art show season. Frank and DG have been friends for many years (and have adopted each other as siblings--she calls him brother and he calls her sister). DG had told me about Frank, knew I was working on this project, and said, "You're going to want to meet Frank." So we arranged for me to meet him there.

I have always been sheepish about approaching Indigenous artists for the first time about my doctoral work. There are a lot more artists I could have interviewed during this project, but I limited my association with artists I met organically through other artists that I already knew through my master's program in Native American studies, or my own work as an artist in Montana. There were no artists that I "cold called" because, as I mentioned in the introduction, I have grave reservations about being a white woman writing about Indigenous artists. I felt that was enough of an internal obstacle in myself without complicating matters by trying to talk to someone as famous as perhaps Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, although Kevin Red Star (equally famous) turned out to be so friendly and accessible that any concerns I had about approaching him disappeared in the first sixty seconds (we also have many mutual friends, which gave me the courage to ask him for an interview). I wasn't nervous about talking to Frank because he is DG's friend, and any friend of DG's is going to be friendly. It turns out that I probably should have been nervous.

My first conversation with Frank at DG's open studio was easy, relaxed and academic. Knowing that Frank is a professor at Salish Kootenai College (SKC)--a fellow educator--put me at ease because, for the most part, we speak the same academic and artistic language. I introduced myself, explained what I was working on, told him that DG had recommended that I talk to him, and we spoke for over an hour about his work, Native American artwork in general, issues affecting Native American artists, how that related to my project...etc. When it was nearing time for me to wrap things up and head home, Frank offered me one of his very small horse prints as a gift. I offered to pay for it. He didn't want me to pay for it. I felt like I owed *him* a gift after taking an hour of *his* time at DG's party for my project, and I felt uncomfortable receiving both the gift of his time *and* a free piece of artwork. Additionally, one of the things we had talked about was how difficult it can be to get people to pay for certain kinds of Indigenous artwork, and I have tried to buy a small piece from many of the artists I have worked with for my own collection (when I can afford it), and also to support their efforts. Frank and I went back and forth for a few minutes, and he finally consented to sell me the horse print for $10.00, which I thought was not enough money. We closed the deal, and I started working my way to the door.[68]

DG intercepted me as I was heading out and told me that Frank had said to her, "She's the real deal," referring to me. I was a little stunned and she went on to explain that he meant that my motives in doing this work were good, and that I actually did understand the issues faced by Indigenous people in general, and Indigenous artists in particular. While I was relieved to hear

[68] Frank eventually had his way and gave me an original artwork by him that I couldn't pay him for. Frank has become a good friend, and he and his wife have stayed at my house from time to time when passing through town. On one of these visits, Frank pulled out a raven print and said, "Here's a hostess gift." It would have been bad manners to refuse it or to offer to pay for it, so I accepted it graciously and gratefully. It is wonderful to have friends who are always trying to out-give each other in good ways.

that, it also validated my concerns about being a white woman writing about Indigenous people. Apparently, Frank (like so many Indigenous people, when approached by white academics and researchers) geared himself up for an insensitive probing that never came, and then relaxed when he learned what I was working on and why. I had passed an unspoken test, without knowing I was being tested, and was relieved.

After that first meeting, Frank and I kept in touch through email, Facebook, visits at my house, and one visit at the Montana Folk Festival. It wasn't until about five years after that first meeting at DG's studio that we were able to carve out enough time for an interview and a meeting place that was convenient for both of us. We have lived four hours apart by car no matter where I've lived in my travels around the state of Montana. At long last we were able to meet at the Apgar campground at Lake McDonald in Glacier National Park when I was living and teaching in Shelby. He was on site that day as a guest speaker for the *Native America Speaks* series at Apgar Plaza. Frank was one of a variety of Blackfeet, Salish, Kootenai,and Pend d'Oreille tribal members sharing their knowledge of the history and culture of Native America with Glacier National Park visitors.[69] I brought a picnic dinner and we conducted our interview on a beautiful summer day at the foot of Lake McDonald.

All of my conversations with Frank always go the same way. We do a little catching up and then we get down to art pretty quickly. Frank is all about the process. He loves talking about art, making art, and working with any and all types of art materials. He is fearless about trying new things, and he loves sharing those processes with his own students at SKC. It was no

[69] Staff writer, "Native America Speaks: Frank Finley Jul 23rd, 2019 At 11:30 AM," Glacier Country Montana, July 23, 2019, https://glaciermt.com/montana-event/18567

different when we met at Lake McDonald. Frank was excited to show me some of the new work he and his students had made, as well as some new processes that he had tried. We talked for about three hours, and the first two hours were all about those processes. Additionally, Frank had recently opened a new studio in Pablo, Montana called *32 Pair of Scissors*. This is not only Frank's working studio where he makes his own artwork, but also an open studio where people from the community can come in and make artwork using equipment, supplies, and materials provided by the studio.

Frank had recently bought a new printing press and started off by telling me all the fun, new things he was learning using it to make canvas prints, reduction prints, using iridescent inks, and experimenting with the texture of the canvas to make fish scales.

Then he showed me some of his students' work. One student made a painting to tell a traditional story about the mosquito and a river that runs red at high water. Another of his students is pushing the boundaries of abstraction in his work.

He showed me counter prints made by himself and his students, and explained to me how they are different from monoprints. In monoprinting, you use a combination of painting and printmaking processes to create a single, one-of-a-kind print. Counter prints are made when you have extra ink on the first print that you pulled, and then you take a piece of paper and pick up the excess from the first print, and you end up with a mirror image that is slightly different than the original because it isn't as intense, because it only picked up the excess ink. The print he showed me, in which he had made an abstracted fish, was made by laying a crumpled garbage bag in the ink to create texture and the illusion of scales. This process is, although it is a

printmaking process (ink transfer), is more like painting because of the time and planning involved. The image he showed me took six hours and twenty attempts for him to lay everything in the right place and figure out how it was going to work to get the final image.

As an art teacher and an artist, Frank is interested in the work, processes, and influences of other artists. He had been looking at pieces by Monet, van Gogh, Agnes Martin, and Mondrian, and making work with Salish themes, keeping the styles of those artists in mind. He showed me a piece that definitely had a Mondrian feeling to it. He also showed me a cubist teepee on ledger paper from the 1940s.

Then we jumped forward in art time and he showed me some work he was doing with pours. Art pouring is fluid technique in which art is created by pouring acrylic paint onto a surface. Often the artist will pour one color onto the canvas, then pour another color into that color, creating rivers and striations of color. While this technique is usually used at art parties that amateur or beginning artists attend with the purpose of creating something quickly that they can take home and hang on their wall, Frank was using it to create background and texture effects as part of a larger piece. In this particular case, he showed me how he and his students were using pours to add effects to ledger art. This one incorporated the pour on a map with a dress pattern over the top of it, and was then painted.

Other ledger art he showed me used dictionary pages run through a shredder and then collaged onto the entire background. Another one was inspired by Agnes Martin's work. She used square grids in her minimalistic, geometric works. Frank said that squares and rectangles are not something you see worked into Native American artwork much. He used triangles

instead, but used them in a similar way to Agnes Martin's work. He also used them in a sort of tessellated pattern. The triangles suggested fish scales to me, which are a frequent theme in Frank's work. Then he showed me another print using triangles that looked more like Sierpinski triangles, in a fractal pattern. He moved on to another work incorporating circles, saying, "One moon circles. A Star Trek reference."[70] Pop culture themes show up occasionally in Frank's work too, usually very subtly. In this one, the reference is in the title, not in the work itself.

Another ledger art piece he showed me incorporated an Iowa map from 1950. He called it the Three Ladies, and used a gold paint to get a sort of buckskin color for the dresses, and incorporated? the iridescent paint he had talked about earlier.

Then he showed me "a bunch of random 8x10s" on antique ledger paper, which spawned a discussion about how ledger art has evolved into a sort of antique paper art. Native American artists who do ledger art are on a continuous hunt for antique paper that they can use as a support for their images. The people who buy ledger art are more likely to fork over larger sums of money if they know that it's created on antique paper. The demand for this paper is so great that some tribes have people who make a full time job of finding it for the ledger artists in their tribes. Frank uses one-hundred-year-old paper, such as stock certificates and maps. He finds his own paper, though.

At this point he started talking about how he teaches his students at SKC to make ledger art. SKC is a tribal college, so most of the students are Native American. When they take an art class from Frank, they get a broad education about processes and methods used in all manner of

[70] https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Night_Terrors_(episode)

art making processes, including western art (from western culture, not art of the west). But he also teaches them traditional Salish art-making methods and practices, as well as Native American art methods and practices from across the whole country (such as ledger art). He showed me how he teaches them to draw a turtle in a traditional, Indigenous way. Turtles are ubiquitous in Indigenous cultures. However, from there he then questions why turtles should be green (why not iridescent purple?), challenging traditions at the same time he is teaching them.

He showed me some Atlantic Richfield stock certificates he used to make some ledger art, and said that they are really important to Montana history, because of their connection to Butte and the Berkeley Pit. On these stock certificates he had painted some shield-bearing warriors, wavy stars, wind diagrams, and tessellations. In another piece he drew references to the Orphan Girl mine, which would present well at the upcoming Montana Folk Festival in Butte. On a Drover's Bank check he had drawn a grizzly bear and some bison. He has a template that he uses to transfer designs onto his ledger art, in different ways on different pieces, tracing it out with graphite paper and then filling it in. He says he does "a ton of them" because ledger art is probably some of the best selling art at Native American art festivals and fairs. He can get about seventy five dollars for each one of these little 8x10s, all originals, all done on antique ledger paper, and all completely original, despite the use of templates. He does not sell digital images--all of his pieces are original, individual, and unique. That's true of his prints, too. All of his prints are hand-pulled. Nothing comes off of a digital printer.

Frank then went on to explain more of the symbols in his ledger art. The zig zag lines in between things are communication symbols. There was a simplified basket and drum. More

turtles. Inktomi, the spider, shows up frequently in these pieces. A type of coyote character, Ikto'mi is a spider-trickster spirit who does things backwards, makes people laugh, and has a sly and cunning spirit.[71]

He went on to show me works in which he experimented with iron oxide paint, which he says hardly anyone ever uses. He has taken up screen printing. He said that he doesn't ever want to get stuck doing just one technique or process. As an art teacher myself, I completely understood his reasoning. One of the great things about being an art teacher and working with students is that we get to experiment with all manner of media, processes, and materials as we teach it to our students. Professional artists tend to specialize, but when you're also an art teacher you don't have to specialize. That is a concept totally contrary to the idea of Native American art for most people. When talking to most people about Native American art, their minds usually go straight to beadwork, parfleche painting, teepee painting, pictographs, petroglyphs, and maybe ledger art. When I start talking about the kinds of things that artists like Frank Finley are creating, I am stretching the preconceived notions of the average person out into the stratosphere.

Frank went on to say that, because he is all about pushing techniques and processes as far as he can for the sake of experimentation and discovery, he has pretty much given up his silver work. He says that he's taken that as far as he can push it. He said there's not a lot more he can do with it unless he starts casting and pouring it, which he hadn't done before. He expressed some interest in trying tufa stone casting, because that's a one-of-a-kind casting process. (I

[71] Staff writer, "Ikto'mi the Trickster," Atka Lakota Museum and Cultural Center, July 30, 2021, http://aktalakota.stjo.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=8683

predict that he will do that, if he hasn't already started. Frank is all about pushing the boundaries of his own experience.)

Frank also talked quite a bit about the distinctions between western art and Indigenous art. He showed me a painting by a Native American artist in the SKC collection that had a gold frame, and explained that Native American art should never be put in a gold frame; but here is the one piece in the entire SKC collection of work by Indigenous artists that's in a gold frame. I asked him why that one had a frame, and why shouldn't work by Native American artists be put in gold frames. He said it was really old, and then went on to explain that it's just a way to differentiate Indigenous art from western art. If you go to any gallery or museum displaying traditional western art of the Charlie Russell or Frederick Remington variety, it's all framed in these enormous, built-up, gilded frames. "We don't want to be doing that," he said. He mentioned an exception in the work of Jesse Henderson, a Cree artist from the Rocky Boy's reservation, saying that Jesse does "that kind of work," meaning work in that Russell and Remington style. We had a discussion for a moment about whether that kind of work by that particular artist qualifies as Native American, and Frank suggested that it does not because of the style. I said that it does qualify because the artist is a Native American artist from a federally recognized tribe. And that led to a whole discussion about style in Native American artwork.

As I already discussed early on, in great detail, there is one legal definition of Native American art, and that is work made by Native Americans from state- or federally recognized tribes. The IACA stipulates that the only qualifier is that the artist meets their criteria as an American Indian person; the subject matter or style do not matter at all. However, I was

surprised to discover that Frank does think that style plays a part in the authenticity of Native American art.

Before I get too deeply into that, let's back up a bit and learn a little more about Frank and his "day job." Frank has a B.S. in Environmental Science from Salish Kootenai College and an M. Ed. in Curriculum & Instruction From University of Idaho. He teaches in the Fine Arts department at SKC. He was a featured artist for the Montana Artmobile in 2014-2015, and an excerpt from Frank's bio on their website summarizes something about Frank that it is critical to understand about his view on art and artmaking: "Frank Finley's creativity expands to other art with strong cultural connections and traditions. These include drinking horns and spoons, dance regalia, and paintings with both mythical and current themes. The left hand is one of his recurrent themes, symbolizing the mystical side of the human psyche, along with animal symbols. Finley frequently hides pictographic symbols in his designs."[72] Frank told me that at SKC he teaches in the philosophical and educational space between Native American art Native American studies, and in the spaces where there are interactions between the two.

"I teach printmaking but I teach people how to make images look like Indian stuff because that's what I do. They can do whatever they want but I make them. There's some things that I make them try, to get them to do this," said Frank. Keeping in mind what he had already told me about Indigenous symbolism and imagery that he has used in his ledger art, he expounded on this idea and said, "So, if we're going to look at prints, like [M.C.] Escher prints, I might say, 'So, how would you do this if you're doing this as an Indian?' That's why I do

[72] Staff writer, "Frank Finley," Art Mobile of Montana, July 3, 2021, https://artmobilemontana.org/frank-finley/.

Mondrian. You can see, in that big red and white painting [that I showed you earlier], you can see Mondrian stamped all over that. And when people look at that and say, 'That's really cool,' and I say, 'It's influenced by Mondian,' POW! It's like they've been hit upside the head. It turns their thinking upside down. So, [back to printmaking and Escher], how would you do it? How would you make this look like [Indian art] influenced by Degas, or whatever? How would you take these [traditional Indian themes] and turn it into [something that makes the viewer think of a major western artist with a distinctive style]?"

At this point, I shared with Frank that in doing this work I became painfully aware that so many people in academia and the art world are completely unaware of the fact that the Indian Arts and Crafts Act stipulates a definition of Native American art that has nothing to do with style, but rather is entirely dependent on who makes it. Then I found myself talking with Frank about Native American art and he seemed to be telling me that it is also at least partly about style. He has all these students coming in and he's got all of these modern methods and these modern artists and their ways of making art that is really cool, and he's teaching them all of that much like an art professor in any BFA program would, regardless of whether they are Indigenous or not., which seems to prove my point about the modernity of contemporary Native American art. However, what he's asking them is how can they take these modern methods, materials, and styles, combine them with Indigenous methods, materials, styles, symbols, and imagery, and make whatever they are making look like it was made by a Native American artist.

I asked him why he approaches teaching them this way and he said: "Because if you're looking at images, and if native art is going to progress or if it's going to stay the same--you

know, 15 rows of beads with a limited number of patterns and color that you can possibly get out of beadwork, or whatever--if you're still painting...you know, turtles, and hawks, and eagles, and bears, and bison on hide for drums...if you still doing the same stuff, there's no progression...there's no...how contemporary is that?" It is Frank's assertion that it's part of the colonization of American Indians and their art to insist that the work--style, materials, et al--remain static and unchanged. He said that his approach to teaching art to his students is a way of decolonizing Indigenous art and the expectations surrounding it. His approach is sort of a reverse approach to colonization: let's colonize the colonizer art by appropriating *their* materials, methods, and themes and putting *our* style, materials, and methods on *that*. The way to move Indigenous art and culture forward and maintain its intrinsic modernity is to use modern materials and methods, which can be improvised in the moment, but also by carrying Indigenous traditions forward by pulling that imagery forward as they go.

He said that there are also traditions that should be carried forward by omission, and explained to me that his grandmother told him he should never draw or paint faces. She said that's "stealing souls." If you examine Frank's work closely, you'll notice that there are no faces in any of it. That's one of the ways that he honors the old cultural and tribal traditions.

Instead, Frank focuses on how many different ways he can interpret the materials, methods, and imagery that he works with. He is all about innovation in the processes of creating art while carrying traditions forward in a new way to be interpreted from a new perspective by a new generation. He encourages his students, when making ledger art, to think of what modern stories they can tell in simple imagery to make "authentic" ledger art that isn't simply a repeat of

imagery that was drawn one hundred and thirty years ago. So, instead of guns, bows and arrows, and the like, he encourages them to draw the tools and objects that modern Native Americans actually handle, such as basketballs, baseballs, hockey sticks, cars, and anything else that each individual artist finds to be a significant part of their personal story, as well as working in the traditional symbols and imagery that he has shown them (or that they may know of on their own) such as turtles, zig zag lines, fish, etc. Put it together to make a meaningful portrait (so to speak) of someone they know. "How much detail do you have to have to know it's a picture of somebody?" he asks. "Not very much." In this way, Frank is teaching his students how to draw pictographs, essentially; capturing an accurate representation of person, place, or event, with the minimum number of pencil or brush strokes. He also encourages his students to expand their visual imagery without violating tribal traditions (no faces), by trying the minimalist approach to drawing dogs, cats, or other things, for example.

I mentally contrasted Frank's approach with that of John Pepion and Terrence Guardipee, whose main objective is to "keep it traditional." Their primary audience has an expectation of ledger art that is rooted in strictly traditional Blackfeet imagery. This means that, even though their focus is keeping their work traditional, one could see an aspect of lingering colonization in their work, because the field of reception has an expectation that if it is authentic, then it will look a certain way. Depending on your point of view, you could see their work as either highly authentic or colonized, because in order to maintain their audience and make a living selling their work, they must cater to those preconceptions about what makes ledger art authentic.[73]

[73] I want to make it crystal clear that neither I nor Frank are saying that Terrene Guardipee's or John Pepion's (or any other Indigenous artist's) work is colonized. We were speaking here in strictly academic and analytical terms with respect to the expectations of the uninformed masses who seek out what they believe to be authentic.

Of course, it's not quite that simple. Getting back to Frank and his work, he pointed out that he has a day job as a professor at a college, so he doesn't have to make money selling his artwork. He does make money selling it, but it's not his primary concern. While Frank is an amazing and prolific artist, first and foremost, Frank is a teacher. Because of that, he has the freedom to innovate and experiment in his artwork that artists like Terrence and John might not--they make their living primarily from the sale of their artwork.

"I would rather keep doing the stuff I'm doing, and having discussions like this with people like you, and have people come away with an idea that maybe we shouldn't be sticks in the mud. We should be looking at the next phase. You know, I could...could I be painting with all earth paint and all that stuff? Yes. And using boiled hide binders? I could be making my own paint. I know how. I can make it from hide, I can make it from milk, I can make all that. But why should I?" Frank said. He makes the strong point that with all of the vast array of modern specialty art materials available which makes the art process so easy for artists, why bog down that process by making a limited array of basic supplies and materials that only have a limited number of applications, and aren't particularly archival. Modern people and modern art call for modern methods and materials.

Returning to the comparison with artists who are doing their best to keep their imagery traditional, not even John Pepion and Terrance Guardipee make their own art supplies. They use antique ledger paper, but the paints and pencils are completely modern.

Regardless of those expectations, artists like Terrence Guardipee and John Pepion who focus on preserving the visual traditions of their tribe are doing a great service to their tribes in limiting their visual imagery to what is traditional. It is their choice to make the art that they choose to make, the way they choose to make it, and the right to do so is one of the things *my* work seeks to defend--artists, regardless of ethnicity, should be able to make whatever art they choose to.

Frank points out that the hue and saturation of modern inks and paints is much richer and brighter than any natural pigments one could make if they wanted to keep their materials traditional. One of the main reasons that Native Americans switched from seed beads and porcupine quills to Czechoslovakian glass beads almost overnight upon the advent of trade in North American is that the glass beads were more durable and the colors were much more vibrant. Frank is not the first Indigenous artist to be so innovative and experimental in his approach to materials and methods. Indigenous people have always done as everyone else has when given the opportunity to upgrade their materials for better ones. Innovation is one of the oldest Indigenous traditions there is.

Frank confirmed that one of the luxuries of having a day job is that he can afford better materials and supplies for artmaking. He can also afford to have a lot of them for the wide variety of experimenting that he does. Additionally, he does think it's important to make his work archival.[74] He uses archival paper, archival paints, because he wants his work to last. Archival methods increase the chances of perishable materials lasting for hundreds (sometimes thousands) of years. Archivally made artwork is worth more money because it is built to last and art investors can be confident that what they have spent so much money to purchase will not just fall apart or disintegrate with the passage of time. This is a standard he also likes to set for his students.

Most of this chapter about Frank Finley has been focused on his creative curiosity and how he attempts to instill that same creative curiosity into his students. But as I've already

[74] Staff writer, "Just for Fun: What does "Archival" Mean?," Utrecht Art Supplies, July 4, 2021, https://assets.ctfassets.net/f1fikihmjtrp/4QhmyWGJhAixgE8kIbJhpY/a3829dd78f2a1889acea92db6cf742c4/what_does_archival_mean.pdf.

mentioned, Frank is a working artist as well. Like all working artists, he works not only at the creative part of the equation but also on the business side, selling his work and getting his art out into the world. Frank was one of the first people on my list of interviewees to actually fill out a written survey that I sent out asking nuts and bolts questions about being an Indigenous artist and the challenges he might face.

The first thing that Frank shared with me in response to my survey questions was why he became an artist. In answer to the question, "Why did you become an artist?" he said, "I didn't. People started calling me that about 15 years ago. I am a maker, ask^{w}ulmn in Salish." I could totally relate (except for the Salish part), because I never made a decision to become an artist, either. It's not a decision most artists make, except to decide that they will try to do it for a living. Artists make art because they can't imagine not doing it. They like to make stuff. I saw a meme going around recently that says, "Artists never retire," and it's true. What looks like retirement to other people is simply a transition to making art whenever and wherever we want without the concern about whether we'll be able to pay the rent. Likewise, artists rarely make a proclamation at any juncture that they have become an artist. On the contrary, it usually does happen that artists start being called artists because the people around them notice that they are always making art. It is usually at that point that the person being called an artist thinks to themselves, "Huh--maybe I *am* an artist." Apparently, that's what happened with Frank, too. Frank's degrees are in environmental science, education, and curriculum and instruction. Clearly, he didn't start out thinking of himself as an artist. Regardless, anyone who knows him now could hardly think of him as *not* an artist. He learned much of what he started out doing from a tribal artisan, and is

at least partially self-taught. Part of his master's degree in education was art related. "I planned to teach in the cultural arts when I returned to SKC," Frank said. At this point in his career, his curiosity is probably his strongest teacher.

As a working artist, Frank has gallery representation at two different galleries in his part of the state. He said he has slightly more sales at one gallery because of its main street storefront, but he is well represented by both galleries. Neither gallery deals strictly in Native American art. They both have a wide variety of art made by local artists. Frank has also been represented in the Museum of the Plains Indian in Browning, Montana, and in a special show at the Central Intelligence Agency Museum in Langley, Virginia.[75]

Frank shared that he was once turned down for an art show that was not billed as a Native American art venue, and he thinks it was because he is Native American, although he couldn't be sure. It can be very hard to prove that even if you're a confrontational person, and Frank is not. However, because his artwork does have what many would perceive as a Native American style, he guessed it was because his work was too Indigenous for that particular exhibit. He said he wasn't particularly happy with that outcome, but it doesn't happen regularly.

Frank participates regularly in art fairs and festivals, including the Eiteljorg Indian Art Market, Montana Folk Festival in Butte, Montana, SLAM Festival in Bozeman, Montana, and most recently at an art market he has been running himself at *32 Pair of Scissors*. He estimates

[75] Yes, the actual CIA has a museum, but you can only go their if you have the proper security clearance: https://www.cia.gov/legacy/museum/

that he travels between 1,000 and 2,000 miles a year to participate in these venues, most of which are highly competitive and at which his work is well received.

His work is well-received by his tribe and local community, also. He is widely known as an artist on the Flathead, and well thought of. He said that he does feel pressure, as an Indian artist, to make certain kinds of artwork. His silver work is what people have most sought after, but he says that people have only wanted to pay about a third of what he charges, and he is pressured about lowering the prices. When I asked him what kind of work he would make more of if his collectors would buy it, he said he

makes the kind of work I want to, regardless, and that his day job at SKC provides him with enough income that he doesn't have to cave in to the demands of the market. His family supports him, and he sells much of their work too because he's able to get more for their product than they do (after he charges them a 20% commission for doing the business work for them).

He describes the community of Native American artists with whom he regularly associates with as cooperative. "We share ideas, techniques, have great conversations about our work, directions [our art] is going, and act much like a large extended family, much like any other Indian group. We are the 'art' crowd, not unlike the 'powwow' crowd," said Frank.

While Frank is largely content with his career as an Indigenous artist, he says he does face challenges in his pursuit of an art career, such as finding the right venue to sell at to make money to invest in infrastructure for producing better work faster. Being Indigenous presents additional challenges, which he describes, thusly:

> "Most of the general public has a romanticized version of the Indian. There are those people out in the world who still think, [even] in the 21st century, that we

> still live in tipis. They don't see us as a living, breathing group of people trying to live our lives, follow our dreams. Living a hardscrabble existence and making an undervalued product make it tough to get ahead. I have a Master's degree, so I can ask high prices and hold out. I know many people who can't, and sell work too low. I used to do that myself. They think I have a superior attitude. I just know what the value of my work is. Sometimes I give in just to make a sale. I am always depressed afterwards."

When I asked him if he thought non-Indigenous artists face the same challenges, he said:

> "The idea of the starving artist comes to mind. Most non-tribal people have some resources to fall back on: insurance, inheritance, grandparents, people with some kind of money or property that can be liquidated. My parents are among the first generation of people to actually buy their own home. There are others [who were able to buy their own home], but it has not been the norm. Subsidized food, subsidized housing, subsidized existence, to paraphrase my friend Joe McGeshick. It is just hard to get ahead. I never even thought of myself as an artist until others called me that. I always just made stuff."

When asked what advantages he believes are available to non-Indigenous artists making the kind of work that he makes, he responded:

> "Marketing, resources, venues, general business sense, and advice from other non-tribal people. Support in excess of just subsistence living. I can starve here on the rez more comfortably than anywhere else. [Well]-meaning people will help keep you alive. [Non-tribal people] also have access to art and culture that simply do not exist on the reservation: speech and drama club, libraries, summer plays, rodeo, and powwow. It is a different culture for natives; none of the high culture associated with big cities. Non-native folks have family members that help them with that. The first time I went to a big city, I didn't know about tipping. The dominant culture has lots of rules and regulations to follow; ass kissing sometimes, if you ask me."

I know Frank well, and I know enough Indian people to know what he meant by those last two sentences: the rules of the dominant culture can seem to Indigenous people as though

they are set up to intentionally reveal those who are not fluent in that culture, and embarrass them. As a member of the dominant culture who has also been closely associated with Indian people for about 19 years, I can't say that I disagree.

I asked Frank what he wishes collectors of Native American art of any kind knew that they do not know, about his work in particular, or about contemporary Native American art in general. He said, "That the people who make art sometimes make it under huge adversity, and talking them down from $100 to $50 is demeaning. It hurts. That money could be used to feed the kids, buy school clothes, or pay bills. They may have no other means of making a living."

That last comment seemed particularly poignant to me because of the paradox it represents: Native American art has been a hot commodity for a long time, especially in recent years, and yet some collectors buying directly from Indigenous makers do like to wheel and deal and talk the price down, if they can. Those same collectors might be willing to pay a small fortune for antique, "traditional" Native American art, but are frequently less willing to pay the asking price to a living, breathing Indigenous artist.

Frank is as outspoken as he is creative, but I appreciated his candor in this interview because he said a lot of things that many of the other artists I interviewed were hesitant to say on the record, because of how it might affect their art careers and business. Frank has the luxury of a prestigious day job in which he is a well-respected academic and educator, so his informed opinions and comments carry weight. In the same way he described earlier, Frank is a supportive member of his artistic community and fellowship, contributing not only artistically but also by

saying the things that the field of reception for Native American art needs to hear, whether they like it or not. If they don't like it, then they are the ones who need to hear it most of all.



Figure 9. Frank Finley, *Untitled 1*, relief print, 2017-2021, private collection.



Figure 10. Frank Finley, *Untitled 2*, relief print, 2017-2021, private collection.



Figure11. Frank Finley, miscellaneous silver and turquoise jewelry, turquoise and silver, 2017-2021.



Figure 12. Frank Finley, miscellaneous turquoise and silver rings, turquoise and silver, 2017-2021.



Figure 13. Frank Finley, *Untitled 3*, mixed media print, 2017-2021, private collection.



Figure 14. Frank Finley, *Untitled 4*, mixed media print, 2017-2021, private collection.

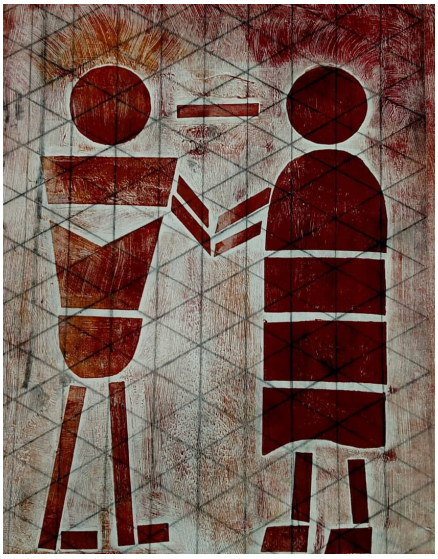


Figure 15. Frank Finley, *Untitled 5*, mixed media print, 2017-2021, private collection.



Figure 16. Frank Finley, *Untitled 6*, relief print, 2017-2021, private collection.



Figure 17. Frank Finley, *Untitled 7*, mixed media print, 2017-2021, private collection.



Figure 18. Frank Finley, *Untitled 8*, mixed media print, 2017-2021, private collection.



Figure 19. Frank Finley, *Untitled 9*, mixed media print, 2017-2021, private collection.

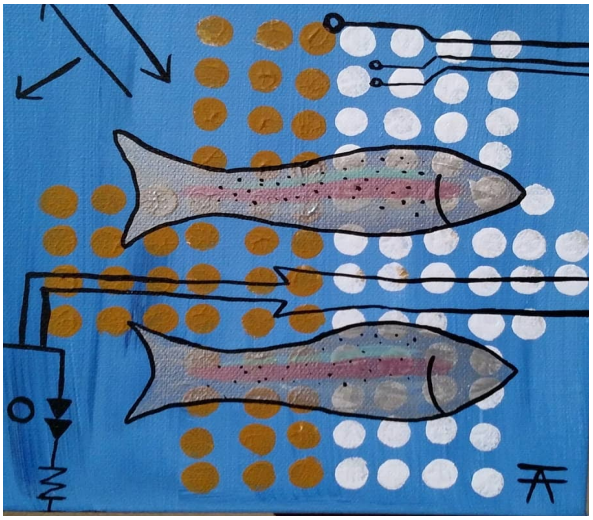


Figure 20. Frank Finley, *Untitled 10*, mixed media print, 2017-2021, private collection.

BEN PEASE: ALWAYS TEACHING INDIAN 101 - OUR WORKS ARE EXPRESSIONS OF OUR EXISTENCE

I have been following Ben Pease and his work for around ten years or so, almost as long as he has been actively pursuing an art career. In that time, I've watched him go through several phases of experimentation as he found his way as an artist. The first works of his that caught my eye were his excellently rendered pencil portraits of Apsáalooke (Crow) people in a ledger art style which he had made using historical photos for references. Then he did some experiments with conceptual art making pop culture references, doing things like taking horses and their Apsáalooke riders out of those photos and replacing them with imperial stormtroopers on speeder bikes, but still holding their coup sticks. When I visited his booth at the 2015 Winter SLAM Festival, he had a new piece that was completely different from anything he had done before. He had found an Indian statue of the kind you could have seen in cigar stores, once upon





Figure 21. Ben Pease, *Not Your Cultural Epithet*, ready-made sculpture, 2015, private collection.

a time, similar to the blackface lawn jockeys of the same era (and just as offensive), at a thrift sale or antique store, and he painted it completely red. Then he invited everyone who came into his booth to write a common stereotype or racial slur that they had heard about Indians on the red Indian statue, which he later entitled, "Not Your Indian Epithet." This marked the addition of ready-made art to his repertoire, and also signaled to me that Ben was shifting from an emphasis on style and technique to using his art to make a statement and educate the public about issues of concern to Native American people. His trajectory in the art world, especially the American Indian art world, has been nearly straight up ever since. Ben is an artist with something to say, and he has found a multitude of ways to visually say it.

He has always been rooted in education, so educating the public and setting the record straight comes naturally to him. His mother, Linda Pease, spent her career as a teacher and a school principal. Even though Ben didn't follow in his mother's footsteps to become a public school teacher, her influence is obvious and Ben has become quite skillful at providing education about Native Americans and their culture whenever the opportunity or need arises. "Not Your Indian Epithet" is perhaps one of the most profound examples of that effort, but Ben doesn't need props to get his point across.

Like DG House, Ben regularly finds himself at art shows, fairs, and festivals talking to the public when someone inevitably says something that they have no idea is offensive to Native American people, out of sheer ignorance. Unlike DG House, in Ben's case it isn't because he doesn't look Indian enough, as he certainly embodies what most people imagine when they think

"Indian Warrior." He's well over six feet tall, trim and fit, and could easily play an Indian role in a movie set in the old American west. He *looks* Indigenous and very much resembles the photos of Apsáalooke men that he has drawn and painted.

He's also very modern. When you see Ben at art shows and other public engagements, he is usually wearing a suit jacket, either a dressy t-shirt or a nicely pressed shirt, and sometimes a bolo tie and a fancy belt buckle. His hair is very short and cut in a mainstream style that suggests no one would ever think of telling him to "get a haircut and get a real job." Ben looks and dresses like a businessman when there is business to be done. If you catch him in his studio, he dresses in casual clothes like everyone else when there's physical work to be done that could get you dirty. But I've never seen him out in public with his art wearing traditional Apsáalooke clothing reminiscent of the nineteenth century. He may do that occasionally, and probably does when attending Apsáalooke events that call for such, but it is not his usual way of presenting himself to the general public. Ben does not need to dress in clothing from a bygone era to let people know he is Apsáalooke. It is obvious that he is an American Indian man.

When I met with Ben in the summer of 2020 in his studio at Rocky Mountain College, we talked a lot about what kind of work he is doing now, and how his process has evolved. But what he spoke the most about while I was there was this issue of people putting both feet in their mouths with comments about Indians that are steeped in ignorance and stereotypes when they speak to him at art shows and festivals.

While at his studio that day, he showed me his newest painting in progress which is part of a series that he had been working on for about three years. In this series, he does paintings of

Native Crows wearing headdresses, and in the headdresses he writes poetry. He explained that this is a reaction to what the headdress has been made into in contemporary pop culture, mainstream media, and Hollywood film. He called this phenomenon the westernized romanticism of Indian culture for western eyes, and that the writing that he does, the poetry in the headdress, is not something that he writes down on paper and transcribes into something else. It's something written spontaneously in the painting, and it lives only in the painting. It's something that the viewer has to experience in the painting, so it carries power with it wherever the painting goes.

It's also a therapeutic reconciliation of the conflict within him between being true to his art and also having to make a living. "I feel like, for me, being that I have to make a living on my painting, that's one of the ways that I am able to sell my work. Because it kills me to sell my work, but I have to do it, you know?" said Ben.

Ben further explained, "So, people stand at these paintings and they stare at them for a long time because they're trying to decipher the words; because when they come out of me they're upside down and backwards, or chicken scratch kind of, you know. It's a carryover from my mixed media series where I do ledger papers and digital drawing prints, where I would write poems on the back of these prints and then paste them down and not tell anybody about it. So there are scores of paintings that have poetry on the back of these figures, but nobody really knows what they're saying [because the text is hidden on the back of the image]. This is my form of sending power and my energy along with every single painting."

What Ben told me about the poetry written on the backs of images that no one would ever see reminded me of what I learned in a graphic design course in my BFA program in the 1980s, about how advertisers attempted to sway consumers who viewed their ads with subliminal messages built into the artwork in the ads. Ben is quite a bit younger than I am (I am old enough to be his mother) and he had never heard of this. So, I told him what I learned in that course.

"I took graphic design courses in the Stone Age. I mean, we didn't even have computers back then. We used rubylith masking film, acetate, and stick-on registration marks to create four-color separations on four separate sheets to get the CMYK (cyan, magenta, yellow, black) layers necessary for the printing process. I could be your graphic designer for the post apocalypse," I joked.

Ben laughed and said, "That is so cool, though!"

I said, "Well, it's really neat to know how to do it, but I'm glad that we have computers now. One of the things that we learned in our intro graphic design classes back then, in learning the history of advertising and graphic design, was about subliminal messaging. We read books published in the 1970s about how graphic designers sometimes put messages (like what you're talking about) into images--messages that people couldn't consciously see--in order to plant a subliminal suggestion in their minds to buy the product. The idea was that the message gets into them without them even being aware of having received the message.[76] At some point this practice was outlawed in many countries (but not in the United States) under the premise that if it actually worked it gave the advertisers an unfair advantage and robbed unsuspecting people of

[76] Victoria Stern, "A Short History of the Rise, Fall and Rise of Subliminal Messaging," Scientific American, September 1, 2015, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-short-history-of-the-rise-fall-and-rise-of-subliminal-messaging/

their free will. However, studies on the effectiveness of subliminal messaging showed that it only works to the extent that it taps into a pre-existing desire.[77] It won't make someone who isn't already craving cigarettes take up smoking. The consensus ended up being that it didn't really work."

"Oh really?" Ben said.

"The research kind of went back and forth on it. I kind of feel like anything you look at long enough gets inside you, regardless of whether it's blatant or subliminal. And what you were just talking about reminded me of those ads using subliminal messages," I said.

"Interesting," Ben said.

"And here *you* are, having unconsciously developed a method of communication that might also unconsciously infiltrate the viewer's psyche with a more worthy message," I said.

"Yeah, and we've seen that at the very least it's a simple interaction. I don't think I'm trying to change people's minds," Ben said.

"Well, you're getting your words in and you're getting them to stand there a little longer looking at the art, taking in the poetry, at least," I said.

Ben went on to talk about more features of this new painting. I had asked him what the circles represented (if they represented anything).

"I've been using circles in my work since I first moved to Bozeman, in treatment of my backgrounds. Just the raw, cyclical representation of the circle, and what it means to us as Native people; within our families, and how we operate; how we think; and even into those ancient,

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[77]Tara Santora, "Does subliminal messaging really work?" Live Science, March 14, 2020, https://www.livescience.com/does-subliminal-messaging-work.html.

romanticised notions of our ontologies, and our psychology, philosophies, which are there, and they're not there. Because a lot of times they're imposed by outsiders on us. But we do the same thing to ourselves, you know. We say we're super secret when a lot of times we're not. A lot of times you're just as human, and even more human than a lot of people, as we're making these humanly mistakes and moral sins," he said.

"You're the first one I've talked to, while working on this interview series, who has actually said that out loud," I said.

He chuckled and said, "Well, I think we've got to see ourselves and recognize that there's not just one light that illuminates us. We're just as diverse as everyone else, that way. Good and bad."

"What you said about the circles is really similar to what Sara Siestreem said about her use of circles," I said. "I see two different things going on right now, which just sort of amazes me about you, and it's one of the reasons I was drawn to your work to begin with. When you're talking about writing on your paintings, that's what I was doing back in the early 1980s in my own work. I had a professor, Jack Bartlett, from Texas. He's retired now, but he was one of my professors at Mississippi State. He would catch me writing on my paintings, doing this free association or stream of consciousness writing, on my paintings as certain associations came up in my mind as I did the work on the painting. It came to me, and I wrote it down. Who knows why? I just felt compelled to do it as these thoughts came into my head, so I wrote them down," I said.

"That's kind of like Basquiat, man," Ben said.

"Yeah. Kind of, except I didn't know about him, yet. They didn't teach us about Basquiat back in 1988 in Mississippi. It was pretty mainstream and all classical training at that point in their program," I said.

"Well, they should have, gosh darnit," Ben said, humorously.

"I know. He's amazing. I teach my students about Basquiat...but anyway...Whenever he would see me doing that he would say, 'If you want to write, then write. If you want to paint, then paint. Figure it out and pick one.' And I was like, I don't feel like I need to 'pick one.' I want to do both. So, I love that you're writing on your paintings. When I saw some of your early portraits, and they were on the ledger paper, and sometimes you'd written on them, I felt validated to see that I wasn't the only one who didn't want to 'pick one'," I said.

"Meanwhile, I went to see Sara Siestreem talk at the MAM about seven or eight years ago, and she was talking about that.[78] Now I'm seeing something similar in your own work. I did it in mine, and it's like that Jungian thing. We're all tapped into the universal collective unconscious," I added.

Ben said, "Yeah, it's a common reaction, especially in artists whose bones and creativity are more fluid, rather than segmented or specifically defined."

Shifting the conversation back to the painting he was working on in the studio, I said, "I love this. It seems so painterly. It seems like you've been moving more in that direction."

"Yeah, I'm trying to figure out how to use oil paints, and this is my first foray into that," said Ben.

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[78] Staff writer, "Sara Siestreem: Ballast," Missoula Art Museum, September 6 2013, https://missoulaartmuseum.org/exhibits/sara-siestreem-ballast.

"It has a real Kehinde Wiley feel to it. Do you know the work of Kehinde Wiley?" I asked.

"Yeah, yeah," he said.

"Had that occurred to you before," I asked.

"No, it hadn't. Not for this piece," he said. "But somebody said a recent piece I did was really similar."

For clarity, Kehinde Wiley is one of the most well-known African-American artists in the country right now. He paints enormous, photorealistic portraits of Black people in a very classical style against highly ornate backgrounds reminiscent of Rococo or Late Baroque period of painting.[79]

We talked about Kehinde Wiley's work for a minute, and how some aspects of Ben's work seem similar without any obvious direct influence. This spawned a continuation of the discussion about Jung's concept of universal archetypal symbols and the universal collective unconscious,[80] and worked around to discussing Picasso's famous quote, "Good artists borrow. Great artists steal." Of course, Picasso was not suggesting that actual theft was OK. What he was saying was that we are all unconsciously dipping into the same pool of collective creativity without even realizing it, and we are all influenced by each other's work, whether on a conscious or unconscious level.

He then showed me a seven foot by seven foot painting as an example of the similarity between his and Kehinde Wiley's work someone else had noticed. It was obvious to me, too.

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[79] Staff writer, "About," Kehinde Wiley, July 16, 2021, https://kehindewiley.com/.
[80] Various contributors, "Collective unconscious," Wikipedia, May 23, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_unconscious.

Referring to that painting he said, “Somebody made that comparison about this painting and I said, ‘Oh my gosh, you’re right.’ Because these are all floral beadwork designs that are traditional spiritual medicine, and things like that, whether it’s spiritual or physiological medicine.

“But a lot of the use of circles, I guess, coming back to that (no pun intended)...early in my work they were really representative of the Apsáalooke people as a matrilineal society, following our mothers. They’ve done so much for us as young people, as the next generation; and knowing how important that is, really comes into my work. A lot of those mixed media pieces that I was doing, like this one, you saw a halo around it,” he said.

“So, like a Madonna?” I said.

“Yeah, a Madonna halo,” he said.

“Now, that’s me taking a Euro-American construct and applying it to your work,” I said.

“Exactly,” he said.

“But that’s me. Is that what you intend?” I asked.

“That’s part of it, yeah. That’s part of it. I’ve always talked about these Indigenous goddesses as being a sort of contentious subject within my art, because what I’m working with, trying to translate or depict, is to talk about that contentious subject of implied aesthetic. Because when I said it, you said it,” he said.

“Yes. When you said it, I *saw* it,” I said.

"And so what I'm thinking…" he said, as he walked over to another painting in his studio. "...Oh, here's one that I've already done...and this is a conceptual painting straight from my home," he said.

"That does look intentional," I said.

"It's an intentional reference, yes. But for me, I'm stealing like an artist, and I'm not saying that I'm deifying these individuals, or even sanctifying them. But what I'm doing is saying, yes, we believe that women are more holy, they are holy beings; we believe this. So, I'm using this to represent that. I'm using this to represent our cyclical beliefs, in our society, our culture, and traditions, while also saying that the halo--the Christian reference--has been both good and bad for us. It's a cultural imposition; a cultural influence. But I use actual gold to talk about beauty and value here, but also extractive things; referencing definitions of value as separated by culture. Because what I'm seeing is a progression in our culture of how we value things, and how we give them their territory, you know," Ben said.

"It sounds like you're making a statement about the intrinsic value of women versus the value we place on women based on the roles we assign them and whether they fulfil those roles and the expectations that come with them. When I think about Christian representations of the Madonna, she's elevated on a pedestal; she's also impossibly perfect in ways that deprive women of the pleasure, the *rights*, of full citizenship. You know, we're going to sit you up here and you have to be this thing that we imagine that you are, and if you deviate from that we're going to burn you at the stake and call you a witch," I said.

Ben laughed and said, "Exactly!"

"Whereas you are saying that women, as viewed by Apsáalooke culture, are the source of holiness," I said.

"Yes," Ben said. "So, part of where this [painting in progress] is going...she's going to have beaded high-heeled boots on, and she's going to have a cigarette as well." He explained that the purpose of the high heels and the cigarette were precisely for the purpose of showing that the value of a woman is not in her outer appearance or behavior. Women are valuable just for being women.

"I am so glad we finally got together for this interview," I said. I've talked with you about your work before in little bits and pieces over the years, and this--what you just explained about the use of circles and the Madonna references, and the intrinsic value of women in Crow culture--is one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you. I feel like I'm making a full circle with you and my whole project..."

"No pun intended," Ben joked.

"No pun intended!" I laughed. "Because my whole dissertation project emerged from what I thought was a really bizarre statement from one of my students about what kind of art Native American artists should be making, what they shouldn't be making, and how it somehow compromises their traditional values if they don't stick to making stuff that looks like it was made in the 1890s. That question, and the conclusion that my student jumped to, suggests that Native American artists are not allowed to evolve as artists, and they're not allowed to do what you are doing here, or to be influenced by your unconscious, or even making conscious choices, like the Madonna and the halo and all of that, or doing stuff like this," I pointed to the red Indian

statue, *Not Your Indian Epithet*. “To hear you say the things you’ve just said helps me to feel like I picked the right project, because I’ve made a full circle right back to that student’s original question. And you are doing it. You’re doing it with all of this.”

“I’ve been struggling with that for quite some time,” Ben said. “Why does Native art have to be Native? Why can’t it just be art? We’re just as human, you know, like I said. But why do all of us need to paint feathers, you know? I think it all sort of hearkens back to definitions of art, separated by culture. I think real art is unredactable from culture. You can’t take it away because it becomes contrived, too set up, too formalized.”

“So, now we’re talking semiotics. The symbol becomes confused with the thing that it symbolizes,” I said.

“Right,” Ben said. “Just like beads and feathers are always Indian.”

“That’s what I said to that student who asked the question that launched this project, so I love that you are working on these things in your art,” I said.

“I’ve really been working on them because I feel like it’s a copout sometimes that I am making this specific imagery,” he said, referring to the classic Indian motifs that show up in his work. “I was on a Zoom call recently with a number of very successful Indigenous creatives, and one of them was Supaman. Chris Parish. I brought up this point and we’ve been talking about it, and he said, ‘Yeah, I know. If I think about it, anything I do is a part of it. Anything I do is Indigenous.’ Indigenous shoes. If I make a cheeseburger that’s an Apsáalooke cheeseburger, and I don’t think you can argue that point. Our works...they are--I’ve said this before--our works are

expressions of our existence. They are actively spelling that out for viewers, and they are actively reclaiming space for the viewers and the creators of this work," said Ben.

I said, "I want to go back to what you said about it being a copout, because being expected by the field of reception to make only the art of your ancestors, and having that expectation be inherently false because what is perceived to be 'traditional' is really a snapshot of a specific moment in time over a hundred years ago--a static moment that is not truly representative of the historically creative evolution of Indigenous arts… I mean...right now, Native American art is really hot. It sells well. You can make a lot of money doing it…"

"That's just the thing," said Ben.

"Lots of people wish that they were Native Americans so that they can claim...in fact they wish it so much that they pretend that they *are* Native American…" I said.

"Pretendians?" Ben said.

"Yes. Pretendians!" I laughed. "And then, if they can't pretend they're Indians, they just co opt the imagery. There's an artist in Bozeman who does this, and it just drives me crazy because we[81] keep telling him to stop doing it and he just doesn't care. He's making tons of money doing it. Ten thousand dollars for a painting."

"But I'm doing the same thing," said Ben.

"But why do you feel like it's a cop out?" I asked.

"Because of the people who buy it. Look at the market? What does the market look like? Who can afford these things? Successful. White. Middle-aged," Ben said, enumerating these

[81] A group of artists in his circle of friends, in Bozeman.

types on his fingers. “Usually women who talk their husbands into buying it for them. Secondary or tertiary homeowners. Usually out-of-staters from Texas, New York, or Los Angeles. And that’s my demographic. Just from an observational standpoint, that’s who’s buying my work. That’s my consumer audience,” said Ben.

“So, when you say it’s a cop out, do you feel like you’re helping to perpetuate the stereotypes that go with this type of Native imagery?” I asked.

“I definitely think I have before, but that’s why I was talking about putting words in here. But the words are not like…’Hey, I’m an Indian!’...You have to look at it closely, you know,” Ben said.

“Because of the market, because of the consumer and their interests, I go to the Charlie Russell art week[82] every year. This year it was cancelled. I say this all the time in my interviews: I first went there and I felt ‘other’ even though I saw paintings of myself in every room. Paintings of Indians everywhere. *I* felt like the alien, you know? Even with those big hats and turquoise necklaces walking around; big hats with feathers and people wearing buckskin, and beaded moccasins. I felt like the outsider, because I was. And I still am. I still feel like that,” said Ben.

“Is it your goal to feel like an insider at any point?” I asked.

“I don’t think it.... It depends. It depends on where home is. It depends on where comfortability lies,” said Ben.

[82] Ben is referring to Western Art Week, one of the largest Western Art festivals in the country, hosted every year in Great Falls, Montana, usually in the middle of March. It was cancelled two years in a row in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“So, if you could pick the demographic for your artwork...if you had a purpose that you wanted to perpetuate with your artwork, what would that demographic look like,” I asked.

“ I would say just everybody. I don’t make this work for just my people or my communities. I don’t just make it for the collectors or the buyers, or the institutions. I just make it because that’s what I do. I make it because it’s my thoughts. I’m actualizing. It’s my thoughts coming to fruition. I make it for a living, and because it’s something that I love to do. Most of all, it’s something that I enjoy doing every day. It makes me feel good to paint.

“I couldn’t pick. I wouldn’t pick because I think that’s unethical. But if I start asking too many questions, I turn into an abstractist. And if I keep asking more questions, not a single mark could be made. ‘Why are you making this mark? Because I’m Native, and it means matrilineal heritage, and it refers to the cyclical nature of life.’ But really, why can’t I just react? And so I get to that point and people ask me, ‘What does this mean? What does this mean? What does this mean?’ I’m explaining it over and over again. It gets exhausting, really. It really does. It gets super exhausting. I talked about this with my mom the other day. I’m always teaching Indian 101. It’s something I’ve made my career on. It’s something that generations before me have made their careers on, whether it’s in education, or law, or the creative sector. We’re siloed within that, explaining the Indian Relocation Act, explaining repatriation, explaining blood quantum, circling, and circling, and circling. Why can’t we break free of that? Who says that we can’t? Nobody’s *really* saying that, but we know that we have to do it because that’s the paradigm,” Ben said.

"Don't you feel like it's inevitable to be always answering those questions, though? No--that's not the way I wanted to ask that question. I had a better way of asking that question about thirty seconds ago. We were talking about how you always end up explaining Indian people to all the non-Indigenous people you meet. Every Indigenous artist I've talked to has the same experience. Some are less patient than others about doing it. Some are happy to play the role. DG comes to mind. She never gets tired of explaining things to people," I said.

"That's how she sells," Ben said.

"I know. It's how she sells it. It's just part of who she is, too. She's bubbly," I said.

"Auntie. Auntie Deeg," Ben said.

"Exactly," I said. "Here's the better phrased question that I forgot earlier. To a certain degree, all artists who 'make it' have to explain their work to their audience. Of course, we've read about all the artists who don't do that, and who basically say, 'My art doesn't need explaining,' and they play all these games about that. How do you feel that explaining the Indigenous nature of your art is different from *that*?"

"Well, ultimately, to recognize my position in my environment, which is Montana, which in my mind is still part of the old west in terms of views and perspectives. I've got to recognize my role and what that is, and why. What is my platform and what am I saying? Why? This is something that I need to figure out for myself, because if I don't, I'm always going to be that brooding artist, you know? I feel like if my works and my thoughts are more nuanced and complex at the same time, then ultimately I can help others break beyond that barrier of Indian

101, maybe move them up to 105, or 201, even. I feel like we can expand and expound on who we are and what our place is. For me, that's what's happening.

"Can you remind me what your original question was, please?" Ben asked.

"You were talking about how you're always doing Indian 101 with people. I always feel that way too. As soon as people find out that I have a master's degree in Native American Studies, I'm teaching NAS 101 for that person, just like I did when I was a GTA for MSU, and then again after that when I was teaching NASX-571 to graduate students, all over again, whether I want to or not. After doing this so often, I wanted to say to these people, 'Go sign up for the class, because I'm doing something else right now.' But at the same time, one of the reasons I got the master's was because I was made aware of my own ignorance, so I feel like it's my duty, to a certain degree, to do what I can to help people come to a better understanding of Native American people and the issues they face, and dispel stereotypes and outright racism.

"So, I'm always teaching Indian 101 too, but in a different context, a different environment, and a different place. I think people feel safer asking me questions because I'm also white, so they feel like they can ask me things that they might be too afraid to ask an Indigenous person. When that happens I'm like, 'Well, that's fine, but why don't you go ask an Indigenous person, also?' All of that to say that I feel like I get weary doing it; and I hear that you get weary doing it; but I also feel like it's the reason I got the master's degree," I said.

"It's an honorable battle," Ben said.

"It is. That's a great way to say that," I said. "It makes me think of a Bible verse in Galatians (which makes me sound like a Bible thumper, which I am not) that says, 'Do not grow

weary in well-doing,' and then it goes on to talk about running 'the good race.' Don't quit when you're doing good work because if you quit doing it there might not be someone to pick it up behind you," I said.

"Well, there's an interpretive paradox there, especially with Indian 101. Is it good? Is it equitable?" Ben said.

"Is the 'honorable battle' good? Is that what you're saying?" I asked.

"Yeah. And it depends who's spending time on it, and who's making decisions about whether it's good or not. But it comes down to combined knowledge, I suppose; general knowledge. Like I said earlier. Paradigms. It comes down to visibility and platform," Ben said.

"Well, you have one, because you have a following," I said.

"Yeah, I have a small following. And so how valuable are these things? Why does oil painting resonate and sell better? Why do people listen to oil paintings more than maybe some beaded moccasins? Painted teepees? War sticks? Drums? Why do those things not resonate on the same level? Because they didn't come from Europe? These things have been being made for longer than any oil painting," said Ben.

Ben is referring here to the dominance of western art (not art made about the American west, but art of western culture, going all the way back to before the Gothic era in Europe). He's referring to the fact that oral histories of Indigenous people do not carry as much weight as the written histories of western culture, in the same way that beaded moccasins, painted teepees, war sticks, drums, etc. are simultaneously considered to be a form of primitive art while also considered by western culture to be *the* authentic art of Native Americans. It's a paradox that

traps Indigenous people in the past in the minds of the dominant culture, and it's this concept that makes the term "contemporary Native American" seem like an oxymoron in the minds of those same people.

Ben continued his thought and said, "The argument that prevents Indigenous art from being elevated to that of 'fine art' would be that it simply was not elevated to the level of that type of art. But the counter argument is that it's a spiritual thing."

"Those are such good questions, and such good counter arguments," I said.

"And yet here I am, sitting here doing big oil paintings," said Ben.

"I guess you could see doing oil paintings as beating 'fine art' at its own game. I mean, you're getting your message out there in a Euro-American medium. I completely agree with you. In fact, I went round and round with a certain history professor at MSU about why histories have to be written down by Euro-Americans in order to be valid. Because he would not accept historical documentation that was passed down orally, or visually," I said.

"Oral histories?" Ben said.

"Yes. He will not accept oral histories. He won't accept *other* histories. When I was taking his class, I wrote a paper in which I discussed that Wampum was one of the most common ways of documenting a treaty without the written word. We have treaties with tribes back east that are documented in Wampum. Before treaties between the US government and tribes, the tribes documented treaties with each other in Wampum. That's a form of visual documentation. The reason I went to the trouble of explaining that was that I had found a source for the paper I was writing for that class which documented the use of things called quipus in South America,

where strings were knotted together in specific patterns and used in the same way Wampum was in North America.[83] [84] It's a record; a physical record of a story. And he wouldn't accept that either. In fact, somebody had written a paper in Spanish that I had to translate in order to use it, but he still wouldn't accept it," I said.

"Well, that all goes back to value. How do you value knowledge of history?" Ben said.

"Exactly. I confronted him on that and said, 'So, what you're saying is that if it comes from Euro-American voices then it's valid. And if it doesn't, then it's not.' He denied that's what he was saying, but I pushed back and told him that that's exactly what he was saying," I said.

"Because he's reinforcing the scientific method as seen through a Euro-American lens. That's just another way of saying that we are other, subservient, inferior. Indigenous knowledge doesn't count," Ben said. "I've been thinking about what we were talking about earlier, about westward expansion and the Doctrine of Discovery, about Manifest Destiny. Part of that is related to how western society values itself over those it defeated; over those it overtook; it consumed," Ben said.

"Yeah, it's about conquest," I said.

"And subjugation," Ben said.

"History is written by the winners," I said.

"So, how should we as Natives expect a society steeped in that tradition of conquest and colonization...how do we expect them to adhere or shift to *our* values? It's only been a few

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[83] Galen Brokaw, "Quipu," Oxford Bibliographies, January 5, 2021, https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766581/obo-9780199766581-0175.xml
[84] Frank J. Swetz, "Mathematical Treasure: The Quipu," Mathematical Association of America, June 2010, https://www.maa.org/press/periodicals/convergence/mathematical-treasure-the-quipu.

hundred years that we were weak and colonized, if that. A hundred and fifty years? Look back at what was happening; right on this spot. And for Indigenous people in the east it's more like about four hundred years, so they're twice as colonized as us out here in the west. The other day I was trying to figure out an equation not only for blood quantum but for colonization. Why don't we expect any more? We fight for our careers, and for our entire lives; my mother, my aunt; my other aunties and uncles. They've been fighting for their *whole lives* only to see things move an inch or two. There's been a lot of great things that they've made happen, but…" Ben said.

"Are you saying you think it's been a futile effort?" I asked.

"It's an act of futility," Ben said.

"You really think so?" I asked.

"Well, that's the brooding artist coming out. It's not an act of futility. They're changing lives and saving lives on a daily basis. But how do you get heard if you've been screaming for a lifetime?" Ben said.

"Well, that's an interesting question in the days of the Black Lives Matter movement, because they're getting heard right now. I've been championing lost causes my whole adult life, and maybe the causes I've taken up with Indigenous people are lost causes, too; which it seems like you are saying right now. But there's a part of me that just believes we *should* fight for what is right, just because it *is* right. That part of me is so excited about the Black Lives Matter movement right now; but there's also this other very realistic fifty-six-year-old part of me that's saying, 'Yeah, but this always happens. At some point it will get crushed. At some juncture some valid point will be driven home to the minimum degree that initiates some minimal change

nationwide, and then things will settle back down, go back to the way things were, and it will be demoralizing to have gotten so close to making real progress without actually having made any. Is that what you're trying to say?" I asked.

"Yeah. It seems that things happen in waves, especially with human rights. I mean it's a lot better in two-thousand-twenty than it was in nineteen-twenty, or eighteen-twenty, or fifteen-twenty," Ben said.

"And as we're in the middle of this Black Lives Matter movement, it all reminds me a lot of the American Indian Movement back in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. That's one of the reasons the fifty-six-year-old, realistic part of me is over hear thinking, 'Look at how much progress they're making right now, but is it going to be like the American Indian Movement, which got a lot of attention for Indian issues and then sort of fizzled out after a while?' And here you are, still trying to explain Indian issues to people, teaching Indian 101 to everyone, all the time. I know I'm saying this, but I'm really *asking*--do you really think that's what's going to happen?" I said.

"Is it futile, you mean?" Ben said. "I don't know. No, I really don't think it is. I think it's an ongoing battle. I think that, like I said, these things come in waves. If I think about it, African-Americans have been fighting and protesting for *more* than a hundred and twenty years, and there's been a lot of great changes. And a lot of great changes have come because African-Americans--Blacks--have spoken up *for* Natives," said Ben.

"Well, speaking of full circles...yes, *but*--you're still expected to paint feathers," I said.

“Yeah, but that’s a much different conversation, me painting people from my history and my family, versus my family not having any food or a place to live that’s warm and comfortable. And it’s a lot different than them going into town and being yelled at for having brown skin, you know, and getting side eyes,” said Ben.

“Do you feel like there’s been progress made in Montana? Like, do you feel that Billings is an OK place for Native Americans to live” I asked.

“It’s tough because my reality is only about thirty years long, if that; maybe only twenty-five years before I came into consciousness. I could argue that I didn’t even fully come into consciousness until about seven years ago. So, I have a really jaded view; but I think everybody does, really. Because I don’t know what it was like in the seventies or eighties,” said Ben.

“You’re kids go to school in Billings, right? How do you feel like they’re treated in school? Do they talk about it? ” I asked.

“They talk about it a little. They have a really diverse class, which is one of the reasons we decided to keep them in public school. But not every school in Billings is like that. I’ve been to a lot of these schools where it’s predominantly white. Montana is a very white state; a very, very white state. That’s not saying anything bad, that's just a fact. We still get side-eyes. We still get bad looks and bad words,” Ben said.

“Here? In Billings?” I asked.

“All over Montana. In Billings. In Bozeman, In Livingston. All over Montana, because Montana is ‘the Last Best Place.’ I mean, think about that. Onward pioneers,” said Ben.

"So, let's make another full circle and come back to your red Indian over here. We've talked about that before. It's made of plaster. You painted it red and have had people writing racial slurs on it for how many years?" I asked.

"Well, I found it at the Goodwill in Bozeman, and it was pretty expensive for a young and budding artist; maybe about a hundred bucks or so. He was painted very realistically. The rock was gray and the moccasins were painted, as was the buckskin, his guns, and shield, and all his accoutrements. But his skin was a really unrealistic dark red. I bought it because I was going to art school and I was exploring my indigeneity in Native Studies courses. I figured his role was a fallacy. He was very idealized. He had a lot of spirit to him, I believed. So I painted him red, and a lot of people have written on him; from children, to elders, to businesspeople, to movie stars, to other artists. I painted it white at first, to cover up all the fallacies, and to almost represent that I feel that I'm surrounded by this color, that is cleansing me, because *I'm* colonized. A lot of my works have turned into self-portraits, really," Ben said.

"You're the first artist that I've interviewed for this project who has come out and said that about yourself," I said.

"Said what?" Ben asked.

" 'I am colonized.' That's like me saying, 'I am racist.' So many white people can't say that, because they have all that guilt. They don't want it to be true," I said.

"Well, look at me. I'm wearing a roping hat from Sheridan, Wyoming. I'm wearing some Hoka tennis shoes. When I first saw the brand I thought they were Lakota, so I wanted to support them; but they come from New Zealand. And New Zealand has historically been a very

colonized place. They're doing better now. I'm wearing Levis jeans. Obviously I'm colonized. I'm making oil paintings," Ben said.

"So, you're able to be very real with yourself," I said.

"Gotta be," Ben said.

"Do you feel like that's connected to your life as an artist? Like, being real with yourself helps you to be more honest in your art?" I asked.

"That's a tough one. Because you can look at yourself in the mirror, but can you really see yourself? That's tough. I hope that I'm telling myself the truth, and I try to, but you never know if you're ignorant, or oblivious, or blissfully ignorant. It's an effort; an active effort," Ben said. Then he continued telling me about the origins of "Not Your Indian Epithet."

"So I painted it white for conceptual reasons. And then I painted him red, all over, to say, 'Hey, this *is* a stereotype that's been used. It's a trope. A common trope that's been used. It has an existence to it. And so this has been a very successful trope. It's gone around the world so many times. Red. And in America we talk about Red people," Ben said.

"So, what do you think about the Redskins finally changing their name?" I asked.[85]

"It's one of those fights that's been changing, you know; just because of the Black Lives Matter movement," Ben said.

"Right. And because of their biggest advertisers threatening to not do business with them anymore," I said.

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[85] Rosa Sanchez, "NFL's Washington Redskins to change name following years of backlash," ABC News, July 13, 2020, https://abcnews.go.com/US/washington-redskins-change-years-backlash/story?id=71744369

"So, for me, it's a cop out. I mean they are changing the name, but for what reason, right? The loss of money.

"And so I painted him red to sort of talk about that. What is red? And why is the red man red, you know? That line, for me, coming from Peter Pan. 'What makes the red man red?' What's that Chief's name?" Ben said.

"I don't remember, but when I started working on my doctorate, Bob Rydell encouraged us to take a look at Disney's 'Peter Pan' again to see if it was what we remembered as children. I had forgotten all about the Indians in that movie. It was terribly racist," I said.

"You changed perspectives, right?" Ben asked.

"Yes!" I said.

"So, that's where I'm coming from with this. But originally I didn't prompt people to provide me with these tropes or racial slurs. But that's what happened. People started doing it and then it progressed. And then the nature of the comments changed. The more it filled up with stereotypes and slurs, and very negative things, and it continued. Then people started writing comments to counter the negative ones, in a sort of progression, and it got progressively better. People see this, and they recognize it, and they started writing things that are positive. So people are writing things about their grandmothers and their language, repatriation and reparations...I mean it's all on there, you can see it," Ben said.

"I see 'Squanto' written on the neck. Do you know who wrote that?" I asked. "Do you have any idea why they write what they write on there?"

"When it's with me, I usually ask people why they wrote what they wrote. We had conversations about...maybe they called someone that when they were younger and they felt bad about it, remorseful. And so it's really complex, this experience I've had with people. I think it's like these honorable battles we're having, like teaching Indian 101. Because people *are* writing positive things," Ben said. "I was going to paint it white again, to capture the positive things people might have to say, but the positive things started coming on their own, so I just left it red.

"So, tell me about the Make America Great Again hat. Why did you put that on there?" I asked. I was referring to the fact that Ben had placed a Make America Great Again hat on the head of the *Not Your Indian Epithet* statue.

"Well, I got it for an art project about a month ago, but I haven't had time to work on the project, because I've been too busy. But I figured this raw piece of feather [on this statue] is so powerful all by itself, do I even need to do anything to it?" Ben said.

"When you put that hat on that statue…" I started to say.

"I could just put this hat on a pedestal and call it Native art," Ben said.

"You can," I said. "I wrote an entire paper on that."

"And so that's that," Ben said.

"Yes. That's something that a lot of my students had a hard time grasping: Native American art is art made by Native Americans. That's a legal definition. So, you could take a urinal, like Marcel Duchamp did, hang it on the wall, call it *Fountain*, and it would be Native American art," I said.

"Exactly. It's like I said, earlier: Our works are expressions of our existence. It's unredactable. Art and culture--you can't separate those. Not with who we are. Maybe in the western world, but not in our world," Ben said.

Moving back to his paintings in the studio, I said, "So, you've added these. You have one more of these that you said was at home. Is this just an extension of the project you started with your original statue?" I was referring to some other statues that Ben has acquired that are similar to *Not Your Indian Epithet*.

"They're extensions, because I can't send this one piece everywhere, because it's being exhibited all the time, and I want to spend time with it. And it's not for sale because I don't want to sell it. I've had people offer me thirty thousand dollars for it, but I just can't do it, you know. When I'm ready, maybe. But probably not," Ben said.

"That is the piece that sticks in my mind, of all the pieces I've looked at over the course of this project; because it's truly contemporary, it's modern," I said.

"It's just different," Ben said.

"It's the kind of modern art you expect to see somewhere like the MOMA, but you don't expect a Native American artist to have done it," I said.

"I should be doing ledger art, right?" Ben joked.

"You should," I joked back.

"But in a way you have, because what is ledger art? People look at ledger art and see it as traditional Native American art, but it's not. What it was, was a way for a bunch of captured Indigenous soldiers to tell their stories in a medium that was available to them," I said.

"But it's so much more than that," Ben said.

"It *is* so much more than that!" I said.

"It's just like this is to this," Ben said, referring to the new statue that he added to what is becoming a series of statues painted red. "Ledger art is an extension."

"The point that I was about to make is that they told their stories with the tools that were given to them in their captivity, but it wasn't *just* that. It was an extension of the way they used to tell their stories, but in a new medium," I said. "Instead of hide and vegetable pigments they were using ledger paper, pencils, and watercolor paints. They were subject to involuntary constraints but their methods evolved and they adapted. In that new medium it told a whole new story in a whole new way, and you've done the same thing, here. I mean you've got painting on a non-traditional support," I said.

"Yeah, yeah," Ben said.

"Writing on the painting," I said.

"Right. There you go," Ben said. "That's what these are. That's what inspired my work at the Field Museum in Chicago, was these sculptures. I made twelve foot sculptures for the Field Museum. Instead of sculptures I'm treating these as 3-D paintings."

At this point I was so struck by the power of Ben's work and the deep layers of thought behind everything that he makes, as well as the way his work is informed by the conversations he has with people at art shows and galleries, when he ends up teaching Indian 101. There is nothing unintentional in his work. The statements he makes may not always come directly out of his conscious mind, but the finished work always tells a powerful story of his experience as an

Indian man and a Native American artist in a world where he is constantly having to explain himself and his very existence to people all the time.

"Just as your friend and someone who has followed you all this time, are you planning to finish your BFA? Why didn't you finish it?" For the uninitiated: BFA stands for Bachelor of Fine art and is the equivalent of a Bachelor of Science (BS) degree in any other undergraduate field of research. Been had started a BFA program at Montana State University in Bozeman years earlier but, despite his early successes making and selling art, he dropped out and set about being a full-time artist.

"Because I got 'big-headed.' I didn't have my priorities focused on education. Even my professors were asking me, 'Why are you here?' But now I think they were asking me, 'Why do you *want* to be here? Why are you still here if you don't enjoy what you're doing?' I thought they were asking me, 'Why are you here, because you're already so successful,' but I think in hindsight they were asking me, 'Why are you here if you don't want to be here?' But we never clarified and differentiated that point," Ben said.

"Do you think you'll go back and finish it?" I asked.

"That was one of the reasons I started here at Rocky, because they offered to let me finish my degree," he said.

"So, you are going to finish your BFA, then?" I asked.

"I think so. I'm pretty sure," said Ben. "Rocky gave me a scholarship and it's only one or two more classes, so...yeah."

"At the risk of sounding like your mother, or at least like one of your aunties: you could just go on and get an MFA and become a professor," I said.

"Yeah, but then I wouldn't have as much time to make my own work," Ben said.

"Well, there is that. God knows I haven't been able to make much work for the last nine years, working on *this* project," I said.

"But I *am* teaching, sharing my thoughts with people, doing this," Ben said.

"That's why I'm asking you this," I said. "You are asking deep intellectual and philosophical questions…"

"Yeah, but then again it's like, am I really going anywhere with these deep questions and philosophies, if nobody else is talking about it?" Ben said.

"Do you have to be going somewhere?" I asked.

"At least progress within yourself, because...I talk about these things with other artists, and we get into arguments. 'Stop thinking so hard. You're not going to make things change. Just ride this wave as far as it will take you, man. Just do what you do.' And I've had western artists say, 'Quiet down; sit down; make some money and *then* talk. Establish yourself. Build a foundation.' " Ben said.

"For the sake of making a living?" I asked.

"A really good living for my family. Because doing it that way is their reality. That's what they do and what they think makes them successful, you know," Ben said.

"What do *you* think?" I asked.

“I've recently been trying to--instead of focusing on being more productive in the studio--*enjoying* my time in the studio. Enjoying this paintbrush, and the paint. Enjoying conversations and meetings like this one. Just...*experience*. Because I think, in the long run, if there is a long run for me, it’ll be so much more valuable than saying, ‘Hey, if I can sell this painting for five hundred thousand dollars, in forty years, that’s success,’ “ Ben said.

“So, you’re a bit of an idealist,” I said.

“A hopeless romantic,” Ben said.

“There are worse things,” I said.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m definitely an idealist. But I’ve never really made strides and bounds. I just have a lot of cool ideas I try to explore,” said Ben.

We talked for a few minutes about the struggle he feels, trying to balance his desire to change things for the better through his work with a sense of futility about whether anything he does really matters.

“I’m working on that, you know. But I think there are real world problems that can be touched and affected by maybe some words that I have, or ideas, or organizations I decide to work with. And that’s hard, with art, with social justice...anything, because I’m just another hand, you know, when it comes down to it; and that’s a long ways from idealism, I think.

“So, I don’t think my paintings are going to change the world, especially in the way we view Native peoples. Rather, I just want to enjoy what I do. And I don’t want to have to carry the burden of Indian 101 to my grave, whenever that is. Whether that’s a literal sense or a metaphorical thing, I don’t know, ” said Ben.

"I guess my big take-away from our talk today, and I'm going to say it out loud because I want you to correct me if I'm wrong, is you have a lot of thoughts...a lot of thoughts and ideas…" I said.

"But they're not all actualized here, though," Ben said.

"No, but you have them," I said.

"They're there; sometimes," Ben said.

"...but you feel most connected when you're painting. So, the writing on the paintings comes out of that, maybe?" I asked.

"I don't know. It's just another part of my reaction and experience, because most times I can't even make out what they say. I think it's the energy exchange and that's what's important. But I've gotta make a living, right? So, should I keep making the art if I'm thinking about all these things? Or should I be blissfully ignorant and forget all about that stuff?" said Ben.

"But do you really have to pursue just one particular truth to the exclusion of all others?" I asked.

"Yeah, I really don't think I'm going to say I'm only going to do *this* for the rest of my life. There's options and opportunities that arise all the time; all kinds of interesting things, you know. Whether it's science based, or spiritually based, or creatively based. It shifts and it evolves all the time. It's just that what people know me for, now, is my art; but I have a lot of other things that I notice," Ben said.

"Do you ever write *not* on the paintings? I mean, do you write things down on paper?" I asked.

"Yeah, I have lots of writings. One of my addictions is workbooks, sketchbooks; but I'm always buying them and never filling them. I'll write like ten or twenty or thirty pages, and then I'll start a new book. They're just everywhere. So, if someone was to conglomerate those, they might have something worth reading," Ben said.

"Do you feel like it's just a process to help yourself, to capture your thoughts?" I asked.

"Well, yeah I have to be able to capture my thoughts, because otherwise I'm not able to talk about them when I need them. Because they're tools, right? They carry their own life. They have their own progression, like with the Manifest Destiny thing. I have pages and pages I've written about that, where it came from, and especially how it's expressed in painting and sculpture in America," Ben said.

"So, talk to me about Manifest Destiny. Do you feel like it's still being enacted?" I asked.

"I do. I mean, what is the American Dream, today?" asked Ben.

"That is such a good question. Do we even know what the American Dream is? I would say that the American Dream in its inception, and now in the way people idealize it, is to...well, it used to mean just to have a home, a roof over your head; to have enough money to enjoy various pursuits; healthy happy children; good relationships…" I said.

"As it was conceived," Ben said.

"Yes. But now it has become this unbelievable megalomaniacal entitlement scheme. Everyone wants to be a billionaire. Everyone feels entitled to go after what they want at the expense of everyone else, which is a lot of what that MAGA hat represents to me right now. So, what do you feel like it is?" I said.

"Yeah, with Manifest Destiny combined with something like the Doctrine of Discovery, for me they work in tandem. They're all powerful allies and opposing forces in a lot of different ways," Ben said.

"Do you still feel like it's a white fantasy? Or does it include a more diverse America," I asked.

"I think that our realities are separate. Not just white versus Indian, but within our own Indian communities. Because we have factions of Christians and Baptists, Pentecostals, traditionalists, you know. And even there there's contention. Huge arguments and huge infighting. And so, I guess I'm thinking about...I'm thinking about ownership. I get to thinking about accumulation within our cultures and societies. And I begin to think about what is dividing us and what is separating us. And that's only within our own communities on the reservations. That's not even recognizing what the rest of the world is doing in their own bubbles, in their own vacuums. We're colonized and there's really no going back to the way it was, ever," Ben said.

"So, what do other people in your culture say when you say that? Do they deny their colonization? Or do they disagree that it can't go back to the way it was?" I asked.

"Well, it's super variable, because there's archaeologists, there's intellectuals, academics, there's political influence. There's all kinds of things. And then there's idealists like me. But on the opposite end of that spectrum there's people who live their culture every single day. They pray with it, you know; and smudge. They speak in good ways and tell stories. But then they walk outside and they get in a Ford pickup and drive off," Ben said.

"That sounds so very Dwayne Wilcox," I said. Dwayne Wilcox is a ledger artist enrolled in the Oglala Sioux tribe in South Dakota. His art pokes fun at seeming inconsistencies like these, in a good humored way.[86]

"But that's true. And so, obviously, there's no going back. We adapt. We change," said Ben.

"Do you have gallery representation?" I asked.

"I'm pulling out of all the galleries who have been representing me because I don't feel like they share my work in a way that I would like it to be shared, and what it means to me, and what is required to get the right message across. I was in a lot of galleries in these little insular communities that have a lot of money," Ben said.

"So, you feel like you're a money-making machine for them, rather than getting your work to people who would truly appreciate it?" I asked.

"I feel like people need it, you know? People need to know that Black people are being killed. People need to know that there's discrepancies, and people aren't being treated like humans. People need to know these things. Just like people need to know whatever this turns into," Ben said, referring to the painting he showed me at the beginning of our time together. "That's just as important for me. So, I'm pulling out of all of the galleries that were representing me, and I'm focusing on building a very strong and informed relationship with the Stapleton Gallery here in Billings."

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[86] Staff writer, "Dwayne Wilcox: Above The Fruited Plains," Missoula Art Museum, June 1, 2012, https://missoulaartmuseum.org/exhibits/dwayne-wilcox-above-the-fruited-plains.

"Have you ever applied to a juried museum exhibit?" I asked. "Because I was thinking that if you believe your artwork has a message that people need to hear, perhaps that would be the best way to get the word out."

If you recall, earlier in this interview Ben mentioned briefly something about his work being on display at the Field Museum in Chicago. I later learned that this is a considerable exhibition entitled *Apsáalooke Women and Warriors*, and it will be a traveling exhibit once it leaves the Field Museum. It's next stop will be at the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman, Montana. The Field Museum website provides this summary of what that exhibit features: "In this exhibition, learn about the history, values, and beliefs of the Apsáalooke (Ahp-SAH-luh-guh) people of the Northern Plains, also known as the Crow. Understand and honor the tradition of 'counting coup'—performing acts of bravery. From 100-year-old war shields to contemporary beadwork and fashion, Apsáalooke community members tell their stories and share vibrant works of art."[87]

I asked Ben about any other museum exhibits he might be associated with.

"The Yellowstone Art Museum asked me to curate an exhibition that will go live next year, and it's about invisibility," Ben said. "One part of the exhibition is combining works with African-American (Black) artists with work by Native American artists. Here's one of the things I'm working on for that exhibit. I called it, 'I Refuse to Be Invisible.' And there's an accompanying exhibit that's just Native works, and it's going to be titled 'Invisibilia.'"

[87] Staff writer, "APSÁALOOKE WOMEN AND WARRIORS," Field Museum, July 10, 2021, https://www.fieldmuseum.org/exhibitions/apsaalooke-women-and-warriors.

"You're doing great stuff, Ben. I feel like you've really come a long way since the first time I talked to you. Or maybe you were always doing great stuff and I just didn't know it," I said.

"I didn't know how to say it, then. I didn't know how to get it out. I'm still working on that part, too," Ben said.

As Ben and I continued to talk about Indian representation in museums and galleries, I asked him if he had ever been rejected from a juried art competition that was not specifically for Native American art because he was Native American. He said that he had been, but he didn't want to name the competition. However, he did say that he thought he didn't get his work into that competition because his aesthetic was too Indian.

"That's interesting, especially when there are so many non-Indigenous artists painting Indians, and their work makes it into those shows. How do you feel about not getting accepted to a juried western art competition when non-Indian artists who paint Indians and Indigenous imagery do get into those shows. One in particular (who we already discussed earlier) makes upwards of ten thousand dollars a painting for works in which he has appropriated Native American culture. How is that similar to, or different than, what you went through not having your work accepted to a show, when you are a real Indian?" I asked.

"Obviously, it's more accepted and widely practiced. It's a hell of a lot more common than Indians painting Indians, and being successful at it, so I don't fault them for it at all," Ben said. I thought that was awfully gracious of him. But then he went on to say, "So, then I'll paint cowboys, you know. Indians painting cowboys. But that's just a reaffirmation of the Doctrine of

Discovery and Manifest Destiny, every time I see a cowboy. When I see Indian cowboys I'm confused," he said, humorously.

More seriously, he said, "Yes, I have a lot of reservations about non-Natives painting Indians, because I've talked about it two million times. If you look on the web you can probably find where I've been quoted talking about that, because I've talked about it so much. But we're still talking about it, and there's more of them than there are Natives painting Natives. I had a guy walk in my booth one time and he said, 'Oh. An Indian painting an Indian.' He was confused; sort of frustrated. And then he just turned around and walked out."

"Was he white?" I asked.

"Yeah, he was white," Ben said. "And, you know, I said, 'That guy is right. This is not normal. Especially here. It's not normal at all. Everything he'd seen before that was white people painting Indians. That was his conception of western art: white people painting Indians. When I think about Howard Terpning.[88] He made over a million dollars on a painting he did of Indians and he's still alive. I mean, he tried to be representational, objective, and as correct as he could; but he wasn't part of any community. I don't think he ever got permission to paint any of these things. It's a huge, huge sector; it's a huge industry, western art. Huge. There's so much money in it."

"Well, part of that huge western art market is paintings of bison, cattle, elk, deer, and landscapes. This goes back to Rousseau's "Noble Savage" philosophy.[89] So, what does that say

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[88] Various contributors, "Howard Turpning," Wikipedia, May 30, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_Terpning#Fine_art

[89] Staff writer, Editors of Encyclopedia, "Noble Savage," Encyclopedia Brittanica, April 24, 2019, https://www.britannica.com/art/noble-savage.

about Native American people, that they are a part of the landscape? That they're part of the west, but they're not…" I asked.

"That comes back to the idea that we're on the same level as the land, and the same level as the animals. Ultimately, we're 'under.' We're less human. It's a normalized perspective on Indigenous people. Why is it normalized? Because people believe it. It's what's been passed down. It's cultural heritage," Ben said. "And so, for me...I'm not the culture police. I'm not going to change anybody's minds, or anybody's hearts about how they make their living as an artist, or how they consume their beautiful things, you know?"

Ben went on to explain that he felt that he had to paint within the constraints of a specific box in order for his work to be acceptable to the public, whereas non-Indian artists can paint whatever they want to paint, without expectations or constraints. Regardless, he felt it was either futile or not something he wanted to spend his energy on, to go around and try to educate the non-Indigenous painters about cultural appropriation.

He also said it wasn't something he felt overly oppressed by because his work was being very well received, especially in Montana.

"I'm a new, young face and my career's been moving at a pretty decently fast pace over the last few years. I guess things come in waves, but especially things like this. Right now, it's cool to be Native American, and so people want me at their table. They want my paintings in their house. They're sort of tickets to be cool; to qualify for 'wokeness.' So, that's one of the reasons that, more times than not, I've been accepted; because I'm Indian. People [who collect my work] want to be inclusive; and they want to be more diverse. I think, to a fault, I've been

tokenized, because a lot of times I feel like I'm 'white famous,' and to me that's a failure," Ben said.

"So, how can you redeem that? I mean, obviously I don't feel like you're a failure, but I understand what you're saying about yourself," I said.

"Remember when we were talking about silos, right? Vacuums? On the reservation, the way we value stuff, it's different than it is even in Billings, you know. And the way that we value things is different than the way they value things on the Blackfeet reservation. And the way that they do it is different than Pine Ridge. And the way that those three peoples do it is different than all the rest of Native America. We have our slogans, and we have our tropes; our mannerisms that are mainstream Native America, that are pan-Indian. We have aesthetics we can plug into to be successful within Native America. And we have other ways to be successful in the white world. Because it's different. It's not the same. But you know, I'm addicted to money because that's what makes our world go 'round, you know. That's what dictates our quality of life. And whether we want to accept it or not, that's the way it is," said Ben.

After exhausting that subject, we made another full circle back to his residency at Rocky Mountain College, and what that entailed. Ben told me that RMC had approached him and offered him the residency, but he was reluctant at first.

"I told them, 'If I do this, I come with baggage,'" Ben said. "We're going to have to do some other things. I can't just be a face. I can't just be 'the Indian artist on campus.' And then COVID hit. But what I wanted to do is work with students, and so we decided to work with the

Native American outreach program to advocate for students in their communities; work with organizations; create relationships."

"Is it like a research assistantship, or a teaching assistantship, where they pay your tuition in exchange for your work in the residency? Do you get a stipend?" I asked.

"There's a stipend involved. The Scott Family Foundation wanted to support me. They've been supporting me for years, even though I didn't know it. I keep finding out that they've been buying my works wherever they can get them, it seems like; different members of the family. I don't know what it's about, but it's happening," said Ben.

"So, you have a patron of sorts," I said.

"Something like it. I don't know why. But they know who we are. Our family association goes back three generations; our family's relationship," Ben said.

Ben is also a founding member of the Creative Indigenous Collective which he started with Robert Martinez, Lauren Monroe, John Pepion, and Louis Still Smoking. They organized themselves to actively work for better representation of Indigenous artists. John, Lauren, Robert and Ben also participated in a program called Youth Artists in Action, through which they bring in Native American kids, teach them about making art using better materials, how to market themselves, how to manage their taxes, marketing, and social media.

"Things that you never learn in art school," said Ben. "We teach them about collaboration and how to collaborate with other artists. How to sell. How to talk to clients."

"Have any of your other students from that program gone on to pursue an art career?" I asked.

"Yeah. One of our students just finished her first year at IAIA in Santa Fe. KamiJo White Clay. And another one of our students was featured in the Billings Gazette. His name is Cyrus Caufield," said Ben.

He also mentioned some work they had done on a community project spray painting a teepee, and that they had done some work with the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) project.

"These are healthy projects. That's the reason I do the Montana Folk Festival," he said. The Montana Folk Festival provides Ben and the other members of the CIC an opportunity to come together to work on projects like those.

Otherwise, he doesn't, as a rule, do festivals.

"Well, like that sculpture, for example," Ben said, referring to *Not Your Indian Epithet.* "People would come by and throw stuff at me; yell at me…"

"White people or Indian people?" I asked.

"White people," Ben said.

"What did they not like about it?" I asked.

"Well, they...some people got mad because they saw "nigger"[90] on the back, because someone wrote "timber nigger" on it," Ben said.

"So, they were offended by the N word?" I asked.

[90] It is important for the reader to understand that this is a common racial slur directed at Indian people, and I do *not* condone its use under any circumstances. However, this was a direct quote and I thought it was important not to censor Ben since dealing with racial slurs is a part of his daily life, and it's important to tell the truth about that.

“They were offended by the fact that I had let people write the truth of their experience on there. They think it’s me that wrote it, voicing my opinion; but it’s these other Indian people that wrote these things,” said Ben.

“So, they don’t like you telling the truth,” I said.

“Yes, but I don’t know how they see it. They may think I’m too sensitive, or too reactive,” Ben said.

“That sounds like my family in Alabama getting really, really mad at me for telling them to stop bringing the Confederate flag to the family reunion. Is it like that? Like, ‘how dare you tell the truth about us because it makes us look bad,’?” I asked.

“Yeah, but then again I’ve also had Native people get mad at me, but also support me for this sculpture; cry about it; laugh about it; just a whole range of emotions, because of this one piece,” Ben said.

“That’s what I think I like about it so much, that it invokes so many responses; because I believe that’s what good art is all about: it invokes a response, whatever that response might be. I used to have a great t-shirt that said, ‘Good art won’t match your sofa.’ Now, sometimes good art does match your sofa. But the point the artist was making was to ask the audience to consider whether they admire or buy art because it speaks to them or causes them to respond in some way; or because it looks good in their house,” I said.

“Yeah, I mean even buying art for an investment...it’s still art, and a lot of artists make art for the value, and people pay a lot of money for it because it’s valuable,” Ben said.

“Speaking of value, are you able to make a living solely from your art sales?” I asked.

"Yes and no," Ben said.

"Is it like 'feast or famine?'" I asked.

"Yeah. The first time I heard that term was from Kevin Red Star," Ben said. "He said you could make fifty thousand one month and nothing the next month. He said it would happen, and it has."

Ben talked for a little while about how it took him some time to figure out how to do the business of art, what best practices to employ in the marketing of his work, and how he is still working on that.

"Are you comfortable sharing with me how much you make every year selling your artwork?" I asked.

"Yeah. When I lived in Bozeman, it was around sixty thousand before taxes. Every year since then it's gone up about a third or so. I don't know what it looks like this year," Ben said.

"Well, I don't think any of us know what anything looks like this year. It's a little scary," I said, referring to all the interruptions of our usual activities and ways of doing business, school, etc., during a pandemic.

"But it has gone up, progressively; because I'm selling more paintings at higher prices," Ben said.

"How many paintings do you think you do in a year?" I asked.

"Anywhere from thirty to fifty," Ben said. "But they're not all big, you know. Some are bigger than this," he said, referring to the painting on his easel, which was about four feet tall by

five feet wide. “Some are the size of a wall. Some are smaller than that teepee painting,” he said, referring to a little painting in his studio about eleven inches tall by fourteen inches wide.

“Do you have a day job, or do you just paint?” I asked.

“I don’t have a day job. I’ve been thinking about getting one, though,” Ben said.

“Why? You’re able to make a living painting full time. Why would you want to get a day job?” I asked.

“So I could have another experience,” Ben said. “Just make friends, even if it’s just at a coffee shop.” I think Ben was mostly joking when he said this. He does have a very dry, wry sense of humor.

“Well, I have a day job and it keeps me from painting,” I said. Then I commented on another very small painting in his studio.

“‘Teepee Painting Make Me Swoon,’” I said, reading the text Ben had written on the side of a teepee in the little painting.

“That’s a shot at all the non-Natives painting teepees,” Ben said. “Because they sell very well, they’re beautiful…”

“So, there are people that do that as a business?” I asked.

“Well, yeah. Even some of the fine artists will,” said Ben, making a distinction here between non-Native artists painting actual teepees with Native designs and non-Native artists creating paintings *of* teepees. He named a few artists who do this, and then his mother, Linda, chimed in about some paintings I see on a regular basis when I go to my doctor’s office.

“And there’s the atrium at Billings Clinic…” said Linda.

"Oh, that's Kira Fercho. She got commissioned by the Billings Clinic to do a painting from each tribe...a painting of their teepee lodges," said Ben.[91]

"So, she did these paintings of teepee lodges and she's not native?" I asked.

"She's not native. No," said Ben. "It's just the way it is. When it happened, I thought, 'I could have gotten that contract. Or one of my friends could have gotten that contract.'"

"Yeah, but then you'd be an Indian painting Indians," I said, joking, and realizing we had just closed two more full circles with that conversation thread.

"I think one of the reasons it has taken me so long to write all this and to get all of this done," I said, referring to the nine years I had spent at that point, on my doctoral project, "is because I just can't grok it all.[92] There's just so much that's *wrong*."

"Well, coming back to that, I started this little series of small paintings. They're all small. This is like the third one. They're teepees with messages on them, whether it's a visual message or a written message. But I've seen a change," Ben said, referring to changes he has witnessed in some of the non-Native artists he is associated with, as a result of having their consciousness raised about certain issues of importance to Indian people. "They're painting less Indians; less teepees. And because we operate in similar circles I think that they've seen my work and felt

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[91] Jaci Webb, "Artist's original commission blossoms to 12 paintings for Billings Clinic Commons," The Billings Gazette, July 11, 2014, https://billingsgazette.com/entertainment/arts-and-theatre/visual/artist-s-original-commission-blossoms-to-12-paintings-for-billings-clinic-commons/article_a5560080-08c3-5dc5-9b77-4989d3f79a9a.html#tncms-source=login.

[92] The term "grok" comes from a science fiction novel by Robert Heinlein called, "Stranger in a Strange Land," published in 1961. As a science fiction buff, I not only loved that book but (like so many other Heinlein fans) found his invented word, "grok," so much more sufficient for describing a gut-level understanding of things that are profoundly incomprehensible, like many of the issues discussed with the eleven artists featured in this work, just as I used it here to describe how incomprehensible it is that white people continue to ignore the issues that are of such great concern to BIPOC people, because "incomprehensible" just doesn't cover it. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grok

confronted. It's kind of like, 'I see you.' I think about cultural change and social change, and by painting these...I'm not painting them to sell them, but people like them, you know. They're popular, so more people see them, and the non-Native artists see them. And once something sticks in your mind it doesn't want to leave."

Once again, we'd made a full circle back to not only the idea of subliminal messages, but also activist art and social activism.

"So, now we're back to the 'honorable battle' and the potential futility of fighting such an honorable battle. After talking with you today, it sounds like it's not futile at all. You are definitely making an impact on the art community; and not just the Indigenous art community," I said.

"I couldn't put a number to it, if that's what you're asking," Ben said.

"No, I'm not looking for specific numbers," I said.

"But, it's not futile. It's just part of my idealist nature to say that it is. It all really just comes down to intention. What are you intending to do? If you're intending to make money painting Indians, well, OK, then that's what you're doing. *I see it. I see you. I see what you're doing*. But you're gonna get this," Ben said, making that hand motion you've seen in comedy movies like, "Meet the Fockers," where Robert Deniro's character makes a V with his index and middle finger, points the V at his own eyes and then sweeps the V out and points it at Ben Stiller's character.

"I'll be saying, 'You should stop this shit.' I'm that person that's calling them out in my own artwork, about what they're putting in theirs," said Ben.

While we were still close to the topic of non-Indigenous painters painting Indians, and Indians painting Indians, I asked, “One of the questions I have had about your work since I first saw your work years ago is: are the pictures that you paint from, are those just people from your family, or are they from the historical archives? Are they all Crows?”

“I paint mostly what I know, and all I know is Crow,” Ben said. “I’m Northern Cheyenne enrolled but I wasn’t raised there. I didn’t have the determination or audacity to research that side. I have ‘daddy issues.’”

“So, are these pictures that belong to you?” I asked.

“No, these are not pictures that belong to me. They are historical, and they’re in the public domain. But even, if they weren’t, it doesn’t matter. I’d still use them because I claim a cultural copyright,” said Ben.

“That actually answers a lot of my next set of questions, because I was wondering how does your tribe feel about your work? Are they proud of your work?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I couldn’t say,” said Ben.

“Have you gotten any feedback from them about it?” I asked.

“Yeah, but I’m not gonna...I don’t want to speak for how my family or other people might feel about my work, because it’s not my place. But I do claim cultural intellectual property rights over the subject matter, because these are our people; they’re a part of us,” Ben said.

He made his next comments as if addressing an imaginary gathering of non-Indian artists. “How do you take something from us and make it yours? You take our faces. You take our history and our culture. You take our skin,” Ben said.

"So, in painting people from the historical photo archives of Crow people, you're taking it back?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm taking it back," Ben said.

"That's a great answer. The reason I'm asking about that is that some of the Indigenous artists I've talked to have felt like their tribe or community did *not* appreciate the way they expressed their creativity. They were encouraged to do things that were more "traditional," by that 1890s snapshot definition, or by a definition that might have been actually traditional to the tribe. I just wondered if you had gotten any feedback on that," I said.

" I have. I have," said Ben. "The one thing I think we need to recognize is that there are separate factions within the tribes, and even within those factions you're dealing with cultural boundaries that are organized separately."

"Well, there are other versions of colonized culture, right?" I said.

"Yeah. From Crow Catholics to Crow Mormons to…" Ben said.

"See, all of that just sounds like it's loaded with cognitive dissonance," I said.

"All of it is, yeah," said Ben. "I'm not going to say that I'm right."

"Well, I guess what I'm asking is whether anyone has said that you're wrong to do it the way that you're doing it," I said.

"Yeah," said Ben.

"And you do it anyway," I said.

"A lot of people have said I'm wrong, but a lot of people have said I'm right," Ben said. "I'm not gonna argue with them because their reality is apart from mine."

"So, you are claiming your cultural copyright and you are expressing yourself the way you experience the world," I said.

"Yeah, I feel like my work is a part of my own medicine.[93] It's a part of my individualism" Ben said. "A lot of these individuals, if I'd asked them if I could paint them, they might have said no. But they're not with us anymore. I've thought about that quite a bit, you know. There's a lot of Native artists who frown upon using historical images, because of that fact. But you can't get their permission, because they're not here anymore."

"No, you can't. But they did pose for those photos, so at some point they must have given some kind of permission to someone," I said.

"In another context," said Ben.

Ben shared a story about a girl in a photo he found who did not want her photo taken. There was some information recorded with that photo that indicated that the girl did not give her permission, but the photographer took the photo anyway. Then he gave her a print of it as a gift, in exchange for her having sat for the photo.

We exhausted that subject, and Ben mentioned his relationship with the CIC again, and the different approaches he and some of the other members take, and how their differing philosophies can actually be mutually beneficial. John Pepion enjoys marketing and is really good at it, for example; while Ben prefers to stay in the studio and explore new ways of creating images and expressing ideas. John makes art, just as Ben does; but they both play to their strengths and that in turn strengthens the whole group.

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[93] When Ben, or any Indigenous person, uses the word "medicine" this way, they're not talking about western medicine. They are talking about a holistic experience that keeps them in spiritual balance.

"So would you say that it's a cooperative relationship, rather than a competitive one, then?" I asked.

"Yes, because he covers bases that I don't want to," said Ben. "There's enough good to go around for all of us."

"What challenges have you faced in the past, and perhaps in the present, that you believe are unique to being a Native American artist making contemporary art rather than traditional art? And did the formation of the CIC help you meet those challenges?" I asked.

"Being tokenized in certain circles has been a detriment, and being a young face has been a bit detrimental. But the success I've experienced has helped a lot of people getting started as artists," Ben said, referring to the Youth in Action program he and the other CIC artists worked with at the 2017 Montana Folk Festival.

"Why do you think non-Indigenous artists don't face those same challenges?" I asked.

"Early on, when I was getting started, I participated in a lot of art auctions and quick-draws. I benefited from being involved and being embraced. But I started getting frustrated with those events and the consumers at those events because of their freedoms, and...because they don't have to know anything about Native people and what we've gone through. They can just donate and go on to the next thing," Ben said.

"So there's a kind of privilege built into being a non-Indigenous artist," I said.

"Yeah, there is. Because...beautiful landscapes, beautiful mountains, beautiful horses, flowers…" Ben said.

"Nobody questions whether you're accurately representing your culture," I said.

"Right. So, there's a freedom of blissful ignorance, obviously. That's why I get a little bit jealous, you know. Freedom of thought can be bought," said Ben. "I didn't have it before I had money."

"So, you have freedom of thought now that you're making money selling your art. Is that what you're saying?" I asked.

"Yeah, because I can sit at home a little bit, now that I have some money in the bank. Not a lot, but enough to sit for a day or two, and not do anything. And not a lot of people have that. So, I'm lucky. I'm more fortunate than a lot of other artists, and some artists are more fortunate than I am," Ben said.

While Ben and I were talking about the privilege that money and success can buy, my cell phone rang. My ringtone is an audio clip of Captain James T. Kirk from the original Star Trek series saying, "Space. The final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise…" from the opening sequence of that series. I only mention this here because that little interruption spawned another discussion about colonization and white privilege that completed yet another full circle in this interview with Ben.

"I'm sorry. That's my ringtone. I'm a die-hard Star Trek fan," I said, silencing the ringer as quickly as I could.

"Colonized space," Ben said.

"Exactly! It is. In fact, going into Native American Studies with my master's degree made it so that I couldn't really see Star Trek the same way, anymore. My favorite Star Trek series is now Deep Space Nine, because it questions all of the status quo embodied in white

privilege. It has a Black Captain. It explores a lot of these colonization and privilege issues, the rights of Indigenous peoples, different world views through different religious lenses... Only you're doing it with alien species instead of Native Americans and African-Americans, you know. When I got into American Studies, which is cultural studies, I finally realized that that's *why* I have always loved Star Trek so much, because Star Trek *is* cultural studies.

"That was a little side trip I didn't mean to take," I said. We laughed and talked about Indians in outer space, and other sci-fi tangents having nothing to do with our discussion about Indigenous art.

Circling back to our last thread, Ben said, "How do you supercede human nature, in terms of colonizing, war mongering, and slavery?"

"If you're really asking, one of the things that I have...I mean, I'm like you--I sit around and think about all this stuff and I just carry this huge cultural burden, you know? And my burden is a *horrible* burden. I mean, I'm white, so having to own up to everything that's been done to protect white privilege and European conquest, Euro-American conquest...I mean...that's a huge burden to bear," I said.

"Well, I'm white, too," said Ben. Making the point that none of us is ethnically pure *anything*.

"Well, by that definition, I'm Indigenous too. I have .79% Indigenous DNA. But that doesn't make me Indigenous. I wasn't raised indignenous," I said.

"I want to get a t-shirt made that says, 'I'm white too'," Ben said.

The point we were making with that last little exchange is that culture trumps DNA every time, and no one is of any one pure race. Ben said, “I’m white too,” partly to make that point, but also because he is kind and was letting me know that it’s not up to me to carry the entire burden for all white people, while acknowledging that he has white ancestry.

We continued talking about that for a few minutes, and then I started to draw the interview to a close.

“This has been a really long interview and I am so grateful for your time, Ben. I’m also really glad to have been able to interview you, John, and Lauren, because I know that the CIC has more members, but you really seem to be the heart of it. You seem to have taken your collective destiny into your own hands by creating that group,” I said.

“Manifest your destiny,” Ben said, tongue in cheek, closing another full circle on the topic of Manifest Destiny.

Then Ben asked me what I planned to do with the interviews I had collected, and what I had learned.

“I’m really invested in this work being a vehicle for your voices. Not just another white person hanging out with a bunch of Indians, studying them on the reservation, then taking their research elsewhere, where it is of no benefit to the Indian people who participated in the research. From my point of view, this whole project has been me, as an artist, being part of a larger art community of artists where I actually get to listen to my Indigenous contemporaries talk about what it’s like for *them* to be artists,” I said.

"Yeah. You're doing a very odd thing. Thank you for being odd," Ben said, chuckling, and referring to the fact that I didn't make this a typical anthropological science project.

I don't think there is anything I could, or should, add to Ben's comments here. However, I do want to emphasize that Ben spoke openly and candidly about his experience as a Native American artist, as well as a Native American man, and I think it's important that the reader receive what he had to say with an open heart. It takes a lot of courage to be so frank about topics that make white people cringe, and sometimes even angry, especially when you know it's going to be put in a dissertation and published for the world to read. White fragility is real. But that's Ben--he doesn't hold back. He's willing to teach Indian 101 to anyone who needs it, and anyone who will listen. As he said early in this conversation, "Our works are extensions of our existence." Ben's art work *is* that, but so is what he has to say. His existence, through his work and his words, will likely long outlive his time on this earth. He is a true teacher.

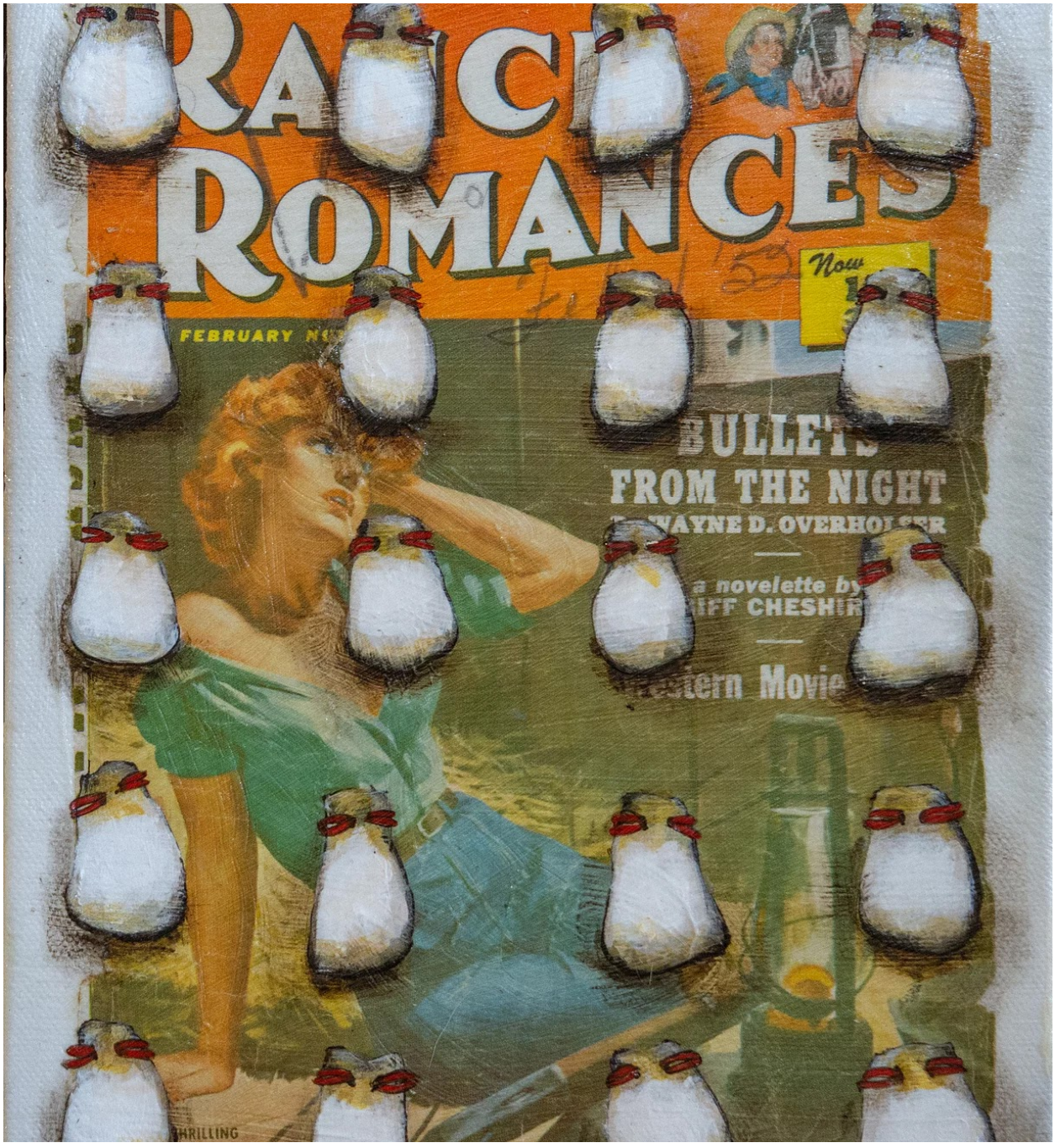


Figure 22. Ben Pease, *Elk Teeth Abstract Study,* 2018, mixed media on canvas, private collection.



Figure 23. Ben Pease, *Bull Chief - Color is the Medicine*, 2017, Acrylic, Ink, digital painting print on Baryta photographic rag, on 1907 Silverbow County linen paper on canvas, private collection.



Figure 24. Ben Pease, *War Pony Express*, 2019,oil, acrylic, antique ledger paper, vintage fruit label, antique photograph, digital painting print on Arches cold press on canvas, private collection.



Figure 25. Ben Pease, *Earth, Air, Water, Fire-Stream*, 2018, acrylic, digital rendering print on exhibition rag on canvas, private collection.



Figure 26. Ben Pease, *Do You See Me, The Way I See Me?*, 2018, 1910's Sears catalogue sheets, acrylic, digital rendering on exhibition rag on canvas, Stapleton Gallery, Billings, Montana.

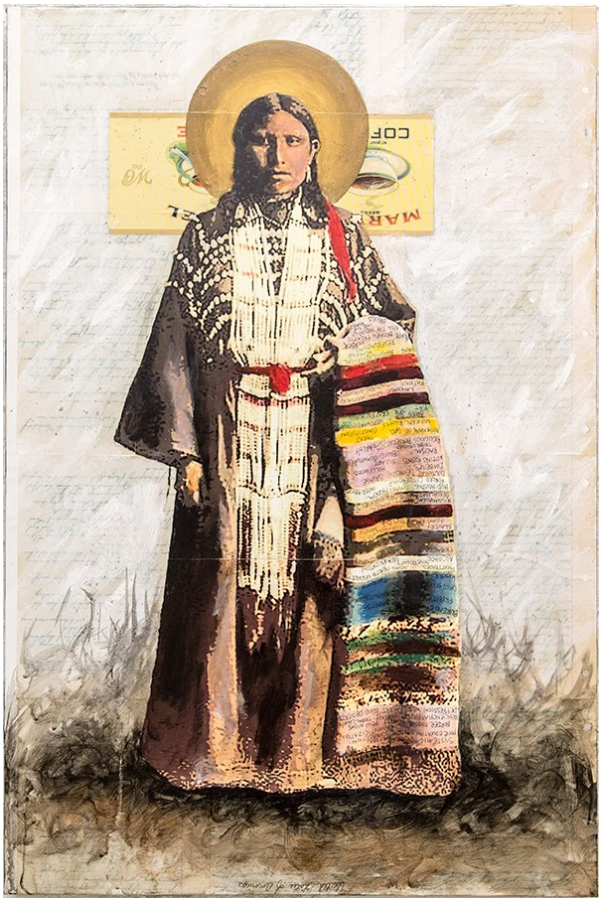


Figure 27. Ben Pease, *Indigenous Madonna As She Stands*, 2018, acrylic, india ink, digital rendering print on platine fibre rag on vintage papers canvas, private collection.



Figure 28. Ben Pease, It Was All A Dream, 2018, mixed media, private collection.



Figure 29. Ben Pease, *The Prayer: Grandma Amy Yellowtail-White Man Runs Him*, 2019, oil paint on canvas, private collection.

ROBERT MARTINEZ: ADJUSTING EXPECTATIONS - THAT'S NOT US ANYMORE

Robert Martinez is from the Wind River reservation in Wyoming. I'll let Robert tell you about himself in his own words:

> Robert Martinez was born in Wyoming on the Wind River Reservation in the small city of Riverton. He grew up a part of many different cultures as his lineage is Spanish, Mexican, Scotts Irish, French Canadian and Northern Arapaho. He graduated Riverton High School at 17 and through a scholarship, attended the Rocky Mountain College of Art & Design. He graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts specializing in Painting & Drawing and minoring in sculpture. In 3 years and at age 19, he became the Youngest Native American to graduate from RMCAD at that time.
>
> As he was brought up in the center of the reservation, his native heritage remains a constant inspiration and source of ideas for his work. Living in among the hard working people of the West and experiencing their issues also deeply influence his creations. The past and present resonate strongly in Wyoming and those historical and contemporary chords echo throughout his pieces.
>
> Much of Robert's current work uses the historical imagery, myth's [*sic*] and stories of the West & Arapaho Culture combined with modern themes to create images that have a statement on the issues of today. Using intense vibrant color and contrasting shades of light and dark, he paints and draws striking forms that are confronting and engage the viewer.
>
> His paintings and drawings have been shown across the Nation and have garnered noted acclaim. His work is included in the permanent collections of the Red Cloud Heritage Museum, The Brinton Museum, The Plains Indian Museum at the Cody Center of the West, and the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian.
>
> A strong supporter of Education and of the Arts, Robert devotes time to helping and mentoring emerging artists on his reservation in Wyoming and the western region. He gives back to the community by speaking about art topics, giving workshops, and demonstrates his style to schools, agencies and art groups.[94]

[94] Robert Martinez, "Robert Martinez," Martinez Design, June 19, 2021, http://www.martinezartdesign.com/about/robert-martinez/

Robert's work is some of the most unique contemporary Native American art I've seen. While more Native American artists have begun doing historical portraits in recent years of their ancestors, drawn from the plethora of photos taken during the late 1800s which can be seen in museum archives and collections around the country, Robert's approach to this artform is unusual. He applies modern media and materials to his renderings, using bold execution which demonstrates his thorough understanding of color theory. His color awareness is no doubt influenced not just by his formal art education, but by a lifetime of exposure to the brilliant and intensely colorful skyscapes of central Wyoming. Every high-contrast color portrait he paints begs a comparison to those colorful skyscapes.

In stark contrast to what has passed for traditional Native American art in the past, Robert's portraits provide dramatic, highly realistic, intensely three-dimensional portrayals of Native people. He uses strong complementary and analogous color schemes to create depth and contrast in the faces of the people that he paints. When looking at the flat, simplistic renderings on traditional ledger art (old or new), and even work from the Santa Fe Indian School (now defunct), a style that still dominates Native American artwork to this day, it is easy to see how so many people can think of Native Americans as one-dimensional relics of the past.

Robert removes that possibility from all of his works. There is nothing one-dimensional about the portraits and murals he paints, or his ledger art drawings. His high-contrast, color-theory-intensive portraits are so bold and realistic that I have felt, when looking at them, as if the subject had something to say to me. Some seem to scold, some seem puzzled or even sad, others seem to look right through me as if to see my bared soul, while others are either laughing

with or at me. I sometimes feel judged and left wanting after looking at Robert's portraits. They are *powerful*.

Robert's work goes beyond ledger art and painted portraits. He also creates graphic designs for t-shirts and other merchandise that aims to jolt viewers out of any preconceived notions about Native Americans that they may hold. All of his work is not only skillfully crafted and beautiful, but it also serves to educate the viewing public about Native Americans in the modern world. Robert's artwork makes bold visual statements asserting in no uncertain terms that Native Americans *are* modern. He accomplishes this by using modern materials and methods (oil paint, acrylic paint, air brush, murals) combined with traditional media (150-year-old photographs of his ancestors and ledger art).

Not all of his portraits are from old photographs, though. One of my favorites is a ledger art piece displaying perhaps the best foreshortening techniques I've ever seen. In it, a Native American man wearing a derby hat pinned with feathers, and a t-shirt, is shadow-boxing and throwing a punch directly at the viewer. There's nothing traditional about *that* portrait. In other ledger art drawings, you will see a Native American woman roller-blading, a Native American man wearing a cowboy hat while taking a selfie with his cell phone, a Native American man in full pow-wow regalia playing an electric guitar, and (in a hat-tip to the Wyoming state logo) a cowboy riding a bucking 1950s sci-fi rocket. There is nothing stoic about any of these Indians. They all exude bold action. In fact, it would not be a stretch to compare these images to the pop art work of Roy Lichtenstein. My mind almost automatically inserts "BAM!", "WHAM!", "POP!", "POW!", and "KA-BOOM!" into these images.

Robert Martinez was working the Montana Folk Festival when I met up with him for an interview in July of 2017. I had met him for the first time earlier that year at the Paris Gibson Square Art Museum in Great Falls, Montana. He was displaying his work as part of a group show called, “Emergence: A Collective of Plains Indian Warrior Artists.” He, along with artists Lauren Monroe, Jr., Louis Still Smoking, Gina Still Smoking, Ben Pease, and John Pepion, participated in a panel at that exhibit on Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, as well as the role of Indian artists in raising awareness about such issues. On that occasion, I had taken my high school students from Brockton, Montana to Great Falls to see various exhibitions of Indigenous artists, and to give them the opportunity to meet Indigenous artists and ask them questions about their careers. After the panel, Robert agreed to give me an interview at the Montana Folk Festival later that year. I wanted to show my students what was possible for them in the art world if they chose to pursue a career in the arts. The artists on that panel were as modern as it gets in contemporary Indigenous art, and my students were able to see exactly what the potential was for them to make an impact on modern perceptions of Indigenous peoples through art.

Robert is a member of the Arapaho tribe of the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. He filled out a survey that I sent to him, asking him questions about his art career. In that questionnaire, he mentioned that when he was a child and it was becoming apparent that he had artistic talent, someone in his tribe told him that it would be “a sin” not to exercise that talent. I asked him to expound on that for me, and help me understand what that meant for him and his tribe, and he told me this:

> Probably when I was about eleven or twelve, somebody told me, and I can't recall whether it was a priest, because I was brought up Catholic (I'm reformed, reformed pagan), or if it was one of my elders, or one of my grandparents that was around [at] the time. But they said something to the effect that if God gives you a gift and you don't use it that's a sin. So I've always been able to draw, or create things, or sculpt, so I've always kept that in mind and it really shaped me in the direction that I wanted to pursue.

I asked Robert if that was the primary reason he makes art now. He told me that he makes art for a number of different reasons. He enjoys it. He enjoys teaching people about it, as well as teaching about his culture, and Native culture in general. He feels that making art and teaching about art in general and Indigenous art in particular is what he is meant to do. He mentioned that he has done a number of other jobs, such as working for school systems, his tribe, and for a number of different youth organizations, but he always comes back to art, and believes it is his calling.

Having previously introduced him to my students from Brockton on the Fort Peck Indian reservation, I mentioned to him at the Montana Folk Festival that I had been a little startled and completely surprised to find out that my Indigenous students didn't really see the value of creating art. I explained to him that I had discovered that they didn't really see a purpose for it, much less understand that they could make a career out of it if they wanted to. When I first started teaching there, I had expected that they would at least enjoy participating in art classes, since the Assiniboine and Sioux tribes have such richly artistic cultural traditions. However, with few exceptions, most of them were not excited about making art at all. I found that very challenging, so I wrote and received a grant from the Charlotte Martin Foundation which I used to take them to Western Art Week in Great Falls, Montana so they could see firsthand the

hundreds of Native American artists making and selling art at the multitude of venues at that festival. One of the venues I took them to at that event was the Out West Art Show and Sale at the Heritage Inn, which hosts the largest number of artists in one venue at Western Art Week, and one of the largest western art shows in the country.[95] I introduced them to the artists on the panel at the Paris Gibson Square Museum show, and they got to meet Kevin Red Star and DG House at the Out West Art Show & Sale, both of whom did an impromptu little gallery talk aimed specifically at them and their potential as Native American artists. That did have a bit of an effect on some of them, but for most of them the idea of art being important, or something they could make a living at, seemed a far away concept only for other people.

Robert said that he did see a lot of that, and thought it was an attitude and mindset more prevalent specifically up here on the northern plains and in the northern Rockies, and perhaps in California, too. The only places he thought it might not be the prevalent mindset, where it might be really acceptable or even encouraged to be a Native artist, is in the Southwest where a lot of Indigenous families grow up going to Indian art markets. They grow up doing pottery and making jewelry. Many of them are fourteenth generation silversmiths "and stuff," and they're encouraged to do that. They get to know the business side of things at a very young age, whereas Indigenous people on the northern and western plains, and in the northern Rockies, do not.

I asked him what he would do differently to change that mindset and attitude, and if he thought it could be changed. He mentioned that he and the artists he sat with on the panel at Paris Gibson Square, as well as other artists he is associated with in the Indigenous Creativity

[95] Out West Art Foundation, Inc., "About," Out West Art Show & Sale, June 18, 2021, https://www.outwestartshow.net/about

Collective, do a lot of outreach for students. They conduct workshops funded by the First People's Fund, providing instruction in the business of art, as well as history, technique, and expanding one's boundaries in the art business. He believes outreach and education are key to helping current and future generations envision and actualize their own artistic success in the Native American art community and beyond. He also mentioned that these outreach programs are more effective for artists who are a little older, so that the information "sticks." As a high school art teacher, I had to agree that he is probably right about that last part. Beyond the ingrained attitudes and mindsets excluding art from the realm of professional possibility for high school students, they also face the same limitations all teenagers do: peer pressure, and cognitive and social development that is normal for that age group which precludes thinking too far into the future, for most of them.

I asked Robert a little more about the First People's Fund, and why he worked with them. He said that their philosophy and mission is one that encourages Indigenous people to generously share their knowledge, heritage, and creativity with those in their communities for bringing out positive cultural change. Upon my own investigation, I discovered that the First People's Fund has an overriding philosophy called *Collective Spirit*:

> OUR MISSION
>
> Founded in 1995, First Peoples Fund is guided by our belief in Collective Spirit. Collective Spirit is a commitment to nurture our shared humanity and honor our connection to one another, the lands around us, those who came before us and the spirit of all things. The Collective Spirit moves each of us to stand up and make a difference, to pass on ancestral knowledge and to extend a hand of generosity. The Collective Spirit is essential to sustaining the cultural fabric of Native communities, and our ability to thrive.

> Our mission is to honor and support the Collective Spirit of First Peoples artists and culture bearers. Our work recognizes the power of art and culture to bring about positive change in Native communities, beginning with individual artists and their families.
>
> OUR VALUES
>
> Rooted in the traditional values of generosity, wisdom, respect, integrity, strength, fortitude and humility, First Peoples Fund sustains culture and cultivates entrepreneurial initiatives and community development programs for and alongside Native artists.[96]

Consistent with that mission and values statement, Robert said that in his experience with First People's Fund, once you're affiliated with them they continue to push you and help you grow, even after you've moved on to other projects and are no longer working directly with them.

I asked him about the availability of support for adult artists in Indigenous communities and mentioned (as an example) the Montana Arts Council (MAC) here in Montana, which runs the Montana Artrepreneur Program (MAP). MAP is a program that teaches self-taught artists (whether Indigenous or not) the business of selling one's art. I asked if there was anything similar in Wyoming, where he lives. He mentioned that the Wyoming Arts Council recently, under new leadership, was making an effort to do some outreach of that kind, and has reached out to the Wind River reservation and artists there. However, as of the time we visited, there were no specific programs for Indigenous artists or, more importantly, emerging Indigenous artists.

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[96] First Peoples Fund, "What We Do," First Peoples Fund, June 18, 2021, https://www.firstpeoplesfund.org/what-we-do

Consistent with the directive given him by his elders when he was just a boy, so much of what Robert talked about during our interview had to do with outreach, teaching, using his gift in a positive way to set an example for future generations, and giving back to his tribe and community.

However, I also wanted to also revisit some of the things that the panel he sat on at the Paris Gibson Square Museum talked about. They touched on some issues of great concern to Indigenous people and communities, and also Indigenous artists. I asked Robert to talk to me about one topic they discussed which had to do with non Indigenous artists who like to paint Native Americans the way they looked 150 years ago.

Robert smiled and said, “I’d like to start with an analogy or simile. (I always forget which one’s which.) So I'm native, I'm Arapahoe native, Mexican, Scotch Irish, and French Canadian. So, if that is my heritage, and I wanted to paint specifically, and almost exclusively, historical Chinese people, I mean could I really speak to that audience? I don't think so. I think I could probably do a few great aesthetic paintings of the characters of Chinese people, but I don't know the language. I don't know their customs. I don't know their Taboos.

“And then I like to follow that up with, ‘so, if you're always painting Native American people you, why can't you switch that up and just paint only specifically, just only exclusively, Black people. Why wouldn't you do that? Why wouldn't you do that? I mean you know...

I replied that I thought the answer is obvious: you don't get paid the big bucks to paint Black people, because they don’t come with the same romantic ideas of the wild west that Native

Americans do. In fact, Black attempts to romanticise the history of Black people in our country usually just end up caricaturing them in ways that are highly derogatory and disrespectful.

Robert said, “You know people still hold on to that romantic image of Native people, and most of the non-Natives that paint Native people, they paint a general romanticized ideal of Native people, and that ideal is 100 to 150 years or 200 years ago. And that's not us anymore. They frequently get details wrong. They frequently paint things that a Native person wouldn't because it's taboo. They do all this..they break all these rules.”

He went on to say that he thinks they do that because, for the most part, the general populace is unaware that any rules are being broken, because they don’t really know anything about Native American cultures in the first place.

I shared with Robert that, in doing my research for this project, one of the things that I discovered is one of the reasons that the so-called traditional Native American artwork is so popular, and paintings of traditional-looking Native Americans are so popular, is because America at large cannot understand the concept of “contemporary Native American.” They seem to have some kind of psycho-emotional investment in keeping Native Americans pigeonholed in the past. I asked him what he thought about that.

“Well, I mean there's a significant amount of people out there who we just feel don't exist anymore. I've had conversations where they say, ‘Oh, you're Indian? I didn't think we still had Indians,’ you know?” Robert replied.

“I don't think it's a systematic effort. However, I do think there are people in positions of power who systematically either overlook us due to racial bias or find that it's easier to overlook

us than to change systems to allow us to proceed and get better at things. I think it's easier to say, 'Well yeah I have 45 other artists and if I said they shouldn't paint Native imagery then you know I'd only have five artists, and the one Indian guy who's crying about it.' I think that's a valid point. However, you know, like I said in the previous question about, well, should they be allowed to paint that stuff...I mean come on--there's there's a few artists that I know that have painted specific ceremonial stuff that, if I were to do that on my reservation, and my reservation found out about it, they would be knocking on my door saying, 'You either take down that painting or we're going to go to the street, and we're going to talk about it by hand."[97]

"So, cultural misappropriation," I said.

"Right. Yeah. I don't know if it's conscious. However I do know that... let me say it's more easily overlooked than it is to make a difference and change the rules. And that even goes with specific Native art shows," Robert said.

"Oh, really," I asked.

"Well, all of our different tribes have different blood quantum, [stipulating] who's tribal and who's not, and then of course the Indian Arts and Crafts Act tries to be as specific as they can without being too limiting. So, you have people with different blood quantums and then of course they say, 'Oh jeez I'm half whatever and she's only on *their* registry. That's not fair. You're just keeping us down.' But I mean there's all those systems that make it hard to be fair to everybody, but you gotta draw the line somewhere," He answered.

[97] Robert explained that this means to have a physical altercation.

At this point, I brought up the discussion I had had with DG House about the exclusion of Native American artists from certain shows or festivals because they are only state-recognized and not federally recognized. I asked him if that was what he was talking about. He said that was exactly the kind of thing that he was talking about, and that the reasoning behind such limiting restrictions excluding some Indigenous people from full participation in Indigenous art events comes down to one thing: money. By limiting who can participate, the show sponsors limit the field of competition and make it more exclusive, giving artists enrolled in federally recognized tribes an unfair advantage, even though the artists enrolled in state-recognized tribes are every bit as Indian as those enrolled in federally recognized tribes. Of course, any kind of tribal enrollment requirement--state or federal--also excludes Indigenous people who have descendancy from multiple tribes but not enough blood quantum from any one tribe to qualify enrollment in tribes with state *or* federal recognition.

"That's almost always the bottom line. If you look hard enough it's always going down to the money. Even though all those systems seem to overlook all those non-native artists painting native themed stuff. They bring in money. Well, we can kind of turn a blind eye to that. When you're selling $10,000 dollar paintings right and left," said Robert. He was referring to the artists I talked about in "The Tribe Called Wannabee."

"Well, we have quite a few of those in Montana," I said.

"We have them in Wyoming. Jackson's full of them," Robert said.

"So, how do you think doing the kind of work that you do helps to change the perception of contemporary or of Native American art in general?" I asked.

“You know, I think probably the biggest theme in all of my work is--and it's in my artist statement too--is adjusting expectations. A lot of people have an expectation of what contemporary art is. A lot of people have an expectation of what Native art is. So that's my biggest thing is trying to get you to adjust those expectations and think, ‘Oh, that's different.’ Good. That's exactly right. That's probably my biggest point. You know, I have different thematic points and different works, but all of it is trying to get you to adjust those expectations. There's a big school of Western art thought. You can definitely tell all of the students that come from IAIA. Of course I didn't go there,” Robert replied.

“Tell me again where you went,” I said.

“Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design in Denver. So I had a really western art background. I didn't get a lot of [what Indian artists at IAIA learned]. In fact I didn't even know IAIA existed till after I graduated. When they do abstract art, they do an abstract from that particular Native art history field, and I do it from a western art field, and I find that that really helps me stick out. I don't use their particular method,” Robert said.

Robert and I talked for a few minutes about exactly what that method and style was that he didn’t learn at Rocky Mountain College in Denver. He was referring to the Dorothy Dunn method that was ingrained in the students at the Santa Fe Indian school, which closed in 1962 when the IAIA (Institute of American Indian Arts) was established, and then carried over into the IAIA. Dorothy Dunn directed her students to work in a minimalistic style that later became the signature style for all Native American artwork, and to which all Native American artwork was

compared for authenticity, sometimes to this day.[98] The approach taken by instructors of the IAIA quickly became much more progressive and modern, but the world outside the IAIA had already created a fixed idea of what authentic Native American art looked like, and it did not include that later progressive work.

I asked Robert what he saw in the work coming out of the IAIA that was different from what he was learning to produce at Rocky Mountain College.

"Well, I mean, I see a lot of thematic imagery that seems to be similar to other artists that go there (IAIA). And it's great work but I can definitely tell there's some similarities. And I'm not familiar with their curriculum and stuff. It's just something that I seem to have noticed from the people that go there, and I do see things in some of their paper work. In the CIC (Creative Indigenous Collective) we were going to go as a group and try and get into their group artist fellowship and one of their limitations was we couldn't do oil paints. And I thought, 'Why not.' Wow. That's like, what--a 500-year-old art form? I know it's not usually a Native art form, but it seems rather limiting to me. I thought, 'Well, if you can't do oil painting in your school, I mean, does anyone teach that? Or is it strictly acrylic? It just raised a bunch of questions for me," Robert said.

"And it makes me wonder if they think it's too contemporary," I said.

"Or maybe they just didn't have the right ventilation for that specific area? Or if that's for the whole school? They didn't explain it. But it's rather limiting to me, and I thought that's fairly odd for an art school," Robert said.

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[98] Various contributors, "Dorothy Dunn," Wikipedia, May 27, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorothy_Dunn

After exhausting our speculation on the reasons the IAIA might not have included oil painting in their curriculum, I asked Robert if he had any stories of running into situations where artists who are not native American but are painting Native Americans and making money from it might have caused him to miss an opportunity because their work was preferred to his, or any similar situation.

“You know I don't know specifically if it was because I was Native. However I do know that I have applied to non-Native art things and was not considered, or awarded, or given the opportunity to show my work,” he replied.

“Did you ask them for a reason,” I asked.

“No, not really. I mean, I can't say if it was specifically because I was Native, or because I was painting Native things. Although, you know, some of the things I'm thinking of are in Wyoming, and you would think that's kind of a western state and that's kind of a no-brainer. You know, people do cows and cowboys all the other stuff they and they get considered. I want to say, for example, the Governor's Art Awards in Wyoming. I've looked through the list; there are no Native names on that list. There's one Latino name on that list and he was nominated last year. That particular artist is a sculptor and, I want to say, about 60 years old,” he said.

“So, He's been at this for a long time, and they finally got him on the list,” I said.

“Yeah. Same thing with the Wyoming Arts Council. I applied for their fellowship every year since, geez, it's got to be every year for at least 14 years. I've never gotten a fellowship. I'm a fairly well-known artist in Wyoming, you know. I don't want to say I'm *the* artist, or better than anybody else. But, you know, people know who I am,” he said.

“How many fellowships are there?” I asked.

“I think there's like six a year,” he said.

“So, there's some to go around. Who usually gets them?” I asked.

“It's a small state. So, I mean, it could have been my turn by now. All non native people,” he said.

“All non-native people. Any African Americans?” I asked.

“I've never seen any African American person win the award,” he said.

“And only one Latino,” I said.

“That person got the Governor’s Art Award,” he said.

“But no fellowships,” I asked.

“No, I don't know about the fellowships. I can't think of any Latino people there, but I didn't check that. I just know the Governor’s Art Award because I know they have a public list. I went and checked the list, and there's nobody I know on that. There's no Natives on that, he said.

“What kind of artwork do they make, the people that consistently get the fellowships?” I asked.

“You know--good old fashioned western art, wild life, landscapes,” he said.

“How about paintings of Native Americans? White people painting Native Americans?” I asked.

“Yes. You look at the evidence and think, that seems odd,” he said.

My biggest take-away from visiting with Robert about these issues was that one of the greatest obstacles to the success of Native Americans in general and Native American artists in

particular is public perception and unspoken but widely agreed upon definitions of what it means to be Native American. In the world of art, that means making art that fits a certain predetermined style that can be recognized on sight as Native American. For Native American people in general, it means fitting a certain style and persona that harks back one hundred and fifty years or more, and brings to mind images of a highly romanticized old west. Both scenarios make it difficult for Native American people to be experienced as the fully realized, modern people that they are.



Figure 30. Robert Martinez, *Thunder*, 2018, airbrushed acrylic on oil and linen, private collection.



Figure 31. Robert Martinez, *What Makes the Red Man Red?*, 2018, airbrushed acrylic on oil and linen, private collection.



Figure 32. Robert Martinez, *Blue on Black Coyote*, Airbrushed Acrylic & Oil on Panel with raised accents, 2021, private collection.



Figure 33. Robert Martinez, *Sko' Den*, 2018, airbrushed acrylic on oil and linen, private collection.



Figure 34. Robert Martinez, *Bloodlines*, 2021, airbrushed acrylic on oil and linen, private collection.

DAVID DRAGONFLY: THE CHALLENGE OF BEING DRIVEN BY THE MARKET

On Labor Day weekend of 2004, I went to the Museum of the Plains Indian in Browning, Montana at the recommendation of Dr. Nate St. Pierre. Nate had told me that it was the best place he had ever seen for teaching viewers about gender roles in Plains Indian culture, through the art and artifacts in the permanent collection on display there. My husband and I were visiting Glacier National Park for our second time since getting married, so we decided to stop in Browning to check out this little museum that Nate had mentioned. Nate was right. The museum and its permanent collection are small, but the content and educational value of the collection is rich. The Museum of the Plains Indian website[99] has very little information about what they do or have to offer, but states this:

> The Museum of the Plains Indian was founded in 1941 and displays richly varied arts of Northern Plains Tribal peoples including the Blackfeet, Crow, Northern Cheyenne, Sioux, Assiniboine, Arapaho, Shoshone, Nez Perce, Flathead, Chippewa, and Cree. Their historic clothing, horse gear, weapons, household implements, baby carriers, and toys highlight the exhibits.

We paid the four dollar per person fee to enter the museum, watched the introductory movie that had been made back in the 1970s, and then walked through the exhibit, reading every label on every item in the display cases. As Nate had promised, I learned a lot about gender roles in Plains Indian art and decoration in that exhibit.

There was nothing contemporary in the exhibit. All the artifacts were from the late 1800s

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[99] Staff writer, "Museum of the Plains Indian," Indian Arts and Crafts Board, July 17, 2021, https://www.doi.gov/iacb/museum-plains-indian.

and early 1900s. I didn't particularly notice a lack of anything contemporary in the exhibit because I was still a novice to Indigenous art issues at that time, having just started working on my master's degree in Native American Studies that very semester.

After seeing all there was to see in the main part of the museum, we wandered the short distance back toward the front of the museum and checked out the gift shop. It mostly contained books about the usual topics one finds in Montana at exhibits featuring Native American culture: history of the various tribes, histories of the Indian wars, etc. We browsed for a few moments and were about to leave when we noticed a little room off to the side of the main gallery space, in the back, behind the gift shop. There was a handmade sign on an easel indicating that there was art in the room around the corner, so we went back there to see what there was to see.

This was where I met David Dragonfly for the first time. He had three tables set up in this small room with his artwork arranged on them for display and sale, and he was painting in the corner. His work was far different from anything else in the museum. For one thing, it wasn't over a hundred years old. For another, it was purely aesthetic and of the category "fine art." He had some ledger art on display, and a lot of linoleum block and mixed media hand-pulled prints. After looking at all of his work, I introduced myself, and asked him about himself and his work.

David is a very friendly person. He was happy to answer my questions, which I wasn't even informed enough to ask intelligently at that early stage of my academic career in contemporary Native American art. I learned that he actually worked at the museum full time as curator, and he only displayed his work occasionally there in that little room on the weekends. It was just luck that I had found him showing his work that day. We talked for a while and I bought

a little print that is still hanging in my living room all these years later. That was the beginning of a friendly association that has persisted for the last seventeen years

My husband and I continued to visit the Museum of the Plains Indian on every trip to Glacier thereafter, always looking in on David at the Museum when we did. When I started my doctoral program and came up with my topic, David was toward the top of the list of artists I wanted to write about. When I moved to Shelby, Montana in June of 2017, I became David's neighbor (sort of --I was eighty miles away, but in Montana, where the distances are vast, we consider that practically next door). This afforded me the opportunity to see David more often and work out a time for an interview. I kept looking in on David and watching his work evolve. When I took my students to Western Art Week in Great Falls three years in a row, I took them to see David and his work at the Out West Art Show at the Heritage Inn, where he always had a booth. At long last, we met up for an interview at the Kowloon Chinese Restaurant in Shelby where we discussed David's art and his career as an artist over some Black Bean Beef .

David Dragonfly is an enrolled member of the Blackfeet tribe. His father is Assiniboine from the Fort Belknap reservation. Although he had worked at the Museum of the Plains Indian for twenty three years at the time of this interview, he had been making art for nearly sixty years. He is a professionally trained artist, having received his BFA from University of Montana in 1988, and also having attended the IAIA for a short while in the early 1980s. Before working at the museum he got his degree and did his artwork on his own for about ten years.

"When did you first know you wanted to be an artist?" I asked.

"I didn't really know it, right off hand. I did know I was talented in art. When I was a kid we lived in California. We lived in the suburbs down in LA. My mom and dad lived there on relocation.[100] That was a federal program for employment. We moved down there...oh...I was probably only two or three years old when we moved there. One time my parents said that our neighbor was painting his fence, and I went walking over there and I started painting the car," David said. We both laughed. "I guess my mom was there just wiping that paint right off of that car. So that started it. I always kind of did a lot of art. In school I was pretty good at art," David said.

"For my high school years we moved back to Montana. I think my parents were trying to get us out of the...there were gangs down there. So they got us out of there and then we moved back to Browning, which was like moving back in time for me, because I was used to living in an urban environment, like California. Back on the reservation everything was like twenty years behind," said David.

"Did you finish high school in Browning?" I asked.

"Yeah. I graduated in seventy four," David said.

"Did you go to the University of Montana straight out of high school?" I asked.

"Yeah. I went straight out of high school," said David. "My dad didn't really want us to go to Vietnam. A lot of fathers said they wanted their kids to do what they wanted, but my father didn't really want us to do that. He was a Korean war veteran and it kind of messed him up. He

[100] Various contributors, "Indian Relocation Act of 1956," Wikipedia, June 14, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_Relocation_Act_of_1956.

didn't think that, as Native American people, that it was our place to even be there. He said, 'I'll let you decide what you want, but if I was you I wouldn't go.'"

"So, he actually kind of talked us out of it, because war is pretty brutal," he said.

"Yeah, my dad was a Green Beret with the 5th Special Forces Group in Vietnam in 1969 and 1970. I understand," I said.

"So, when I turned eighteen, I signed up for the draft because I could get a Pell Grant. I thought if they draft me I'll go, but I ain't gonna volunteer. So the year after that, 1975, was when the Vietnam war was over. People always asked me what I thought of the war and I just...I mean...everyone I knew that went was damaged psychologically, physically, or mentally when they came back. I had cousins that were kind of half off because of the war. My dad actually had shell shock.[101] You know how it is when you get around a veteran," David said.

David backed up a little and took his story back to when he was in high school."When I went to Browning High School, I took art classes there. The funny thing about art in high school is...and it's still probably the same way...If you were interested in art you had to be a real artist because they had it Friday afternoon. You know, nobody stuck around Friday afternoon after school let out. But you could take the art class, if you really wanted to. It was like the lowest [priority] class. They wanted you to do English and math and all that stuff," David said.

"Same today in Shelby," I said. "I always have to recruit for my class because the Guidance Counselor is always trying to stick them somewhere else."

[101] Various contributors, "Shell shock," Wikipedia, July 14, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shell_shock

“It’s like they think art is a waste of time. It isn’t, but...” said David. “Sometimes I wonder if you can really teach anyone art. I think the kids have to really want to do it. I think they’re better if they want to do it.”

“I think so too,” I said. “I mean, you can teach skills...”

“...but you still can’t teach them how to do anything if they don’t really want to do it,” said David.

“No, you’re right about that. I just had an experience this week with one of the kids that I took to Western Art Week. He’s really quiet and really shy. He has a passion for art, but because he’s just so quiet you can’t really tell what he’s thinking. But he’s kind of attached himself to me this year. If I ask him to come help with Art Club or anything he’s always there. I was teaching a painting class for the Art Club and he showed up to help. That’s one of those painting party things; not really an art class. He and one of the other girls showed up to help, and once they got our attendees going on their own paintings, the two of them went back to paint by themselves. After a while the rest of us needed a little break so we went back to see what they were doing, and it was amazing! His work was really good, and it had just come out of his heart and his imagination. Those are the kids you can teach. He’s already got this whole world inside of him. All I can do is just teach him the skills to help him get it out,” I said.

“You never know what will come out,” David said.

“I love that about being an art teacher. It’s the best job in the world. But I’ve had some bad art teachers. I bet you have, too,” I said.

“I had one in Browning, in high school. But now we have a group from Whitefish. They came to the museum, these two ladies with the Stumptown Art Gallery and asked how they could help the community on the reservation. So I said, ‘Get them some art supplies.’ People have no money and no way to even raise money. So they’ve been delivering art supplies there for over a year. And there’s a lady from New York City in Whitefish; she gave eight people industrial sewing machines. Isn’t that cool?” David said.

“That’s awesome,” I said.

“You know, Indian people really have distrust for people sometimes, when they’re giving stuff out, and doing stuff for somebody, right? But these people were doing really good, and they’re kind of getting more accepted. And they’re also bringing art into the treatment center, and art therapy is probably one of the best forms of healing. So I kind of helped start that, but they’re doing it now. It’s helping a lot of people,” David said.

“It sounds like you’ve always wanted to be an artist. Is that true?” I asked.

“It seems like I was always involved in cultural stuff. Art and culture are pretty close together. Most of the people I knew when I was a child who were artists didn’t really call themselves artists. Like my grandpa and others. They used to make stuff but they didn’t really have a name for what they were doing. They didn’t call it art because there really wasn’t a name for art in our language,” said David.

“Did everyone make their own decorative arts? Or was it only certain people?” I asked.

“I don’t think everyone did, but the people who wanted to did. Because a long time ago there wasn’t computers or Facebook. Nothing like that,” he said.

David and I talked for a little while about various people from his tribe who were artisans before they had a word for that. Then I wanted to know more about what he had learned about being an artist in his BFA program at UM and the IAIA.

"I went to university right out of high school. Before I finished, I quit and moved to California and Ohio for a few years. I worked at Oakland Public Schools. I was a cultural teacher. You know they used to have that Title IX? It was for cultural things. I worked with mostly Native American students, tutoring them. I taught them how to play hand games; stick games. I lived down there for a couple of years. From there I went back to the art school in Santa Fe. I got accepted there in eighty one," David said.

"So, did you graduate from the IAIA?" I asked.

"No. I just went for two years. I was close to graduation. I don't know why I always left, but...It seems like when you're really young you don't have any ties," David said.

"Did you ever actually graduate from UM?" I asked.

"Yeah, after I went back. I graduated in 1988," David said. "I got a BFA in art and a minor in Native American Studies."

"Was that when Dr. Henrietta Mann[102] was teaching there?" I asked.

"I took classes from her. I think she was the head of the department, and then she moved to MSU," said David.

"Henri was one of my greatest mentors in Native American Education when I studied at MSU," I said.

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[102] Various contributors, "Henrietta Mann," Wikipedia, April 28, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henrietta_Mann.

"Her husband was an artist," he said.

"As well as I know her, I didn't know that," I said.

We talked for a little while longer about our association with Henrietta Mann, and then I moved on to my survey questions.

"Do you have a gallery that represents you?" I asked.

"Not really. I had a couple of galleries representing me, but I'm kind of anti-gallery. I'd rather sell my own," David said. "When I go to Santa Fe[103] I don't need a gallery. I finally got in there. Galleries take forty to fifty percent. But we'll see what I say next year after I pay taxes," he joked.

This is an issue for Indian people that came up over and over again as I talked to Indigenous artists throughout this project. It's an issue related to what David had been saying earlier about not always trusting people to help you out when someone makes an offer. In the case of the two ladies from Whitefish who ended up helping a lot of people by distributing art supplies to students all over the Blackfeet reservation, it worked out. But it is not always clear to Indian people whether they are getting value for the commission they give up to a gallery.

I asked David if he had been collected by any museums.

"I have one in the C.M. Russell Museum, in their permanent collection," David said. "And I've got one in the Missoula Art Museum."

"So what about the museum you work in; the Museum of the Plains Indian? Do they have any of your work?" I asked.

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[103] David was referring to the Santa Fe Indian Market, which is the largest Indian art market in the world, drawing an estimated 150,000 people internationally each year. Various contributors, "Santa Fe Indian Market," Wikipedia, September 30, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Fe_Indian_Market.

"No," David said. "When I got hired there they quit buying from artists. They said you couldn't use government funds for purchasing art, because it's a government museum."

I found this a little ironic, and perhaps a catch-22 for someone like David, and it strikes at the heart of one of the issues that I addressed in this project: museum representation. David Dragonfly, a professionally trained artist with a BFA and also an enrolled member of the Blackfeet tribe, couldn't get collected by the museum in his own community because of a bureaucratic technicality that wasn't even clear. There was art hanging in the museum every time I visited it, so it wasn't a matter of the museum not displaying art in the main galleries. David was never even given a reason besides the one that he had already mentioned here, which honestly sounded like a flimsy excuse. The more I spoke with him the more it sounded like a matter of politics; perhaps maybe a perceived conflict of interest, because he was an employee at the museum. There were no advantages to him as an artist connected with being an employee at the museum, outside of having a day job and federal employment benefits. The only way David was able to display his art at the Museum of the Plains Indian was to make occasional use of the back room where I found him on my first trip there, or to participate in the Museum's weekly Indian art market which they host in the summertime.

I moved on to the next survey question and asked David, "Have you ever been turned down for a juried exhibition because you are Native American, or because the show was not billed as a Native American art show?"

"No. Every time I've applied to the CM Russell show I've gotten in," David said. "I've gotten into shows at the Yellowstone Art Museum in Billings."

David then offered, “But I’ve experienced a lot of racism. You can almost feel it going to some of these shows, even the one in Great Falls.” David was talking about Western Art Week. “A lot of people would come by and I’d watch them. They’d see my name and just keep walking.”

“You know, I did notice when I was at Western Art Week this year that there were very few Native American artists at the Out West Art Show at the Heritage Inn. There were over one hundred and fifty artists at that show. I had created a scavenger hunt for my students to get them to seek out and find artists that might not normally look for. First of all, it’s mostly white men. There aren’t very many women. There are even fewer Native Americans. I assigned them DG, because DG always gives them a good gallery talk. I also assigned Don Greytak because he’s from up on the Hi-Line where they are from, and he’s a farmer and a white guy like them, so I felt like they could identify with him as someone they could relate to. Beyond that I told them I wanted them to go find five Native American artists and five female artists. That turned out to be a challenging assignment because there were barely five Native American artists at the show: you, Ben Pease, Kevin Red Star, Jackie Larson Bread, and DG. That was it.”

“There’s a guy who claims he is, but...I don’t know...Did you meet him?”[104] David said.

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[104] I am not mentioning the name David gave me, to protect the identity of the artist in question, as well as to protect David from any potential repercussions. I did a little research on the artist we were discussing, and while he paints primarily Indigenous imagery--paintings of plains Indians as they might have appeared a hundred and fifty years ago--I could not find any evidence that he is actually Native American, nor any back history on him at all. In the limited amount of biographical material available about him on the Internet, there are no direct claims that he is Native American. However, the subject matter that he paints, the way he dresses, and even his surname (which I couldn’t verify was real but which conveniently conjures Indigenous imagery while also not being an authentic Indigenous surname from any tribe I’ve ever heard of, and is also the kind of name one might choose if they want to sound Indigenous) all work together to suggest an Indigenous persona. It does appear that this artist is walking a very fine line without crossing it, in order to profit from the idea that he might be an Indigenous artist.

"No," I said. "But that's interesting because DG gave them the talk about the Indian Arts and Crafts Act and how you can't claim to be Native American if you're not, and how you can be shut down if you do. So, that would have been an interesting exercise for the kids to participate in. But he didn't come up in their scavenger hunt.

"But you know, I went over to the Western Living and Design Show over at the fairgrounds, because there were some artists recommended to me over there that I wanted to meet. They weren't there that day, so I looked around to see who else I might find. I went through the whole show, and finally found Robert Martinez's booth. I said to him, 'They've got you guys in a ghetto back here. It's like this is Indian Row, over there they've got all these white artists, and some of them are doing paintings of Indians over there, and then there's you guys over here in your own little area. Robert said, 'You've got it. That's exactly what's going on.'," I said.

"Yeah, there's this segregation going on. John was talking about it," David said.

"John Pepion?" I asked.

"Yeah. He said if you talk about it too much or complain about it, they'll just get rid of you. They won't let you come back to the show," David said. "You know, I used to get upset about [white people painting Indians], but then I thought it's just freedom of expression, you know. I mean we can paint white people, you know? Nobody's going to buy it, but...," said David, with his tongue planted firmly in his cheek. "But you know, there's nothing we can do about it; and complaining about it is just negative energy."

"Well, I'm going to call you a very good sport then, because it does bug the daylights out of me," I said.

"Well, you know, the Indian Arts and Crafts act makes it illegal for them to do that. But I'm not going to spend my energy trying to get them to stop. It's just negative. But at the Indian art market at the Museum, you have to be enrolled in the tribe to sell there. So they can't sell there if they're not Indian.

"And you know, one thing I started was letting Indian artists sell in the back room. They could go there and set up and sell. But it gives an outlet for some of the artists," said David. "Well, if they have any ambition they can. You know, a lot of people will say they're artists, but you don't see too many of them really participating and doing it. With the museum there…I used to be a real hardcore radical, you know. But as I got older I just sort of gave up," David said.

"So are you saying you've mellowed, then?" I asked.

"Mellowed out, I guess. It's kind of weird how that works. The people who made the movie in the museum, they were not Native," said David.

"The little intro movie?" I asked.

"Yeah. That movie's about a hundred years old," David said. "I've been trying to get rid of that movie for years."

"There are some things I'd like to ask you about related to that, but I had not expected you to talk so much about the museum today, so I was unprepared. I just have my canned little survey questions here," I said.

"But the museum ties right into it," David said.

"It does, and what you're talking about is exactly the kind of thing that I should be asking about, here. What I'm taking away from the things that you've said here is that the Indian Arts and Crafts Act was supposed to benefit Native American artists, right? And then they set up these Indian Arts and Crafts Board museums that are also supposed to benefit Native American artists, right? But what it sounds like to me is that non-Natives have gotten in control of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board through the BIA…" I said.

"The Department of the Interior," David said.

"But the BIA is part of the Department of the Interior, right?" I said.[105]

"Yeah, but we're our own department. The Indian Arts and Crafts Board only has twenty-six employees. It's the smallest department in the Department of the Interior," David said.

"How many museums are there?" I asked.

"There's just three. There's this one, one in Oklahoma, and one in Rapid City," David said.[106]

"So, there's three museums, twenty-six employees, and they're all run by a white guy?" I said.

"Most of the employees are non-Indian," David said. "All the lower jobs are Indians, like me. Those jobs don't pay great. They don't pay a regular curator. They pay that one guy in Rapid City. He's GS-12. He was hired as a GS-12. That was actually racist."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

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[105] BIA stands for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. It is a department within the Department of the Interior.
[106] Staff writer, "Our Museums," Indian Arts and Crafts Board, July 18, 2021, https://www.doi.gov/iacb/OurMuseums.

"Because they overlooked all of us who are Indian and hired this white guy," David said.

I couldn't disagree. David has a BFA in studio art. He even has a minor in Native American Studies. He knows as much about art in general and Indian art in particular as anyone else working for the Indian Arts and Crafts Board; probably more.

"So do you have a GS level?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm a GS-8 and I've been here twenty-three years," said David.[107] [108]

After David pointed this out, I realized he was just being humble earlier when he had said that he wasn't a radical activist anymore. What he shared was the kind of thing that could have gotten him fired for boat-rocking. True, he was on the verge of retirement and this wouldn't get published until after he was retired; but it's still a bold and risky thing to speak out as frankly as David did that day about inequities such as the one he had described and was experiencing.

"So, you're a GS-8, you have a BFA in art, you're working at an art museum founded by the Indian Arts and Crafts Board for the benefit of Indian artists and Indian people…" I said.

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[107] Staff writer, "FederalPay 2021 GS Payscale," FederalPay.org, July 18, 2021, https://www.federalpay.org/gs/2021.

[108] After our interview, I did a little research on the federal government's pay scale and learned that the table maxes out at Step 10, no matter how many years you have in the system. I don't know how many years the head of the IACB has in government service, but even if he was a brand new government hire as a GS-12 at Step 1, and even with David's twenty-three years of service maxing out as a GS-8 at Step 10, David would still make less money than the person running the three museums. According to what David was saying, this organization created for the benefit of Indian artists places Indigenous employees at the bottom of the pay scale while holding the top positions for white people at much higher places on the pay scale. I also do not have any direct or specific employment or hiring data regarding that specific position and all the circumstances surrounding that to confirm that this was actually the case, here. As has been demonstrated in recent decades, there are no federal laws protecting employee privacy per se, except in the specific cases of ADA and HIPAA considerations. However, employers are not required to disclose employee information, and rarely do unless so compelled by a court of law, usually preferring to protect employee privacy. I really didn't want to push this that far, for the protection of both David and the individual who he was referring to here. For more information about the complications surrounding employee privacy and disclosure of employment information, consult this resource: https://www.justia.com/employment/hiring-employment-contracts/privacy-in-employment/

I told David that I had written about the Indian Arts and Crafts Board and the Indian Arts and Crafts Act in an earlier chapter. I hadn't planned to talk about it too much more throughout this work beyond the extent to which it affects the lives of the artists I'm interviewing. But here I was at the Kowloon Chinese Restaurant learning all about how those laws, designed for the benefit of Indian artists, could be actually being used to game the system against them. It's difficult to actually assert intent without documented proof, but the context seems to point in that direction.

"It sounds like the same old same old; just one more way that colonizers game the system against Native Americans," I said.

"It's all just for show. They just want to look good," said David.

"It looks to me like these museums are like the old trading posts," I said.

"I think so," said David. "It makes it look like they're protecting our rights but they're not, really."

What David had shared with me was not only surprisingly candid, but it was also very important. I wanted to learn more about what David was saying about the administrative structure of the IACB. I also wanted to find out if there would be negative consequences for David if I published what he said, so I did a little digging. In doing so, I discovered information about the federal No FEAR act, which was created in 2002. It stipulates:

> One purpose of the Act is to "require that Federal agencies be accountable for violations of antidiscrimination and whistleblower protection laws." Pub. L. 107-174, Summary. In support of this purpose, Congress found that "agencies cannot be run effectively if those agencies practice or tolerate discrimination." Pub. L. 107-74, Title I, General Provisions, Section 101(1).

> The Act also requires this agency to provide this notice to Federal employees, former Federal employees and applicants for Federal employment to inform you of the rights and protections available to you under Federal antidiscrimination, whistleblower protection and retaliation laws.[109]

I also found a link to the aggregate documents that each department within the Department of the Interior is required to publish every year.[110] From there I clicked on the report for the entire DOI because there is not a specific report for the IACB.[111]

That report is *illuminating*. The second largest complaint category is Race (after sex). Within that category, the largest complaint category is "Appointment/Hire" and the second largest after that is "Assignment of Duties." Under the complaint category of "Disciplinary Action," the top two categories of complaint are "Reprimand" and "Demotion."[112]

That report provided me with the supporting evidence to suggest that David did have cause to complain about his situation to the administration in the DOI, even though he didn't. It also provided me with data to support the claims that he had made about white people being placed in the top level positions while Indian people are placed in the lower level positions.

In a later chapter, "Museum Representation of Native American Artists," I take a look at museum collection practices and how they might be changing with regard to Native American contemporary art. What David had shared so candidly is an issue of central concern to Indian artists in general. It also touched on the degree to which federal employees are gagged "or else"

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[109] Staff writer, "Equal Employment Opportunity | NO FEAR ACT," OPM.gov Main, August 9, 2021, "https://www.opm.gov/equal-employment-opportunity/no-fear-act/#url=Notice.
[110] Staff writer, Reports Repository | No Fear Report," US Department of the Interior|Office of Civil Rights, August 9, 2021,https://www.doi.gov/pmb/eeo/reports-repository.
[111] Staff writer, "Equal Employment Opportunity Data | Posted | Pursuant to the No Fear Act: Department of the Interior (and below) | For 3rd Quarter 2021 for period ending June 30, 2021," Department of the Interior, June 30, 2021, https://www.doi.gov/sites/doi.gov/files/doi-aggregate-no-fear-report-2021-q3.pdf.
[112] Ibid

when they see injustices happening within their department. Those issues dovetail perfectly with my chapter on museum representation, which deals with what museums are doing (or could be doing) to better represent Indian people, and how the five museum curators I interviewed for that chapter are making those positive changes.

In the interest of fairness, I decided to try to get an interview with the head curator of the IACB, to give him a chance to comment on these issues directly. He declined to comment.

After exhausting this subject, we moved on to my next survey question.

"You participate in art festivals, right? You were at Western Art Week. You're going to the Santa Fe Indian Market. Is this your first time at the Santa Fe market?" I asked.

"No. I went there in eighty two, but I didn't have a booth. I was just selling out of alleys and stuff. I was just carrying around my stuff and selling it. It was worth it. See, every other art show, compared to Santa Fe, is like a flea market," David said.

"Will you have help when you go down to Santa Fe this time?" I asked.

"Yeah, I gotta get help," David said. "I hear that people sell out really quickly. I have about eighty small prints that are about a hundred bucks. If I sell those, not counting the big ones, I'll make eight thousand dollars."

"Have you ever done an artist residency?" I asked.

"No, but I've thought of doing them, though," David said. "There's one in Indianapolis, and one in Santa Fe I've thought about doing. But it's kind of hard because I'm a printmaker. I can't really carry my big printing press around."

"What about a little one?" I asked.

"I've got a little etching press," said David.

"Do you see that as kind of an obstacle to you doing some of these residency programs? With painting you just take your easel and your box of paints. But with printmaking you've got equipment to haul and set up," I said.

"A little. Painting is what I studied in my BFA program. And I paint on my prints. But I haven't done a painting in about thirty years," David said.

"I'll bet you haven't forgotten. I think it comes right back to you," I said.

"See, what I do is I pull the prints and then I paint them, sort of fill them in," David said.

"So they're like monoprints," I said.

"Similar," David said.

David talked for a little while about the headaches of traveling to festivals, having to haul all of his artwork, and how far it is to drive to these places. Most artists do drive because they have to take not only their finished, framed artwork, but also their show booth and their art supplies. Most artists do little demos in their booths to pass the time and create an art experience for their visitors, so the art supplies are necessary.

David said he actually preferred to fly because "it's a long damned drive" to most of those places. I asked him how he transported his art when he was flying and he said that he packed it in suitcases. David doesn't frame his work for display, which makes it easier to carry when traveling (no broken glass). He does mat his work and places it in archival acetate envelopes for display. That makes it more lightweight and easier to pack.

He told me that he had been collected by Tom Brokaw and Robin Williams. Robin Williams had been in Browning for the filming of "What Dreams May Come." Some of the scenes were filmed in Glacier National Park. Even though David has a day job, it's clear that he has had some success selling his artwork.

"What's the most you've ever made selling your art at a single show?" I asked.

"I think I made sixteen or eighteen thousand once, at that show in Sioux Falls. It was the Northern Plains Tribal Art show," he said. "But that's like just *one* of Guardipee's pieces."

"Yeah, he prices his art pretty high, just like he teaches them to do in his art business workshops," I said.

"Yeah, and then that guy that was selling in the booth next to him in Great Falls…" David said.

"Ernie Marceau," I said. "He's so nice." Ernie is another Blackfeet artist from Browning that I met in that same back room at the Museum of the Plains Indian.

"Yeah, he did pretty good at that show," said David.

Then I said, "It sounds like you could make a living selling your art if you wanted to, though. It's just the travel that you don't enjoy. Is that something that interests you at all? Working your art business full time?"

"I probably will, I just gotta see what happens. I'm glad I've got a retirement [program]. It pays all my bills," David said.

"You're not just talking about Social Security, right? You're talking about federal employee retirement benefits?" I said.

"Yeah, both," David said.

David talked to me for a little while about various small venues that he had participated in as an artist, and other one-off opportunities that had arisen over the years for selling his art. He told me about a couple of people that he had hired to work his booth at a few different shows and festivals, for a fee.

"How does your tribe feel about your artwork? Are you well received there at home?" I asked.

"I don't know," David said. "Maybe. It depends on who you're talking to. My mom and some of them in the tribe were always opposed to it."

"Really? So, they don't support you in your work?" I asked. "Do you know what the reason is?"

"Politics," David said. "I would never have gotten that job at the museum if it were up to some of the people in the tribe. But it was federal. If it was tribal I wouldn't have been able to get a job there. It's just the way it is. But I don't rely on them. I don't really sell them anything. But it don't bother me. It's been that way for years."

I asked David some questions about this, trying to get at what the issue was; why his own mother didn't support his efforts, and why some in the tribe didn't. He attempted to explain without providing a lot of details, and it became apparent to me that the heart of the issue was tribal politics that I would not be able to understand as an outsider. So, I didn't press too hard. Even so, he volunteered that he felt that certain people in the tribe played favorites among some of the artists. None of the "favorites" are the artists I talked to for this project.

“It’s kind of who you know, not what you know,” David said. “It don't even bother me, really.”

“Are you making the kind of art that you want to make? Or do you feel pressured to make certain kinds of art because you’re Native American?” I asked. I also wondered if this was part of the issue with the tribal politics, and whether the kind of art being made by artists from the tribe determined whether people with influence in the tribe would endorse their work.

“I do what I want to do,” said David.

“So, you are working in the genre and the medium that you want to work in,” I said.

“Yeah. Printmaking,” said David.

“Do you feel like there’s pressure to make a certain kind of work that’s expected from a Native American artist? I asked.

“Well, I did ledgers,” David said. “Because they sell.”

“So, you did feel some pressure, then,” I said.

“Oh, yeah. I thought, ‘Well, everyone else is doing them, so why shouldn’t I?’ It’s easier to make a ledger drawing than to pull a series of prints. They sell for just as much, if not more. Why not?,” David said.

“How do you feel about that?” I asked.

“Like I sold out to the market,” David said. “Anybody can do it that knows how to draw, but you have to find the paper to do it on.” David was referring to the fact that people buying ledger art are looking for antique ledger paper as much as they are for the art created on it.

This was the longest conversation I'd ever had with David and I learned some things about him that I didn't know before. He's a very quiet man, and friendly, which I've already mentioned. To some he might seem on the surface to be like that stoic Indian stereotype, because you are not going to find out what he's thinking until you get to know him. He is not an open book at first. The further we got into this conversation, the more I felt like Donkey in the movie *Shrek*, pestering him with questions. Like Shrek, David has layers and I felt as though the progression of our conversation peeled away some of those layers revealing some deep thoughts and strong opinions about the world of art in general and the world of Native American art in particular. David said quite a lot "I don't know," or "I don't think about it," concerning what I was asking him about; or he said he wasn't concerned about how his art was received, or how he was treated. However, it became clear by this point in the interview that David had a lot of thoughts and opinions about the things we were talking about, and had had some profound experiences in his life as an artist directly related to the issues I was trying to get at through this project.

For one thing, David is an amazing artist with professional training. He works hard at his craft and makes beautiful work. Printmaking is not a simple process, but he has mastered relief printing. He applies imagery from his Blackfeet culture and experience to a western fine art process in a way I've never seen before. There are other Indigenous artists doing printmaking, but he has a distinctive style all his own. It requires considerable drawing ability to draw and then carve the images into one or more linoleum blocks to make the multi-colored prints he produces. Sometimes they are created using multiple print runs. Sometimes he makes them with

one print run and then he hand paints them. Either way, he uses recognizable Blackfeet motifs in his prints to create unique images that reflect both his tribal culture and also his own individual style as an artist. David is a fine artist and excellent craftsman of the highest order.

For this reason I couldn't quite believe him when he said it didn't matter whether anyone from his tribe supported him as an artist, or respected his work. I think he was just being humble. I know that it's true that some from his tribe do respect him and his work. Of the eleven artists I interviewed for this project, five are Blackfeet. All of them only have good things to say about David and his work, and are supportive. But I also know enough about the art scene in his tribe to know that there is some contention, and I understood what David was saying without being too frank about it. In that way, being an Indigenous artist is similar to being a non-Indigenous artist: not everyone is going to be supportive of our work, and often those who are most supportive are outside our local community.

However, one way that experience is completely different from that of a non-Indigenous artist is that in American culture at large our local community doesn't have so much say-so over what we do in our professional lives. We are a mobile society. We go where the work is; where the market is. So much of the appeal of the work of Indigenous artists *is* their local culture. That can be a detriment to an artist like David who seeks to march to his own drummer in the art world, so to speak. His work is a unique marriage of Blackfeet culture and western fine art methods and materials.

David also made the point that the imagery he uses (and has been using for decades) in his own hand-pulled relief prints is the same imagery that many Blackfeet artists (including him)

use in their ledger art. No one owns the imagery; it's central to the culture. But when he puts it on ledger paper it sells better. That points to a glaring misconception by the field of reception for Native American artwork about what is authentic in Native American art. For some reason if it's not on ledger paper, for some viewers that makes it *in*authentic, even if it contains the same imagery. One gallery owner in Bozeman (a gallery that has been closed for quite a few years now) actually once told David that if he were to put his imagery on ledger paper instead of hand-pulled prints she'd represent him. Otherwise, she wouldn't.

"Do you feel like the perception of Native American art has been influenced too much by that kind of attitude?" I asked. "It seems to me that what she said to you and the issue we were talking about at the Museum of the Plains Indian, where you couldn't be collected there because of an obscure bureaucratic rule, are related."

"It is," David said, answering "yes" to both parts of that question at once.

Regardless of the implications, David continues to make the kind of work he chooses to make, even though he doesn't think it sells as well as ledger art. He said that back when he was represented by a few galleries, they actually sought out his work because it is different from what everyone else is doing. So, there are benefits to bucking the expectations and trends in Indigenous art, too.

David also doesn't limit himself to a specific genre. He occasionally breaks out into traditional Indigenous arts. In 2016, he created a hide painting that was accepted to a show at the National Museum of the American Indian called *Unbound: Narrative Art of the Plains.*[113]

[113] Staff writer, "Unbound: Narrative Art of the Plains," Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, March 12, 2016, https://americanindian.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/item?id=951.

At this point, I realized that David is an even more accomplished artist than I had even considered. When we started the interview, he downplayed his achievements to the point of not even mentioning them. Then over the course of our conversation, the list of shows, festivals, galleries, museums, and other venues he has participated in began to spiral into a long list. He was obviously reluctant to toot his own horn.

There were so many things I learned from David about his experience as an Indigenous artist during this conversation. His insider knowledge as an employee of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board's Museum of the Plains Indian shed some disturbing light on some of their museum practices. In a later chapter, I discuss what I learned about how museum collection practices and representation of Native Americans and their art are changing. After talking with David about his experience at the Museum of the Plains Indian, it seemed to me that the more mainstream museums were actually doing a better job than this one created to benefit Native Americans. Perhaps they will continue to evolve and provide better representation moving forward. The wheels of government bureaucracy move slowly, as we all know. Additionally, what he shared about his own work and career as an artist was by far the most telling about the challenges facing Indigenous artists who choose to go their own way, creatively; breaking out of expected roles and ways of making art. There is so much we can learn from his long career as an artist and from the challenges he has faced making the kind of art he wants to make, and also working as an Indigenous museum professional in an IACB museum.



Figure 35. David Dragonfly, *4 Horses*, 2016, linocut, private collection.



Figure 36. David Dragonfly, *Blackfeet*, 2016, linocut, private collection.

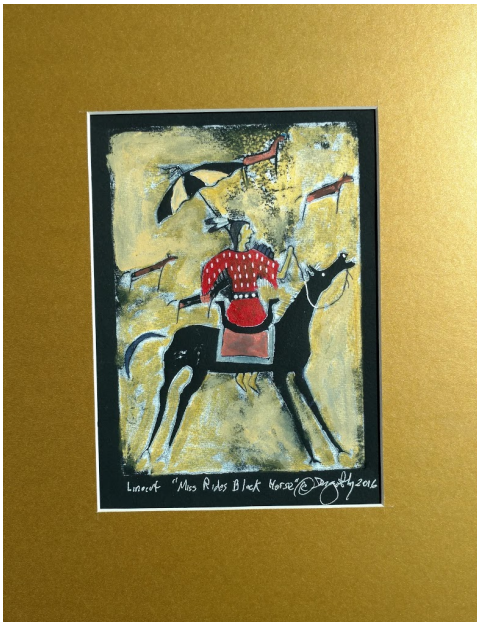


Figure 37. David Dragonfly, Miss Rides Black Horse, 2016, linocut, private collection.

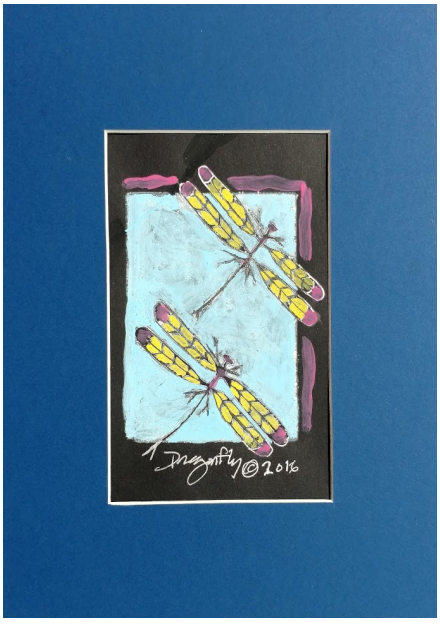


Figure 38. David Dragonfly, *Dragonfly*, 2016, linocut, private collection.

LAUREN MONROE: IT'S ALL ABOUT LEADERSHIP

Of the four members of the Creative Indigenouse Collective (CIC) I was able to interview, Lauren Monroe was the hardest one to pin down. There turned out to be a lot of really good reasons for this. When I first started interviewing artists for my doctoral work, Lauren was working on an MFA in Creative Writing at the IAIA in their low residency program. Because of this, when I had time to travel for interviews, he was in New Mexico; and when he had time for interviews, I was teaching or attending classes for my doctoral program. When I moved to Shelby, Montana and was just down the road from the Blackfeet reservation, he was making regular trips to Canada for a project he was working on with a University of Calgary professor on community-led art intervention with Indigenous youth for their wellness and increased engagement.[114] Once that project ended, I broke my leg into five pieces, had major surgery, and was unable to drive for three months. We finally connected for an interview on April 11th, 2019, and it was totally worth the wait.

Before I dive into our discussion, I'll borrow an excellent synopsis of Lauren's work from his bio on the University of Lethbridge's Art NOW[115] page:

> "Lauren Monroe Jr. is a member of the Amksapii Pikanii (Blackfeet) Nation in Montana. As a visual artist and filmmaker, Monroe is heavily influenced by the oral history and traditional life of the Blackfoot culture. He completed his Master of Fine Arts in screenwriting at the Institute of American Indian Arts.

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[114] Shannon Michelle St. Pierre, "Impressions and Experiences of Blackfoot Artists Involved in a Community-Led Art Intervention for Student Wellness and Educational Engagement," (MS Thesis, University of Calgary, 2018), PRISM: University of Calgary's Digital Repository, https://prism.ucalgary.ca/bitstream/handle/1880/108785/ucalgary_2018_st.pierre_shannon.pdf?sequence=1

[115] Staff writer, "Art NOW Series: Lauren Monroe Jr." University of Lethbridge: Notice Board, February 11, 2019, https://www.ulethbridge.ca/notice/events/art-now-series-lauren-monroe-jr#.YRBAcohKjIU.

> Monroe is involved in community leadership and service, social justice and advocacy, cultural events, ceremonies, and community initiatives and research in Amskapi Piikani. He has received multiple grants and awards for film work, including a Time-Warner Producer Fellowship from Sundance Film Institute for the documentary series project Horse Nations, Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program – MacArthur Short Film Fund Initiative for the documentary series project Horse Nations, and Big Sky Film Grant for the short film Kills Last: A Piikani Coup Story. Currently, Lauren resides in Browning, MT."

Adding to his list of accomplishments, Lauren ran for and won a seat on the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council in June of 2020. Pursuing and obtaining that post was completely consistent with his record of community leadership and service. He was also about to begin a doctoral program in Canada before the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council election, but has put that on hold until after his term as Councilman Monroe has ended.

As I mentioned, Lauren is also a member of the CIC. We started out talking about how the CIC came to be.

"I think it just came out of practicality," Lauren said. You know, we just met up once. We had a few shows together which overlapped and we just decided to see if we could do it for a year. Then it kind of rolled into something else. Now we do shows together. We're doing quite a bit together. But it was born out of necessity, like all things are. I'm on the Northern Plains up here. For artists in general, I think the networks are pretty slim; especially if you're a Native artist. So, we just created it out of necessity to support each other and to promote our own ideologies about contemporary Indigenous art and Indigenous identity. Not that we had all the answers, but I guess it was a platform to really explore those concepts."

"I understand your dilemma completely. I just started a non-profit organization called the Northern Plains Visual Arts Association,[116] to support artists up on the Hi-Line, because there are so few of us up here. We're focusing more on the business end of things. You're welcome to join," I said, half joking.

"Yeah, yeah, sure," Lauren said, and we both laughed.

"I know that you also do film, and you just finished your master's degree at the IAIA in Santa Fe. Is that correct?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's correct," Lauren said.

"Tell me about your master's degree," I said.

"Well it's a MFA from IAIA, which is a program that I think they started in the seventies with federal monies for Indian artists," Lauren said. They had recently created a program for film. Well, it's actually for creative writing, but screenwriting crosses over with film and falls underneath that, so they had this whole film program that's part of it. I think people have been graduating with that degree for the last five years or so. I got mine in 2018, and it took two years to complete. I basically used that degree to explore more of the film world, I guess; the Indigenous film world. Because I wanted to create. I saw having that degree, and obviously the technical training of writing scripts and things, and having that behind me as an Indigenous artist gave me a little more understanding of the Indigenous film world."

"What's your favorite Indigenous film, either by and for Indigenous people, or by Indigenous people for anyone?" I asked.

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[116] That organization is now defunct because I moved to Billings and there weren't enough artists up there to keep it going, proving both of our points.

"I'm not sure if I've seen it yet. I mean, my interests are quite varied, so I like sci-fi and stuff like that. I think it hasn't come out yet," Lauren said. "So, I think it's possible in the next couple of years. I think that probably it's on its way."

"Well, I can't wait, then; because I love sci-fi," I said. "Did you ever see the Indigenous film *Fast Runner*?" I asked.

"Yeah, yeah. That was a good one. I liked that one," Lauren said.

"I really liked that one, but I didn't understand it at first. I had Indigenous friends who kept saying, 'You've got to see this!' So, I watched it like two times, and I kept getting lost at this one scene about twenty minutes in. I told my friends, 'You know, I think I might just be too white to understand this movie.' But they said, 'No, you can do it,' and told me to stick with it and just keep watching past that scene; so I did. Of Course I finally *did* understand it," I said. "But that was why I always showed the *Darmok* episode[117] of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* on my first day of teaching Native American Studies 101 classes, which were made up mostly of white students. It occurred to me that there was more than just an actual language barrier for me in *Fast Runner*. There was a visual language barrier rooted in a culture that I wasn't fluent in, and that prevented me from fully understanding the meaning of that one scene. What the *Darmok* episode of *Star Trek: TNG* taught us is that just because we understand the language and all the words, that doesn't mean we can understand each other culturally, and language is cultural. Star Trek made it seem like the universal translator was the be all and end all of interspecies

[117] From the IMDB synopsis on that episode: "Picard must learn to communicate with a race that speaks in metaphor under a difficult set of circumstances." Gene Roddenberry, Joe Menosky, and Philip LaZebnik, "Star Trek: The Next Generation | Darmok," IMDB, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0708696/fullcredits?ref_=tt_ov_wr_sm#writer.

communication, but the *Darmok* episode showed us that it was *not*. I wanted my NAS 100 students to understand that even though we're all speaking the same language in the classroom, there's so much about Indigenous culture that can only be understood in their respective languages, and it's important to let Indigenous people explain it their way. It's our responsibility to try to understand, and to listen."

"That's a good one," Lauren said.

"What is your undergraduate degree in?" I asked.

"I have a BFA in English literature. I was going to be a teacher, but I've decided against it for now," Lauren said.

"You mean like a public school teacher?" I asked.

"Yeah. I tutored for a bit, but I think the art kind of snagged me away for a while," said Lauren.

"So, are you a self-taught artist, then?" I asked.

"Yeah," Lauren said. "Still learning, obviously; but yeah. I mean, all of my own technique and creativity. That's all my own. I never did take art classes in my post-secondary education."

"OK. I get it now. I love your work, but I didn't know you didn't have a BFA. I assumed that was your degree from looking at your paintings," I said. "But the literature and creative writing combo make sense now, because I find your artwork to be almost didactic. Every picture tells a story."

"Yeah, that's all telling stories," Lauren said.

"I'm still surprised you don't have a BFA because your work is so strong, but I like your work even better now, knowing that you are self taught as a visual artist," I said. "So, you make art and you've done art shows. Where did you pick up the art? Was there anyone in your life when you were growing up, or at school, or did you like art classes, or...how did you arrive at wanting to paint?"

"Well, I grew up with my grandfather who was an artist. He was sculpting, and so I always helped him. And I think that gave me the creativity and stuff like that to pursue art in general. And I always toyed around with different things and stuff. I think when it came to painting, it was more like I said--practicality; because I lived in Missoula and I didn't have access to...you know, sculpting materials could be quite expensive. So I just thought, well, you know, here's something a step up between pen and paper. The painting could do that for me. So, I think I started off more of....kind of like an art therapy kind of thing, you know. Just creating stuff from whatever I could, and just exploring the medium. And then it just kind of really morphed I think from that to I guess being a business, or whatever you want to call it as me, the artist, working a business.

"But I think my focus is primarily, I think, exploring contemporary identity and things like that, versus just the business model. So, a little more substance over more of a creative endeavor," Lauren said.

"You're still painting, I assume?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah," Lauren said.

"Are you enrolled in the Blackfeet tribe?" I asked.

"Yes," Lauren said.

"And you said your Grandfather was an artist. Who was your grandfather?" I asked.

"Gordon Monroe," Lauren said.

"Did he make his living as an artist?" I asked.

"Yeah," Lauren said.

"Could I go look up his work somewhere if I wanted to see your influences?" I asked.

"You could see some of it. I mean, he has stuff in like the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, Wyoming. His time, of course, was before the digital times, so a lot of his stuff isn't online, but I'm sure you could see it somewhere," Lauren said.

I did a search on Lauren's grandfather and was able to find an article in the Glacier Reporter that included a picture of both him and one of his sculptures.[118] He is collected by the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, but I wasn't able to find one of his sculptures online in that collection.

"I wonder if he is collected by the National Museum of the American Indian," I said.

"Maybe he is," Lauren said.

"There's an amazing number of unknown Indigenous artists collected by them. I'll look it up," I said.

It turns out that Gordon Monroe *is* collected by the NMAI. I went to the National Museum of the American Indian's online Collection Search, searched on his name, and found a pen stand that he had carved. It's a cast bronze sculpture of a bison skull mounted on a piece of

[118] John, McGill, "'Sculpture featuring Gordon Monroe' on display at MPI," Glacier Reporter, March 18, 2015, http://www.cutbankpioneerpress.com/glacier_reporter/news/article_cb042fdc-ccd5-11e4-a820-639cf3264316.html.

wood. According to the label in the NMAI collection entry for that item, it was "Formerly in the collection of Senator Daniel K. Inouye (1924-2012, D-Hawaii) and received as a gift from the artist in 1987; donated to NMAI by Senator Inouye's widow Irene Hirano Inouye (1948-2020) in 2013."[119]

"Tell me about your doctoral program. Why did you decide to go on for a doctorate?" I asked.

"Well, when I got my MFA and I came back, and I got involved teaching in a land based master's program with the University of Calgary, allowing people from reservations to teach locally, without having to travel...you know, we did classes in Browning, so that was a little easier...My interest has always been, I guess, trying to change things for my home, you know. As much as I like art and stuff, and I always do [make art], I think the idea of being a little bit more of a proactive influence is important. I think having a doctorate, especially being a minority in Montana...it's all about leadership. For the longest time, when it comes to my home, my history, our leadership has always been from outside perspectives. I think as much as that's helped, I also think it's also harmed, when it comes to cultural understanding and our own future.

"And I think, myself, being a kind of younger person, I get it and stuff. I've been off the reservation, and of course I live on the reservation, still. I feel like I am quite, you know, eligible to take over some leadership at some point, but not right now.

"I think we're educated enough to understand that we need to make our own decisions as a people, ultimately. And I think that's where we're at in this timeframe. And you know I think

[119] Staff writer, "Pen Stand," National Museum of the American Indian | Collection Search, August 10, 2021, https://americanindian.si.edu/collections-search/objects/NMAI_407754.

that's just one of my main goals. Of course my grandfathers pushed it. You know there's a famous quote by this Crow Chief, Plenty Coups, who said, 'With white man's education you'll never be his victim,' because you can at least be equal to him.[120] And I think that's what I took to heart, because I'm part historian and I see some of the things that we've been through as a people, and I think having that doctorate, obviously, will really allow me to pursue funding opportunities that would really be helpful to have a direct impact on my home and community," Lauren said.

"What are you going to get your doctorate in?" I asked. "What's your major field and minor field, if you've chosen, yet?"

"It's in curriculum and instruction. So, with that maybe I could be a school superintendent. But mostly I'd just be trying to develop programs like land based programs for youth, art as therapy, or land based therapy, or horse therapy, and things like that back home to deal with some of the social issues we face on the reservation," Lauren said.

"Would you want to work with Blackfeet Tribal College, or the public schools, or your own educational programs?" I asked.

"Probably all of the above. I mean there are limitations and guidelines, but I think the potential to create something different is pretty possible. And I think I'm leaning towards creating something different just because I think keeping the vision I have in tact is very important," Lauren said.

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[120] Lauren paraphrased that quote but got pretty close. The actual quote is, ""Education is your greatest weapon. With education you are the white man's equal, without education you are his victim and so shall remain all of your lives." Staff writer, "Plenty Coups," Wikipedia, December 4, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plenty_Coups.

"So, you started out with English and Creative Writing. Now you're looking at curriculum and instruction. Running through all of these things is your art. Do you have gallery representation?" I asked.

"Yes and no," Lauren said. "Not someone that carries it continually. I do have different shows at different galleries at different times. I think if it was constant...I mean it gets pretty dead in the winter up here and most of the galleries I know....there's one in Browning that carries my work, and one over in Whitefish, but they usually don't get going until summer."

For those unfamiliar with the northern plains and northern Rockies region of Montana, the summers are very short and the winters are very long and cold. When I lived in Shelby (just 80 miles east of Browning, with the same weather patterns and seasons), we experienced three winters in a row where it was below minus forty degrees fahrenheit for over a month. The snow gets deep. The wind blows hard and long. The only winter sports are cross country skiing and ice fishing. There is no tourist season in that part of Montana in the winter time. Peak art gallery season is in the summer when the masses of tourists come out to Glacier National Park.

"I know Robert, Ben, and John[121] just work, work, work the whole art business program…" I said.

"Oh yeah. The circuit. Everything," Lauren said.

"Is that something that's even interesting to you?" I asked.

"I think it depends on what the intent is. I've done that. I hit as many shows as I could, at least I thought I did, in my world. I still enjoy doing that, but I've recently kind of stepped back

[121] Robert Martinez, Ben Pease, and John Pepion, the other members of the CIC that Interviewed.

and just chosen what shows I wanted to do. And it's a little bit easier for my mental state, and plus the things I'm doing when it comes to teaching and pursuing other degrees and stuff," Lauren said.

"If you could make your living entirely as an artist would you do it?" I asked.

"I have actually done that for a bit, before I went back to school and changed my interests. Art will always be there no matter what I do in life. And I think that's just what my relationship with it is. Whether I do it as a career or a hobby or a pastime, I don't think it's necessarily important for me to be making a living as an artist to be an artist. I think my philosophy is that my people have always been artists and it's more of an idea of who we are. I guess those are higher concepts for me, and that's where I resonate," Lauren said.

"So, let's talk about those higher concepts and that resonance. Is it more of a personal thing for you, when you're making art? Is it something that keeps you centered?" I asked.

"Well, I grew up with an artist, my grandfather, observing the things he's done and learned about, and the things he's passed on. Having that accessibility to that window of creativity...ultimately that's it for me. That's my focus; always having that available. I think it's just really being free and examining this time, this era we're in right now as Indigenous people, and doing the best we can. Finding the beauty of it, all of it, despite some of the things that have happened in the past," Lauren said.

"So, art helps you to answer some of those questions?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. It's just practical, you know. It is for me. It's therapy. That's how I came to it. I like creating things. I like telling stories and connecting with people, and that's the easiest way

to do it; to create things and ask people questions. Then you tell them what you think, and they tell you what they think. There you go," Lauren said.

"When you have submitted your work to shows, have you ever been turned down for a juried exhibition because you are Indigenous and the show was not billed as a Native American show?" I asked.

"I can't think of anything specific right now, but I know that it has happened, for sure. I can say that without a doubt it has happened," Lauren said.

"How did that make you feel?" I asked. "I mean that's kind of an obvious one, but…"

"Well, yeah, besides the obvious, I had to consider whether it was racist or not," Lauren said. "Because I am Indigenous, I have to wonder if it is because they just didn't like my specific style of art, or because I am Indigenous. I guess I've thought, 'Well, that's kind of unfortunate,' and moved on. I think early in my career I was quite upset by that. Now, I've done quite a bit to the point where I just think, 'Well, OK. That's fine with me.'"

"Have you ever had anyone tell you, 'Sorry, but this isn't a Native American art exhibit and we're not accepting Native American art,' directly?" I asked.

"No, it was never direct. It was always indirectly implied. People know how to choose their words carefully, nowadays. It's always been indirect," Lauren said.

"Do you ever participate in art festivals? I know you had a show in Butte during the Montana Folk Festival, but did you actually participate as a vendor in the festival, or do you ever do that?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah," Lauren said.

“Do you find there is better reception to your work than in galleries,” I asked.

“Well, it depends. Usually, folk festivals and things like that...I mean, looking at it strictly from a business model...You might sell a few things at a high-end price, but most likely it’s going to be the smaller items that sell better, just because most of the people attending are probably not going to buy a 5K piece or a 10K piece. They’re gonna go there and buy earrings and stickers and stuff. I’m not going to say it doesn’t happen, because sometimes it does. I think it’s a good way to get your name out, and people will come by and visit you. It can be good PR. But usually you put more effort into it than you get back, ” Lauren said.

“Have you ever participated in an artist in residence program at a national park or a museum?” I asked.

“No, but I’ve thought about it quite a bit. I almost even submitted an application a time or two. But my life right now is...usually I have so much going on and I can’t commit to something like that. I mean, it’s idealistic. Like, ‘Oh, yeah! Glacier Park! Lake McDonnell! Three weeks!’ It sounds amazing in January when you’re looking at those opportunities and it's cold and snowy and you’re thinking about three weeks in the park when it’s summertime. But yeah, my life’s just too busy, usually, for those kinds of things,” Lauren said.

“How much time are you able to spend in your art studio every week?” I asked.

“Last year I’d say it was ten to twenty hours a week,” Lauren said.

“And do you have a day job?” I asked.

“Yes, as an instructor for University of Calgary,” Lauren said.

"Do you teach for them online, or do you actually go up there and teach?" I asked. Calgary is about a four hour drive from Browning.

"Oh, the classes are right here in Browning. They have an agreement with Blackfeet Community College," Lauren said. "University of Calgary signs a contract to use their space."

"How is your work received by your tribe?" I asked.

"Thumbs up," Lauren said.

"So, they're supportive," I said.

"Yeah, I'd say like ninety-ish percent. I'm sure there's a few people that don't like it, but that's just the way it is, you know," Lauren said.

"How is it received by the Native American community in general?" I asked.

"I think it's the same way. I mean, I think I'm able to tell a story and articulate what I'm trying to say, and I think people are really interested in hearing what I have to say," Lauren said.

"How is your work received by the non-Indigenous art community?" I asked.

"Well, that's an interesting question because it depends on who you're talking to," Lauren said. "I mean, if you're talking to people who are educated and know about the history, then it's obviously very well received. In Montana, I've noticed that in order to have those higher conversations you've really got to start with the basics, you know. And I think that's what usually takes a lot is trying to explain, for one, that we're still here. So, debunking a lot of stereotypical myths and stuff like that. Like I said, if people are educated, they understand the histories. They don't have to understand all of it, but just the basics. If they do, then yeah, they're

supportive. But the ones that are, you know, don't have a clue...unfortunately, you spend a lot more time explaining about other things, not art."

That reminded me of my conversation with Ben Pease, where he said that he was always teaching Indian 101. Apparently, Lauren spends a lot of time doing that, too.

"That makes me think of some conversations I've had with DG, where she is frequently told by people who don't have a clue, 'What are you doing here? This is a Native American show. You're not Indian. You don't look Indian. Why are you doing this? Why don't you make ledger art?' and so on--all the usual stuff. Have you had similar experiences? Except that you are obviously phenotypically Indigenous, and I doubt that anyone would walk up to you and say, 'What are you doing here? You don't look Indian,'" I said.

"Well, yeah. That doesn't happen to me, but I think it does happen to others. And obviously they don't understand the history of blood quantum," Lauren said. "You know, like, you could be tied to a culture and not look how I look."

"Exactly," I said.

"So, yeah. That's also one of the conversations, too. I have to set people straight," Lauren said.

"I'm going to imagine a scenario that would probably fit you better and you tell me if it's anywhere close to realistic," I said. "So, you're at a festival and someone walks up and they see that you aren't making ledger art, or silver jewelry, or war shirts, or beadwork, or whatever. What do they have to say about your work? Is that a person that you have to educate, to let them know

that the Indian Arts and Crafts Board says that you could do Jackson Pollock style action painting and it would still be authentic Native American art?"

"I think I do, depending on how educable they are. I hate to say that, but it's true. If they seem like they're going to be invested in their stereotypical idea, I don't waste my time. Otherwise, it's just kind of a lost cause. I just smile and I'm done with the conversation," Lauren said.

"That's so polite of you," I said.

"Well, ten years ago I think I might have expended more effort, but now I'm just older. I have better things to do," Lauren said.

This is something that came up over and over again with all of the artists I spoke with for this work. Ben Pease went into great depth about how far he is willing to go to try to educate the public, and even though he wearies of always being put in the position of teaching Indian 101, he sees it as an important thing to do. How else will the people who won't ever take a Native American Studies course, or learn about Indigenous histories and issues in school (which is the vast majority of people) ever learn what is true for Indigenous people? Ultimately, every single Indigenous artist who puts themselves in contact with the general public for the purpose of showing or selling their work ends up being an inadvertent ambassador for Indigenous people and their issues.

"Do you ever feel pressure to make certain kinds of art over others to make sales or to please your family, your tribe, or your elders? Or your grandfather? Do you ever feel like, 'My ancestors are watching, I better make this kind of work,'?" I asked.

"Oh, absolutely not," Lauren said. "My grandfather was extremely intelligent and the stuff he did was varied. I think early on there was pressure, but it's not…no matter what I do, I'm one hundred percent confident in it. I mean. I don't even know what to do sometimes, but it's something I quite enjoy. So, no, I don't feel pressured. Not anymore. When I was younger I think I was pressured in general anyway, just to make a sale."

"You seem very healthy and well adjusted. These are healthy attitudes," I said.

"Well, no matter what we call it, it needs to be real. I'm a real human being, you know," Lauren said. "Maslow, when he visited the Blood tribe, he got his 'hierarchy of needs' from them, from our people."[122]

"Really! Was that specifically from the Blackfeet?" I asked.

"Yeah. Well, the Bloods; but it's Blackfoot,"[123] Lauren said.

"Aren't they one of the three…?" I started to ask.

"..Four. Yeah," Lauren said.

"Are there four nations?" I asked.

"Yeah. There's North Piikani, South Piikani, and there's Siksika and Kainai," Lauren said."

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[122] I did a little research and verified the influence of the Bloods (one branch of the Blackfeet tribe that lives above the Canadian border) on Maslow. There are some sources that deny their influence entirely (which, in the face of evidence to the contrary, we call "whitewashing"). Here's an article from *Psychology Today* that draws a pretty straight line from Maslow's experience with the Bloods to his presentation of the "hierarchy of needs": Steve Taylor, PhD, "Original Influences | How the ideals of America were shaped by Native Americans," Psychology Today, March 22, 2019, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/out-the-darkness/201903/original-influences.

[123] Staff writer, "Blackfoot Confederacy," Wikipedia, July 26, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackfoot_Confederacy.

"Here's a good question, especially for someone in the ICC: Would you consider the community of Native American artists with whom you are regularly associated to be cooperative or competitive?" I asked.

"Oh, one hundred percent cooperative. Yeah. I mean, it's such a small world and we all know each other, even outside my tribe, too. For instance, DG--I'm grateful for her. I like DG," said Lauren. "I always see them as, well, friends *first*. Like, 'How ya doin'? Yada yada. What do you think of this?' You know one thing that's interesting, though? Outside of the CIC, in general, and in Montana, there's definitely competition, I think, with the fine artists who are non-Native but do Native scenes. And I think there is some weird...I don't know what you'd want to call it, but there's some kind of weirdness there for sure, because I've felt it quite a bit just visiting people."

"So, you mean weirdness between them and the Indigenous community?" I asked.

"Yeah, yeah. And especially if you're one of those artists. Like, 'I'm a Native artist so I'm gonna go check it out,'" Lauren said. "It seems, oh...I don't know….*interesting*, I guess."

"It's weird. It's very bizarre. I told Robert, not this year but last year at Western Art week…" I said.

"...Yeah. Specifically Western Art Week," Lauren said.

"...It wasn't so bad this year, but they still had it set up this way...I said to Robert, 'It's like they've got you all over here in this Native American ghetto, and then you go over to the main area and it's all these white people doing Native American stuff," I said.

"And that's the thing, too. I really try to immerse myself in the different concepts of art. It's like if I'm just...if I'm looking strictly at the art, there's work that's comparable. Like Robert, John, Ben...whoever...it's comparable. But there's something there, and it's really interesting because I don't think there's quite a difference in quality [between the work done by the Indigenous artists and the non-Indigenous artists]...but obviously the name...but, I don't know," Lauren said.

"What do you mean? Non-Native artists calling their work Native American?" I asked.

"Well, yeah. And maybe just doing that style of art, and then being a little bit higher," Lauren said.

"What do you mean by higher?" I asked.

"Well, I guess one thing that we always talk about is that there seems to be so many Native artists, but why aren't there more DGs, or whoever else, at Western Art Week, at the other higher end galleries?" Lauren said.

"Oh, I see what you're saying," I said. We were back to talking about the Native American art ghettos at these art festivals, where most of the Native American artists seemed to be lumped into one small section, while the high-end venues such as high priced galleries hosted mostly non-Native artists. I had to agree with his assessment, having been to Western Art Week multiple times and having seen the very same thing.

"That's one of the things that I think is weird. I'm not saying it's racist or anything, but it's a weird glass ceiling," Lauren said.

It *is* a weird glass ceiling. Think back for a moment to the earlier chapter entitled "Artists of the Tribe Called Wannabee." Those are the kinds of artists painting Native American themes who get the high-end galleries, instead of the real Indians who make real Indian art.

"You know, I've seen some really amazing artists even way before my time, and there's a certain few that get in, you know. The golden boys and girls club. But I don't know. There's a lot of factors involved that I just don't understand quite yet," Lauren said.

I mentioned before that Lauren is very polite. This was one of those times when he was being extremely polite, because I think we both knew that he did understand those factors, and that the reasons Indigenous artists were excluded from the high-end venues was the same as it's always been.

"I have a feeling that you understand them perfectly but you're just grasping for some appropriate language to express that understanding," I joked.

Lauren laughed and said, "Yeah, to apply to it."

"Feel free to share, because I'll be glad to share your true thoughts on the subject. But you might want to write your own dissertation on this one day, you know," I said.

"Someday, you know, I think that's when I get my doctorate," Lauren said. "And that's the thing about the doctorate. It's such a platform. I recognize where I'm from. I recognize that not many people from my community can have access. I recognize the fact that I'm very articulate, and I can do quite a bit of things, and that's a platform I want to bring back to my reservation. And I think that's one of the reasons I'm going after the doctorate. Whether or not I

use it in the public school system. There's quite a bit of potential once you have that little piece of paper to write for grants, and write for publications (which I have, and will continue to do)."

"Well, you're to be congratulated for shooting for that, because I know what the challenges are for you as a person who's decided to go for more education," I said.

"It's tough. You know, not many people do it, especially not from my community, and that's the reason I'm doing it," Lauren said.

"Good for you. That's great," I said. "Speaking of challenges, what are the challenges you've faced to pursue a career as an artist, if you've had any? You've already pretty much talked about that. You said you didn't see them as challenges. It sounds like no one was preventing you from being an artist."

"Absolutely not. I mean, I came from a family and support system that no matter what I chose to do they would have been behind me one hundred percent," Lauren said.

"What challenges do you face now that you've established a career as an artist?" I asked.

"I think it's just time, and conflict with the other things I'm going after," Lauren said.

"What challenges have you faced in the past, and perhaps in the present, that you believe are unique to being a Native American artist making contemporary art?" I asked.

"That's the thing of it. I think the public has this idea of western style Native art, and I think that's what they expect you to do. I think that's part of the challenge of me being a contemporary Indigenous artist. Yeah, I could still do those romanticized images and stuff, but I think having the ability to explain yourself, some of the issues that we face now as modern...I guess not modern Indians, but as modern *persons*...I think that's part of it," Lauren said.

"Getting people to see you as a modern person," I said.

"Yeah, exactly. Yeah," Lauren said.

"What advantages do you think are available to non-Indigenous artists making the kind of work that you make? Are there any advantages?" I asked.

"I think, unfortunately, maybe it comes back to race, expectations, and professionalism. I mean, we've had non-Indigenous artists making Indigenous style art for X amount of years, and it's been kind of like the status quo. Any time Native artists have access to the power structures, they want people to see them as professional, living artists; fine artists. I think that's a big one. I mean, that's still that glass ceiling right now. At least where I'm from, in northwest Montana, and Idaho, Washington…" Lauren said.

"I know exactly what you're talking about, but the way you're talking about it is different than the way the other artists I interviewed talked about it. They didn't talk about it as much, and they didn't talk about it in our language. You're talking about it like an academic, which is my language: power structures, for example," I said. "Since those power structures are essentially created by commerce and money, what do you wish collectors of Native American art of any kind knew that they do not know about your work in particular, or contemporary Native American art in general. We've already talked about seeing you as contemporary, modern people. I know that I wish everyone knew about the Indian Arts and Crafts Board and the laws defining what Native American art is. I came closer last month to reporting people than I've ever come before, at the Western Living and Design Show. I said to myself, 'I don't really believe this person is Native American,' and almost went up and asked for their enrollment card.

"But what, besides the things we've already talked about, do you wish that collectors knew?" I asked.

"I think in a perfect world people would be interested in learning more about the story. I think the one thing I run into, and I think there's no way to change this, just because I think it's the American capitalistic system, is people buy things to own them; and I think that's just a hallmark of Manifest Destiny. There's no need for anything beyond that; people thinking, 'I'm a consumer. I want that. I don't care about the backstory. This is going to hang on my wall. I'm going to own it,'" Lauren said.

"Like it's a trophy; a Lauren Monroe original," I said.

"Yeah, exactly," Lauren said. "And I think all artists can agree on that. I've spoken to enough people and you start telling a story and their eyes glaze over and you're like, 'OK, they're no longer interested. They just want to own this because it fulfills something in *the*m.' Which, I guess, is part of the transaction, you know. Doing business as artists...it's something we have to accept.

"But I think that would be one thing. And then I guess, for my own personal art, I suppose just having the same thing, too. Just being able to tell someone some of the history because *I* enjoy the history of Blackfeet people. I think explaining contemporary issues and stuff, in a way that people understand and want to care about them, makes them walk away with a different frame of thinking about how we are now."

"Well stated," I said.

What Lauren had said reminded me of a paper I read on the agency of objects when taking an art history methods class. In this paper, the author asserted, "For an object to be socially powerful in a recognized manner, the form of the object lays down certain rules of use which influence the sensory and emotional impacts of the object."[124] How this connects to Native American art is that the objects themselves, the style of the objects, create meaning in potentially three ways: the intention given to the object by the artist, the meaning the viewer and collector bring to the object from their own limited perspective and potentially incorrect understanding of the actual meaning of the object, and all of the historical and stylistic presence infused in the object itself through the unconscious influence of cultural traditions leading to the creation of the object. What Lauren was saying here was that he wishes that collectors would leave their own assumptions and misunderstandings out of the equation and allow the intention of the artist and the history, function, and cultural influence that come with the object to inform their experience of the art. Too often, in the world of Native American art, the form of the object is subjugated to the rules created for it by society at large, and those rules emerged from a very incorrect understanding of Native American art which have perpetuated to this day. That unfortunate reality has removed the ability of Native American art to be "socially powerful in a recognized manner." It has in fact removed the agency of Native American art to tell its own story in its own way with the power of the histories and cultures of Indigenous people behind them. That is the very definition of colonization.

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[124] Chris Gosden, "What Do Objects Want?" *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* Vol. 12, No. 3 (Sep., 2005), p.193, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20177516.

Throughout my visit with Lauren Monroe, I was struck by the way in which he embodies the integration of all of the things that he mentioned were important for outsiders to understand about Indigenous people, Indigenous art, and contemporary Native American art in particular. He has leveraged all of his experiences and education to live by example, and patiently instruct people who are willing to listen, both inside and outside of his tribe. His belief that he not only has the opportunity to use his knowledge, experience, and education to lead his people into a better future is coupled with a feeling of responsibility for that mission, which he has taken on in his role as a Blackfeet Tribal Business Councilman. Lauren not only talks about what he wants to see change for his tribe, he also keeps moving forward, even when he's not sure where that might take him, and stays open to the possibilities. He leads the way he paints: with an open mind and open heart, listening, sharing, and applying his creativity in the moment.



Figure 39. Lauren Monroe, Jr., *His Story Robe*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, private collection.



Figure 40. Lauren Monroe, Jr., *Power of the Tongue*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, private collection.



Figure 41. Lauren Monroe, Jr., *Pieces of me Revisited*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, private collection.



Figure 42. Lauren Monroe, Jr., *Black Buffalo*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, private collection.



Figure 43. Lauren Monroe, Jr., *His Many Horses*, 2019 acrylic on canvas, private collection.



Figure 44. Lauren Monroe, Jr., *His Dream Shirt*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, private collection.

JOHN PEPION: WE'RE DOING IT OUR WAY, NOW

How I met John Pepion the first time is a testament to the friendliness and helpfulness of Blackfeet people. Of the eleven artists I wrote about for this work, five of them are Blackfeet. It would be unfair (and probably untrue) to say that the reason for that is that Blackfeet people are friendlier than people from other tribes. For one thing, people from the Crow tribe have always been every bit as friendly to me as people from the Blackfeet tribe; and every single person I interviewed, regardless of the tribe they are from, treated me with equal respect and cordiality. The prevalence of Blackfeet artists in my project *might* have something to do with the prevalence of the arts within certain tribes, but I can't say that with any certainty, either. What *is* absolutely true, however, is that there were more artists willing to contribute to my project from the Blackfeet tribe than there were from any other tribe in Montana, and they were all very friendly about it. This story of how I initially became acquainted with John Pepion is a testament to that friendliness.

In the summer of 2016, my husband's best friends in the world, Mick and Linda Jones, came to visit us for two weeks from San Jose, California. It was the first time I'd met them in person since Jonathan and I had been married, and it was the first time they'd ever been to Montana. Of course, we took them to our favorite places, one of which is Glacier National Park. We camped for five days at Johnson's of St. Mary and spent each day exploring a different part of the park. Glacier National Park is adjacent on its eastern border to the Blackfeet reservation. East Glacier and St. Mary are towns on the Blackfeet reservation, so we were actually camping on Blackfeet land. We always camp on that side because it is the side of the park with the most beautiful views and the fewest tourists. Most tourists hang out on the west side, which makes West Glacier very crowded, and we don't like crowds. Additionally, the Blackfeet people are wonderful hosts, and we have always had wonderful experiences at local

establishments there on the east side of the park. This trip revealed even more of their kindness and hospitality, which I would have thought impossible as it was already superlative.

On the day during this trip when we were exploring East Glacier and Two Medicine, we stopped at Brownies, a favorite local establishment in East Glacier, for some ice cream. I had my little dog with me at the time, so I waited out on the porch at a table while Jonathan, Mick and Linda went inside to get our ice cream. Chewey was the cutest little rescued Pomeranian (caramel) you've ever seen, and he attracted the attention of a handsome Blackfeet couple sitting next to me on the porch. They struck up a conversation with me on the topic of the cuteness of my dog and introduced themselves. I learned the fellow's name was Billy Edwards, that he has a little restaurant over in Browning, and Billy asked me where I was visiting from. I told him I was from Bozeman and that we had brought some out of town company up to see Glacier. He asked me what I did in Bozeman and I told him about my doctoral program and the project I was working on.

"Then you need to meet John Pepion," Billy said.

"He's actually at the top of my list," I said. "I've seen his work and we have mutual friends. I was going to look him up."

Billy pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and started dialing numbers. He talked to a few people and said the same thing each time: "Hey. You know where John is right now?"

After a few of these phone calls he said, "I found him. He's got a new number. I'll call him for you."

I insisted that wasn't necessary because I didn't want to impose. I really didn't. I had a whole plan for introducing myself to the artists I was hoping to meet with and scheduling a time that was convenient for them, and I didn't want to make it seem like I was a pushy outsider demanding that they see me on the spot. There was also the issue of having out of town company in tow.

Billy waved a hand and dismissed my concerns, and said, “It’s alright. He’ll want to talk to you.”

At this point I simply didn’t want to be rude to Billy. He was going out of his way to hook me up with John, which was awfully nice of him. So, I let him continue.

Billy raised John on the phone and they talked for a few minutes. I listened self-consciously as Billy explained to John that there was a student from MSU in Bozeman here writing a paper about Indian artists, and he asked if John would be interested in talking to me. John said that he was.

“He says he can talk to you right now if you want,” Billy said.

Dumbfounded, I replied, “Well...where is he?”

“Where you at?” Billy asked into the phone. “He’s up at the Cattle Baron in Babb. You guys had dinner yet?”

“No, we haven’t, but we were planning to go to the Cattle Baron while we’re here, sometime,” I said. “How long does it take to drive up there?”

“Oh, about an hour,” Billy said.

I had to think fast and I didn’t want to blow this opportunity that had been so serendipitously created for me by this total stranger. So, I said, “Tell him we’ll meet him up there as soon as we can get there. We’ll leave as soon as my husband and our friends get out here with their ice cream.”

Billy conveyed the message and hung up with John. I thanked him profusely for his kindness. The rest of my party came out of the store with the ice cream, I introduced everyone, and then Billy and his girlfriend left.

“Well, it looks like we’re having dinner at the Cattle Baron,” I said. My husband loves a good steak, and the steaks at the Cattle Baron are legendary. I got no argument from him, but he was curious about how I had come to that decision. I told him, Mick, and Linda what had just transpired on the porch.

Like me, they were stunned. We ate our ice cream as fast as possible without inducing an ice cream headache and headed up to Babb to meet John.

About an hour later, we were seated at a table at the Cattle Baron and the waitress pointed out where John was sitting. I placed my order and went over to his table, just as he was finishing up his own dinner. I introduced myself and gave him the sixty second elevator speech on my doctoral project, and he said he'd love to do an interview. Neither of us had time on that trip, so we exchanged numbers, became Facebook friends, and kept in touch.

It wasn't until the summer of 2017 that John and I were finally able to connect. After I had moved to Shelby for a teaching job at the high school there, I met up with him at the Blackfeet Heritage Center in Browning in July. John works there in the summertime, and when traffic is slow he makes ledger art to pass the time. We started that day by talking about the Santa Fe Indian Market, which was just a month away, and in which I thought he might be participating. John told me he wasn't going that year, and was telling me how it had changed.

"Some of the organizers left because they felt it was being run by more non-Natives, so they broke off and started IFAM," John said.

"And what does IFAM stand for?" I asked.

"Indigenous Fine Art Market," John said. "Last year was the first year for it. Robert Martinez told me a lot of artists were disappointed because they had to close the market down one day early. And two more members of that group broke off and started SEEDS. Now SEEDS is going to go this year and compete directly with the Santa Fe Indian Market."

We had barely started talking about this and I already felt like I wasn't keeping up, or was missing some details. I let John keep talking and took my notes, but later I researched IFAM and SEEDS and figured out that there was quite a lot going on in Santa Fe, including some controversy concerning Indigenous artist venues.

What John was talking about was the fact that IFAM was born as an alternative to the Santa Fe Indian Market. As I already mentioned in an earlier chapter, the Santa Fe Indian Market (the largest Indian art market in the world, run by SWAIA) took up the practice of excluding Indigenous artists who were not affiliated with federally recognized tribes. IFAM's debut occurred just after three of the SWAIA[125] (Southwestern Association for Indian Artists) board members suddenly resigned in 2014.[126] John Torres Nez resigned first, and had been the CEO of the organization. He was followed shortly thereafter by Tailinh Agoyo and Paula Mirabal. After doing some research, I learned that the reason for the resignation of John Torres Nez was that he had been accused of embezzling $37,000 from a fundraiser conducted by SWAIA.[127] The three former SWAIA board members established IFAM, which ran from 2014 through 2016. In its final year, it closed a day early because of a problem with liability insurance (not enough insurance coverage for the size of the venue). Shortly after that event, Tailinh Agoyo and Paula Mirabal left IFAM and carried their vision forward (without John Torres Nez) by creating *We Are the SEEDS*. IFAM never appeared again. SEEDS has continued to the present day and has

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[125]Staff writer, "About SWAIA," Southwestern Association of Indian Artists," July 25, 2021, https://swaia.org/about-swaia/.

[126] Michael Abatemarco, "Creators of Indigenous Fine Art Market break from group to launch newer event," The New Mexican, September 16, 2016, https://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/local_news/creators-of-Indigenous-fine-art-market-break-from-group-to-launch-newer-event/article_f15ce5ea-3a6a-55b3-a372-4ee987320295.html

[127] Ibid

expanded to include not only Santa Fe but an east coast venue in Philadelphia. According to their website:

> "Since our founding in 2016, we have prioritized the following: celebrate and educate about contemporary Indigenous arts and culture, create opportunities for Indigenous artists, and provide positive and accurate representation for Indigenous peoples. In the four years Seeds has been in existence, staff has joined the organization in the areas of programming, marketing, development, and production. Together we produce cultural events, programs, and workshops that celebrate and support Indigenous arts and artists throughout North America."[128]

So, what does all of this have to do with John, and why did he start out talking about IFAM? IFAM (while it was in operation) and SEEDs both compete directly with the Santa Fe Indian Market, occurring on the same dates each year.

"It was crazy, because I applied [to IFAM] last year and I didn't hear back from them, or anything, until like the week before. They didn't call me or email me or anything, and I wasn't ready. I didn't have any art at the time," John said.

"So, it sounds like they might not be very organized, either," I said.

"Yeah, and then we found out it wasn't even in existence anymore," John said. "Now we're going to go to SEEDS this year, and they're going to compete right with the Santa Fe Indian Market."

Now he was getting closer to making the connection. John is an enrolled member of the Blackfeet tribe so he could participate in the Santa Fe Indian Market if he wanted to. While he still didn't get to the specifics of why he was choosing to participate in SEEDS instead of the Santa Fe market, it became obvious that for an artist trying to plan and coordinate venues from

[128] Staff writer, "About Us," SEEDS, July 25, 2021, https://www.wearetheseeds.org/about-us.html

the remote location of rural Montana (just thirty-some-odd miles from the Canadian border, in John's case), being able to count on a venue to have their act together, being able to count on them to actually be there once you make the 1,288 mile journey to get there, loaded down with framed artwork, booth materials, and art supplies, is of supreme importance. You don't want to make that trip only to find out when you get there that it's not happening.

Let's back up a bit. This discussion with John hit the ground running and covered a lot of ground before I was able to get to the basics. Here is a little bit of information about John, in his own words:

> "John Isaiah Pepion is an artist who hails from the Blackfeet Nation in northern Montana. The art journey has been ceremonial for John as his understanding of his past, family, and culture grows with his work. He descends from Mountain Chief, a Blackfeet leader who preserved history through numerous winter counts. Through art, John finds personal healing and cultural preservation. He speaks with troubled youth in public schools to promote the benefits of art as therapy. John holds formal degrees in Art Marketing and Museum Studies from United Tribes Technical College and the Institute of American Indian Arts, respectively. However, his education continues with every piece he creates and with every story he shares. John incorporates traditional design elements into colorful contemporary illustrations, leaving his work highly recognizable. Most importantly, John's art deepens his connections to self and place, providing him with a sense of strength."[129]

John is partly a self-taught artist, but he did take a lot of art classes at United Tribes Technical College. His degrees are in areas peripheral to the arts, but serve to support his career as an artist. He told me that when he was in college he had roommates that were artists and that he learned more from artists themselves while he was attending school.

[129] John Pepion, "Biography," John Isaiah Pepion, July 29, 2021, https://johnisaiahpepion.com/pages/biography

"I had four roommates. One was a Hopi woodcarver. One was a Zuni potter. Another was a Lakota painter. The other was a Ho-Chunk painter. I was majoring in museum studies and there was really no art. I took all my art classes before I went to IAIA. So, I started working with them, and learning from them, and from other artists on campus. Just working together, creating together, sharing music, sharing stories, and sharing work. I asked about their techniques, or what they were using, or how they did what they were doing. That's how I learned, you know," John said.

John told me that despite the influence of other artists from other tribes, he would never feel comfortable making art that uses the visual and cultural symbolism from another tribe. "I feel uncomfortable as an artist doing designs from other tribes. I would never dare to. Like, I wouldn't do Apache clown dancers, or anything like that. But other artists feel like they can do other cultural designs and all kinds of stuff. I mean, there's no rules but me personally…I stick to my own tribe's designs," said John.

John was talking about cultural appropriation, here.

"What got you interested in doing ledger art?" I asked.

"I've been doing that style my whole life. It wasn't like I said, 'Hey, I want to do that.' It runs in my family and goes far back, a few generations, to my great-great-grandfather, old man Mountain Chief. He has tons of winter counts. Some of his horses are blue. Some of his horses are green and orange. That's where I get people saying, 'How did you decide to do a blue horse?' That's where I decided to do that. I was also in love with the Santa Fe Studio Style and ledger art in general. I always did that kind of stuff, but I never had access to the [ledger] paper and didn't

even know how to get it. So I was doing ledger art with watercolors. But how I started doing ledger art is that, back when I was in Santa Fe, my roommate would come back from Pine Ridge with ledger paper and say, 'Hey, I got this from another ledger artist. I'll give you five sheets. It was nice. It was from the 1800s. I didn't even know what to do with it. I was kind of scared of it. It kind of sat there for a while. Then I decided to get an art desk, and I put the art desk together and started working on it; did those ledgers.

"Then my other friend, the Ho-Chunk painter, came back with a small notebook of five by seven ledger paper from the eighteen hundreds and I started doing those. People bought them but I didn't know how to sell them. Some of the small ones went for twenty dollars. Some of the big ones went for a hundred dollars. I wish I would have known then what I know now.

"So, I did that, and I didn't really care, because I could do art, but I wasn't like, 'Hey, I'm an artist,' or pursue it; but I did it. I didn't do art shows or stuff like that. It wasn't until two thousand and nine, I got in a car wreck, here...I broke my shoulder and I was pretty depressed. I was going to physical therapy and I started drawing and doing ledger art a lot. I had some ledger paper gathered, I started doing it, and I haven't stopped since," John said.

"Where do you get your paper from, now?" I asked.

"I get my paper from two antique dealers. One's from here, originally. Chuck Lewis. He's Blackfeet. He's an older cowboy. He's probably sixty or seventy. He lives in Questa, New Mexico. He's been trading Indian art and ledger paper since the nineteen sixties. So, he travels up here and I'll trade him for some pieces. The other antique dealer is from Whitefish. I go up there and pick out maps and stuff," John said.

"So, they just know that you're looking for it and…?" I asked.

"I tell them what I'm looking for. They've gotten to know me pretty good. They tell me that I'm fussy and picky because I'm really particular. I don't like my paper to be ripped up or bent up and I like it from the eighteen hundreds, and specifically Montana" John said.

"I've noticed that Robert and DG and some other artists use more contemporary materials for their ledger art. Like, they're using maps and sheet music, and other things like that. Have you tried some of those?" I said.

"I've been doing that. In the ledger art world people do it on Western Union telegrams, checks, music sheets, and maps. I did all that. I've been doing a lot of maps lately. I just did a few music sheets," said John."It's really popular and it seems like every Native artist is trying to do it, like it's going to make you famous and rich. I'm not in it for that. I'm not rich. But I've been doing it, pushing the limits of the artform. I love ledger art, you know. But it seems like everybody's doing it. There's a lot of people right here on the reservation that's doing it now, that weren't doing it before, ever."

"Do you see that as cultural appropriation? Or is it more of an opportunistic act?" I asked.

"That's a good question because even though ledger art is our tradition it was introduced to us by non-Natives while the plains Indians were incarcerated. What we were drawing was a tradition, but what they introduced, the paper, was new and it became its own genre. Now, there's so many periods, and it's still going on, and the period we're in is contemporary art, and it's going in all kinds of directions. So, it's hard to say. When people ask me, 'Is this traditional?', the only way I can say it's traditional is by saying it's carrying on what *my* family did; telling

stories all the way back to winter counts or war records. That's in my blood and the whole family does it. So, yeah, I can say it's traditional.

"As far as the paper? That's a good question," John said.

"It *is* an interesting question. One of the things I'm writing about is the idea that *any* Native American art that we see now is traditional, but it's also contemporary at the same time," I said.

"Even amongst ourselves, as Indian artists, there's a huge argument about what's traditional or contemporary. Some people say, 'I can make some scribbles and it's traditional.'" John said.

"Right. I have this idea that what we call traditional--like, the really traditional stuff, like the beadwork, and the old stuff that looks like it was made in the eighteen nineties or before--is really just a snapshot of that period in time, and it's the thing that non-Indian collectors understand. They have a hard time with the idea of a contemporary Native American, much less contemporary Native American art. So, when they see the old stuff, they say, 'Oh, yes--that's Indian stuff. That's traditional. That's authentic,'"I said.

"And that old stuff, it wasn't made as art. It was made to be used every day. It was worn every day. It wasn't as it is now, where people say it's art. It wasn't seen that way. No one said, "Oh, we're going to make this today for art.' That's why, now, I purposely do pieces that reflect how we're living now. Contemporary issues. But a lot of collectors are like, "Oh, no, we want to see teepees or war bonnets,'" John said.

"Do you know Dolores Purdy's work?" I asked.

"Yes," John said.

"What do you think of her work? The subject matter. She's very punny, with the cadillacs" I asked.

"She's out of Santa Fe. Yeah, she's always kind of making fun of Santa Fe. But she's a big artist there. But she's still making...not fun, but jokes about it, about the artist life," John said.

"Well, she's Caddo, and I like her Caddolacs," I said.

"Oh, yeah," John said, laughing.

"I was explaining to my students last year...I showed them one of hers where the people in her pictures have that weird hair that she does...so, she's got this artist in a truck full of artwork, and the artwork's falling out the back of the truck, and she's driving on a dirt road, and the road is full of potholes. Then the writing on that piece says, 'The road to market is full of potholes.' I was trying to explain to my students that that was a pun. Anyway, I considered her stuff very modern because she's using cars instead of horses, and commenting on modern life. But I mention it because you were talking about doing more contemporary subjects," I said.

"Some of the issues we go through are how we live now, how we dress now, or cars, or bikes," John said.

"Do you do things besides ledger art?" I asked.

"Yeah. I paint buffalo skulls. I do acrylic painting sometimes. I do murals sometimes. I paint teepees. I have the right to paint teepees here. You have to get the rights. I also make rawhide earrings," John said.

"You said you are represented by five galleries. You also mentioned you are thinking of letting Old Main Gallery in Bozeman represent you exclusively in Montana. Does that mean you're going to be dropping local galleries up here, even?" I said.

"Yes.," John said.

"Old Main sells that much more work for you?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. It's a good relationship. Plus, they'll come up here and see me, or I'll go down there, or I'll ship them the artwork, and they just automatically mat and frame it," John said.

"Do they sell on consignment?" I asked.

"It's on consignment. But recently they made a purchase from me. It's the first time I've ever had a gallery buy work from me like that," John said.

John talked a little about the other galleries that were representing his work, but he has since done exactly as he said and withdrawn his work from all the other galleries. Old Main Gallery in Bozeman is now the only official gallery representation John has in Montana. John said that he felt a little stretched out having to create work to stock five different galleries. Having just one gallery that markets him well, and which does not mind John doing his own online marketing and direct sales, has allowed John to focus more on making the kind of work he wants to make, instead of being constantly driven by market demand from five different galleries.

John is also part of the Creative Indigenous Collective (CIC), with Lauren Monroe, Robert Martinez, Ben Pease, and Louis Still-Smoking. Through that organization he has been working to improve the representation of Indigenous art, as well as provide education and

support for young Indigenous artists. I bring this up now because one of the other things John was doing at the same time he was scaling back on the number of galleries that represent him was to begin to work with museums. John's work was displayed along with other members of the CIC at the Wyoming State Museum in the summer of 2017 in their first show ever featuring Indigenous artists.[130] The show, "We Were. We Are," was curated by Robert Martinez. John's work is also now on display in the permanent collections of the Missoula Art Museum (MAM), the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in the Plains Indian Museum part of the complex, and Paris Gibson Square in Great Falls.

Additionally, John has extended his efforts to work with Indigenous youth beyond that initial effort of the CIC in Butte in 2017 at the Montana Folk Festival with Ben Pease and Lauren Monroe. He spent four days in British Columbia working with Indigenous youth up there, and has been travelling, doing workshops, lectures, and speaking engagements. He did some cultural exchange with Indigenous communities in Canada and said he learned a lot from their stories.

John does not participate in many festivals. Although he did participate in the Montana Folk Festival in the same year that he and the other members of the CIC kicked off their youth initiative, John says that the Montana Folk Festival happens every year at the same time as the Blackfeet pow-wow, which creates a considerable conflict.

Concerning the CIC and the work that they do together to support each other, as well as other Indigenous artists, John told me a story. There is an art broker in Santa Fe who buys ledger art from a variety of Indigenous artists, and he used to buy ledger art from John, too. After this

[130] Bailey Knopp, "Art Exhibit on Display at State Museum: We Were. We Are," County 17, June 20, 2017, https://county17.com/2017/06/20/art-exhibit-on-display-at-state-museum-we-were-we-are/.

guy kept trying to talk John down on his prices, John started saying “no” when he would call him looking to buy new work. He would tell John that his prices were too high and that the other artists he worked with didn’t charge him that much. He would also be very pushy and demanding when trying to get work out of John to sell. Apparently, he was marking up the work that he bought from Indigenous artists about four hundred percent. After the guy continued to call and John continued to say “no,” he asked John, “Does this mean you want me to take you off of my list?”

“Yes, please do. I will no longer be sending you any of my work or doing business with you,” John said.

“Well can you at least give me an explanation?” the guy asked.

“Yeah. Because I don’t like the way you treat Indigenous artists,” John said. This apparently made the guy mad and he went off on an angry tirade at John.

“That sounds like straight up exploitation,” I said.

“Yeah. Buying work and then marking it up by four hundred percent? Yeah, that’s exploitation,” John said. “So, that’s what I’ve been doing with the collective. We’ve been taking control of our own careers, you know. We’re doing things differently. Some people might not like it, but what we say is, ‘We’re not breaking the rules, but we’re bending the rules.’”

It sounded like breaking the rules to me, but it also sounded to me like the rules needed to be broken. Every business and industry has its own standard operating procedures, but from the perspective of Indigenous people (and those of us who support them) those rules can seem very colonized, stacking the deck against Indigenous people.

"A lot of museums have a way of portraying us. Here we are trying to work with museums to educate them about representation. Some of them love it. Some of them don't like it. Same way with galleries and certain people, like exploitation, for example," John said.

"That reminds me," I said. "Last year when I met you at the Cattle Baron, everyone around the reservation kept telling me about how Terrence Guardipee had just been there the day before teaching an art marketing workshop. Did you participate in that?"

"Yeah," John said.

"Talk about that a little bit. How did that come about?" I asked.

"Terrence and his wife worked out a deal with the community college[131] to teach that workshop," John said. "The workshop was free and they provided free lunch, and I just went. I just wanted to hear their personal experience. And it was pretty good because they did open up and share a lot of their secrets with us." Terrence Guardipee is a very well known Blackfeet ledger artist, and his wife is his business manager.

"Were there a lot of local artists at that workshop?" I asked.

"There was, yeah. But I'll tell you how it is here. There's a lot of talent here, but a lot of people don't want to learn the business side or work together. There's been a lot of workshops here. I've been involved in a few and tried to organize a few too, through the First Peoples Fund, [132] because there's really no support for art here in this community. Not from our council. And just to be clear, the support I'm talking about is about how to make a living from an art career; how to get grants or anything," John said.

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[131] Blackfeet Tribal College in Browning, Montana: https://bfcc.edu/
[132] https://www.firstpeoplesfund.org/

I've already mentioned how five of the eleven artists that I interviewed for this project are Blackfeet. Based on what John was telling me, the fact that there were so many Blackfeet artists actively working their craft meant that they were finding success despite a lack of support. Something Orson Welles, the famous movie director, used to say came to mind: "The enemy of art is the absence of limitations."[133] What he meant by that was that if you have too much of what you need, and become too satisfied, you will never create any art. He believed that struggle was part of the equation. These Blackfeet artists seemed to be proving his point.

"A lot of artists try to come together, on their own, and one of the major goals is to have a space to show your work and to be able to actually make work there, like a business," John said.

"Like the Emerson Cultural Center in Bozeman," I said. The Emerson Cultural Center, if you recall, is the arts incubator non-profit facility in which DG House got her start.

"Yeah, like studios and gallery space," John said. "Conference rooms for having business classes and stuff like that. So, when these workshops come up, people know; it's advertised, but some people just don't go. But I try to help everybody as much as I can, because there's so much new talent here. Because I was in the same boat."

"So, last year when I came through here with our friends who were visiting, after we had met you at the Cattle Baron, we went to the Museum of the Plains Indian. I wanted to see David Dragonfly too, and ask him for an interview. There was this guy up front selling tickets and I asked him if David was around. He asked me why I wanted to see him and I told him, and suddenly he wanted to talk to me about my project, and was promoting himself as if he were

[133] Henry Jaglom, "The Independent Filmmaker," in The Movie Business Book, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 54-55.

some kind of advocate for the arts and artists here in Browning. Do you know anything about that guy?" I asked.

"Oh. Yeah," John said.

"Are there any good opportunities at the museum for local artists?" I asked.

"No, not really," John said. "And he's not a very good person to try to represent us. A lot of people don't associate with him, including myself."

"Is he considered more of an outsider?" I asked.

"Oh….he's a shyster," said John. "He's all about himself. He talked big about what he was going to do for artists, but he never followed through. And he also will talk to tourists coming through the museum about our history, but a lot of times he's wrong." John gave me some information about this guy that explained why he had said that, and also supported what David Dragonfly had said about him as well. I'm not writing it here, nor am I providing his name, to protect John and David from any negative fallout that might come their way as a result of their candor.

Redirecting the conversation back to potential opportunities and support in the community for artists, I said, "I guess I still don't know why Terrance did that business workshop, and what I'm really trying to understand is whether there will be more things like that happening here."

"I don't know if he's going to do more things like that but there have been more things like that recently that have been put on by First Peoples Fund and the Native American

Development Corporation.[134] They've been getting these grants and really pushing for art. They're the ones that started the new Native art show at the fairgrounds in Great Falls, at Western Art Week," said John. "I participated in that. It was OK. I liked it. And I think the CIC, us as a collective, we're going to have our own gallery at the Heritage Inn, at the Way Out West show."

I've mentioned the CIC throughout this work, interviewed four of the members, and would like to emphasize how important that endeavor turned out to be for the artists in the group. It's no coincidence that John, Lauren, Ben, and Robert were able to make the inroads they have as artists, advancing their careers respectively, after forming the CIC. That collaboration brought together members of at least four different tribes (Blackfeet, Apsáalooke/Crow, Northern Arapaho, Kul Wicasa Oyate/Lower Brule Sioux) from at least three different states (Montana, Wyoming, and South Dakota).[135] While they are all Native American, tribal perspectives can not only vary but provide different perspectives and insights. The members of the CIC brought all of that information and wisdom to bear in their artistic collaboration. They also have the strength of numbers and the benefit of organization. Forging a path together for Indigenous artists in general has provided each of them with vital support and validation as artists, individually. This is important when understanding the next part of our conversation.

"Earlier we were talking about whether or not the community was supportive and cooperative, and you said that some are supportive but others are stuck in their old ways," I said.

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[134] http://www.nadc-nabn.org/

[135] The Creative Indigenous Collective is comprised of Robert Martinez, Lauren Monroe, Jr., Ben Pease, John Pepion, Louis Still Smoking, and Gina Still Smoking. I would have loved to have interviewed Louis and Gina, but the logistics and timing never worked out. Perhaps in another paper.

"As artists," John said. "Nowadays, things are done way differently, especially with social media. Some of the older artists say, 'Well, we already did this and we already did that,' they don't even want to try, and they just are negative about their chances, you know."

The CIC gave its artist members the power of collective action, and a sort of brain trust. It put the creativity and intellect of six different artists together in a way that they were able to work out the best ways to do marketing and promotion, how they want to impact up-and-coming artists and give them a leg up where they didn't necessarily have that help, and it also gave them bargaining power that provided opportunities like the *Native Nations Now* exhibit at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West Plains Indian Museum, and the Wyoming State Museum.

One opportunity that came to John was having his artwork displayed in the Instagram corporate offices. "How did you get your artwork in their office?" I asked. "That's quite a coup."

"About a year ago, they emailed me and said they wanted to interview me. I thought it was a joke, so I called them. Sure enough, it was real. They put the interview on Instagram. The post went crazy and it got over six hundred thousand likes[136] for that picture in that interview. So, I got a lot of exposure from that," John said.

"So, did they find out about you through your Instagram page? They must have someone at the corporation that trolls art pages, " I said.

"Yeah. So, at the interview they told me that they were building some new headquarters and they'll have my art there on display.

"I also have something at the Library of Congress. Is that corporate?" John said.

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[136] Staff writer, Instagram, September 25, 2015, https://www.instagram.com/p/8DyM-yhQYI/?hl=en

"Well, it's federal, but that's a big deal!" I said. "Have you been collected at the National Museum of the American Indian, yet?"

"Nope," John said. I checked their online collections database, and he is correct. They do have a couple of ledger art pieces by Terrence Guardipee, but none by John. "I ain't collected by anybody. That's my first major collection, the Library of Congress."[137]

"Congratulations. That's a very big deal," I said.

"I thought that was a joke, too. It's been about a year in the making," John said.

In going over the questions from the written questionnaire that John had filled out for me, I came across another question I wanted to ask. "When you said, 'Seasonal day job I assume it's this,'" I said, referring to his position at the Blackfeet Cultural Heritage Center, where we were conducting our interview.

"Yeah, I've been working here for...I think it's been fourteen summers, now," John said. "I like it. We have a private collection of artifacts that I've worked with. I like looking at them, and I also get to sit here and draw all day, so I don't mind it."

"Well, you're an amiable host, too. I've noticed that you're really friendly to everyone who comes in here," I said.

Moving on I asked, "Is your work well-received by your tribe?"

"Yes, and as an artist that's what matters to me most. I'm embraced by my community and my tribe; even our tribal counsel and elders. I get special assignments to do for them sometimes, or I get to see things. That's what matters to me most: being from here and having

[137] Staff writer, "Environmental Activism," Library of Congress, August 5, 2021, https://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/herblock-art-in-action/about-this-exhibition/environment/environment-activism/.

the privilege of representing them, because a lot of people don't get that opportunity. A lot of artists aren't accepted in their own community or on their own reservation. I don't know why, either," John said.

"Do you feel pressured to make a certain kind of work?" I asked.

"No. I do what I do," John said.

"Have you heard of the Montana Artrepreneur Program?" I asked.

"Yes, I have. I haven't really looked into it, though," John said.

"I only ask because I did the Montana Artrepreneur Program. That's how I met DG, actually," I said.

"Teri Dahl did that program. She's from here. She talks about that program all the time, and some show that they do," John said.

"Yeah they have a thing they call the Gathering. I've never done it. In fact, I don't know if I'll ever finish the program because I don't really need it. I have a BFA and business experience. All I need is time to make art to sell. But it's a brilliant program for teaching artists the business of art, and it's designed for self-taught artists. Anyway, several of my friends in Bozeman who are not Indigenous had their careers take off after they did that MAP program. So, I was wondering if anyone in this community had done it," I said.

"No, but I also have been with the First Peoples Fund program for artists, and ever since I've been with them my career has taken off," John said.

"And they focus on the art business?" I asked.

"Indigenous art business," John said. "And trainings. I've done numerous trainings with them. As a matter of fact, I'll be a trainer for them. I'll put on trainings for artists about business all over Indigenous communities across the United States, and I'll be one of the artist coaches and trainers."

"That's really cool," I said. "Where will you be going? Do you know?"

"I've completed all my requirements and tests. I'll do my first training in Fort Belknap, Montana," John said.

"What do you think is the hardest thing about the art business?" I asked.

"Just business in general," John said. "Like *knowing* business, your taxes, all that stuff. Here's the thing I realize about Indigenous artists, even in this community: there is so much talent but if they don't have business knowledge they can't be successful. Every successful Indigenous artist I know *knows business*."

"That's true. They figure that out," I said.

"It's kind of hard," said John. "Because I'm more relaxed. I don't like deadlines. I hate numbers"

"So, keeping up with the paperwork?" I said.

"Just everything about the business. It's an ongoing learning experience," said John. "Like when I first started I thought, 'Oh, I'm going to do great. I'm going to get into the Santa Fe Indian Market,' but it's just been constant learning."

"It is a steep curve," I said. We talked for a little while longer about the things that were difficult about the business side of art, which amounted to the same things that most artists are

averse to in the art business. We generally prefer to spend all of our time creating, and mostly do not enjoy doing anything that takes us away from the creation process. It's making art that provides a zen experience, not doing the books or the marketing. This turned out to be one of the more predictable experiences that Indigenous artists have in common with non-Indigenous artists.

Then our conversation turned back to cultural appropriation. At the beginning of the interview, John had told me about a time when he noticed that another Indigenous artist from another tribe had rendered a wolf in a piece of artwork he made exactly as John renders wolves in his artwork. The imagery John uses in his artwork has specific tribal history, and is unique to the Blackfeet tribe and their culture. Earlier I discussed how non-Indigenous artists frequently appropriate Indigenous imagery and symbolism for their own artwork without permission or remorse. However, this was the first time I had heard about an Indigenous artist appropriating imagery and symbolism from another tribe.

"It happens a lot. It's been a huge topic lately from here to Canada. Some people have gone as far as saying, around here, that cultural appropriation and cultural sovereignty has been more of an issue. I don't know where it started, but I've been hearing more about it. How it first affected me is this person in Italy beaded a beer mug of my artwork without asking me if they could do it," John said. "I said to destroy it, and they said they would. I went to the First Peoples Fund and they have their own lawyer. We were allowed to ask anything we wanted at the seminar. I brought up that issue (of the beaded beer mug with my work on it) and he said that there was really nothing that could be done.

That was actually an example of a white person appropriating his artwork, as well as Blackfeet symbolism and imagery. The reason that there was nothing that could be done about it is because it was an international incident. It takes deep pockets--millions of dollars--to pursue international copyright infringement cases. Additionally, the IACA only applies to the United States, so there is no way to enforce it overseas unless the person from overseas who appropriates the imagery tries to sell it in the United States, and even if they do they would have to claim that it is Native American artwork. If they merely sign their name to it and don't call it Native American artwork, they can't be held to the IACA legal statute. The only way such a person could be prosecuted would be for copyright infringement, and such an issue is fuzzy when it is a cultural symbol and not an exact copy of an artwork. In the case of the beaded beer mug it was a case of directly copying John's work, and therefore a copyright infringement case; but there still remains the issue of how extremely expensive it is to pursue international copyright infringement cases.

"So, that was my first experience with that. My second experience was with another Indigenous person from another tribe in another part of the country taking an exact copy of my art and putting it in his work, and he is Indigenous himself. I thought that was weird. Now I know it goes both ways: cultural appropriation can be by Indigenous people copying other Indigenous people, or non-Indigenous people copying Indigenous people. What matters most to me is non-Indigenous, because sometimes….like at Western Art Week, it's a big art week, and [non-Indigenous artists] are making millions of dollars off copying *us*. But here we are, the real deal, just pushed to the side," said John. He was referring to the Native American art ghettos I

discussed earlier, where Native Americans are segregated in some parts of some of the venues at festivals like Western Art Week and the Montana Folk Festival, instead of being distributed throughout the festival with all of the other artists.

In defense of these festivals that do work hard at featuring Indigenous art as part of the entirety of western art, one of the reasons that they do this is not necessarily to segregate and ghettoize Indigenous artists, even though it can end up having that effect. Their purpose is to feature and drive traffic to the Indigenous artists that many people visit these festivals especially to see. Unfortunately, this is one of those paradoxes whereby something that may be intended to help Indigenous people actually amplifies the problem. I would argue that if the Indigenous artists were distributed throughout the main venue, perhaps placed directly next to the non-Indigenous artists who are appropriating their culture without permission, that juxtaposition might actually cause both the non-Indigenous artists and the field of reception to notice the difference between "the real deal," as John put it, and the misappropriation of Indigenous culture, symbolism, and imagery in work by non-Indigenous artists. It might be worth a try.

"For example, I saw this guy at the festival who had a bunch of our symbology in his paintings, and he didn't even have a clue," John said.

"At this last Western Art Week?" I asked.

"Yeah. He had it mixed in with other tribes' stuff. In the Indian art world, you can tell what's real Indigenous art, and which artists know what's real. Even the Indigenous artists themselves...some people don't understand the symbology. They'll have all kinds of tribes mixed up in their work together," John said.

This was an interesting point because it referred to the blurred lines between what is considered to be authentic and traditional in Indigenous art, and it also spoke to the idea that perhaps Indigenous artists ought to "stay in their own lane" when making Indigenous artwork, and only use cultural symbols from their own tribe. It also spoke to the idea of pan-Indianism and the generalization of tribal cultures to something nonspecific and generically referred to as "Native American culture."[138] All of those issues highlight how complicated it can be to make Native American artwork that is simultaneously unique and original to the individual artist making it, respectful of both their and other tribal traditions and customs (and taboos), does not misappropriate imagery from other cultures, and also does not contribute to the diminishing and homogenous effects of pan-Indianism.[139] Beyond consciously *not* appropriating the imagery and symbols of other cultures, non-Indigenous artists do not have these concerns when making their artwork. Indigneous artists, on the other hand, have a multitude of things to be concerned about when creating art, if they are going to avoid criticism for violating tribal mores, practices, and taboos.

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[138] I and other writers on topics of Indigenous concerns and issues use these terms somewhat interchangeably, for both variety in the writing as well as convenience: Indigenous, Native American, American Indian, Indian. (I do not include First Nations here because that is a term used primarily in Canada, and like the term American Indian, it has legal definitions and ramifications in Canada). However, the distinction that I am making here is that although we can use the term Native American, American Indian, or Indian to refer to Indigenous people broadly or collectively, there is no such thing as a single "Native American culture." There are as many different indigneous cultures as there are tribes and language groups in the United States. There are 574 federally recognized, 63 state recognized, and a fluctuating number of landless tribes (no recognition by the federal or state government--that's a more difficult number to pin down as some tribes gain federal or state recognition through legal proceedings). Attempting to characterize all Indigenous cultures as the same is to homogenize and diminish the rich, distinct tribal cultures which exist in this country. It deprives them of their uniqueness. It also contributes to the misinformation that leads to the kind of misappropriation by both non-Indigenous people and Indigenous people who make use of specific tribal symbology in ways that they don't understand, and which can also violate local tribal practices and taboos.

[139] Staff writer, "Pan-Indianism," Wikipedia, May 23, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pan-Indianism.

“So, were there any artists at Western Art Week who particularly got your goat? There was one that got mine, and I made a lesson out of his work to my students,” I said.

“There’s all kinds, and I don't know what to think. I don’t know what they think, either. There’s a lot of them,” John said.

“There’s one artist from Bozeman who I’ve known for decades, and she’s making a ton of money selling paintings of Indians in headdresses. She had a painting at the Russell auction, and it was an Indian in a headdress, like an eagle bonnet. I pulled my students over in the museum, and right there in front of that painting I taught them a lesson about cultural appropriation, using her painting. My artist friends in Bozeman and I have talked to her about it, over and over again, and she refuses to stop doing it,” I said.

“Yeah. It’s been happening for so long. My grandpa used to talk about it. It’s been happening for so long that people couldn’t really do anything about it. But now, people are starting to do something about it. People are starting to push for laws or something, finally; because it’s just too much. It’s to the point where people are taking our ceremonial stuff here, like our teepees--our painted teepees… You could drive to Hungry Horse and past that Native American trading post and they’re painting teepees outside. They’re trying to be like ours,” John said.

We talked for a few minutes about teepee painting culture. I have a friend in Bozeman who bought a teepee from a Blackfeet family that he said had permission from the tribe to paint teepees with traditional Blackfeet imagery designated for teepee painting. I told John about this, and mentioned that I’d been thinking about buying one, also; but I wanted to make sure I did it

the right way.

"We don't sell them like that," John said. "This is how it goes. Teepees are considered medicine lodges. The images on the outside of the teepees come from dreams. Each comes with an altar and its own bundle.[140] When you put it up, you've got to do the prayers and songs before the sun goes down. You can't just put it up for no reason. And not just anyone can have one. You have to get it transferred to you," John said.

"So, are you talking about the painting? Not just the structure, but the painting,?" I asked.

"Yeah, yeah," John said. "Like, I have the rights to do that, but I don't sell them. I can't paint a teepee and sell it. Those paintings are actual sacred texts. It's a medicine lodge, and it comes from the family. Some of those designs are passed down. They're called renewals. Not just anybody can paint a teepee, and you can't sell them."

"So, my friend got ripped off, then," I said.

"I'd like to see the design," John said. "I could tell you if it's fake, because I can read teepees.

"So, if I want to have a teepee, and I want to have a painting on it, I would be smart to just buy a teepee and paint it myself, but not with Indigenous designs, right?" I said.

"Yes, yes," John said.

"That's funny, because that's what I was actually thinking about doing at one time," I said. "When you're driving to Browning from Cut Bank, there's the cutest little house in the

[140] A medicine bundle is a special pouch, usually made of deerskin or similar, which contains special items of spiritual or ceremonial value. These bundles are blessed by an elder, and the contents of each are unique to the owner.

world and it's got these two cute little teepees. It's a yellow house and it's got painting around the bottom of the house, and then there's a teepee to the side," I said.

"Where's it at?" John asked.

"It's between Cut Bank and Browning," I said. "Do you know the one I'm talking about?"

"Yeah, those are actual real teepees," John said.

"They do look authentically Blackfeet," I said.

"Meaning that it's a medicine lodge. Meaning… Lauren[141] painted those teepees. Those are real teepees. You're talking about the red teepee and the yellow teepee? And they're canvas?" John said.

"Yes," I said.

"Those are called all star teepees, or falling star teepees. All the circles represent stars. Those are real teepees, with real medicine. So, when you have a painted teepee, it's medicine and it gives you good luck, too," John said.

"That's very interesting. I just learned something about teepees that I didn't know. I taught about teepee painting in my American Indian Art Survey course at MSU, but I didn't know about the medicine piece. We were just looking at the designs. I also didn't know about the part where the images come from dreams. I was just teaching what I had learned from the Museum of the Plains Indian exhibit and some other historical texts about Plains Indian teepee culture and the artwork on the teepees. None of those sources talked about the specifics that you

[141] Lauren Monroe, Jr., another member of the CIC (Creative Indigenous Collective) who is also Blackfeet.

just shared with me," I said.

"And what I told you isn't true of every tribe," John said. "We're one of the few tribes that always had painted teepees."

That conversation about teepees is a perfect example of how the dominant culture, in its ignorance, can broadly apply a little knowledge about a topic to all tribes. I had learned something about teepees from the Museum of the Plains Indian exhibit that gave me completely accurate information, although it was incomplete. I had read some scholarly works on teepees that had generalized teepee art to all plains tribes, when in fact not all of them have the same cultural practices surrounding teepee art. The reader should use this as a lesson on why one should never apply anything they learn about one tribe to all other tribes, and also why one should never assume that just because you read it in a book that the information is complete. Do a little outside research, and talk to someone from the tribe who is an authority on that topic. Make sure that person has the authority and blessing from their community to pass on that information. John is just such a person.

Returning to the conversation that we were having before getting serendipitously sidetracked to the topic of teepees, I asked John whether he thinks non-Indigenous artists face the same challenges as Indigenous artists.

"No, because they don't understand the meaning of our designs and stories, and they just mix them all up as if they are generic. Some of our sacred symbols get mixed into their designs, and we would never do that. They might have seen it in a picture but they don't understand what it is or what it means," John said.

"And then they have an easy time selling it because they are selling to people who don't know any better, either," I said.

"It's always the fantasy, too." John said. "It's always the stoic Indian."

"The Noble Savage," I said.

"Yes. The war bonnet... People in my culture still wear war bonnets. We still ride horses. We still have teepees. That's our culture. We still live that," said John. "So, I'm still drawing horses, and teepees. It's kind of hard when people will say, 'Oh, you're stuck in the past. Why don't you just move one,' because we are still here and that's still our culture."

When he said he is told, "Why don't you just move on," John is referring here to issues of social justice that many Indigenous people are still fighting for, as well as the way they are negatively stereotyped while also being romanticized as "the Noble Savage." At the same time that artists continue to romanticize Indigenous imagery in their artwork, society at large dismisses the very real concerns of Indigenous people, including generational poverty, ongoing termination policies, and widespread discrimination.

"It's really hard. I don't know why. And we're really hard on ourselves, too. Our constant discussion is a lot of criticism of who can do things, who can't do this or that...." John said.

John had hit on the heart of my thesis, which is that Indian people are modern people living among us today. They still have their ancient traditions, but they practice them as modern people, just like all the rest of us do. I shared with him the question I got from one of my students while teaching the American Indian Art Survey course at MSU, and we talked about

how that dovetailed with what he was saying here. That led us back to talking about contemporary Native American art again.

"One of the artists I shared with them in the contemporary unit was a Native Alaskan artist who takes junkyard materials and auto parts and turns them into animal sculptures, like hubcap walruses with exhaust pipe tusks," I said.

"Have you seen the art like that around here?" John asked. He was referring to the fact that at the four entrances to the reservation, and in a few other places, there are sculptures of Blackfeet warriors riding horses and holding coup sticks. These are life-size sculptures made of rusted auto parts, by an artist named Jay Laber.[142]

"Yes! In fact, last year when we came up here with our friends who you met at the Cattle Baron, I took a few dozen photos of those so I would have them for later. I want to meet him and talk with him about his work," I said. Alas, Jay died in November of 2019, before I had a chance to meet him.

We talked a bit about how the medium used by Indigenous artists doesn't really matter. Even if they are using modern materials, or car parts from a junkyard, the art is still Indigenous if it is made by indigneous artists.

"There's a story there. People may see it another way but it actually means something, you know," John said. "I talked about Blackfeet designs, but even within the tribe certain families have certain designs, or a certain look. My family does, too. It's good to carry those on.

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[142] Cory Walsh, "Blackfeet artist Jay Laber transformed junk metal into iconic sculptures," The Missoulian, November 16, 2019, https://missoulian.com/entertainment/arts-and-theatre/blackfeet-artist-jay-laber-transformed-junk-metal-into-iconic-sculptures/article_ae53b92a-04b1-5222-9270-0b95ba1a1fdc.html#:~:text=Jay%20Laber's%20sculptures%20of%20warriors,to%20the%20Blackfeet%20Indian%20Reservation.

But at the same time, it's also good to know what I can put in my artwork, and what I shouldn't put in my artwork, because I know my culture and our traditions. There are some things that we're not supposed to share with outsiders, that are only for us."

"You mentioned earlier how you would never draw sacred clowns. What you're saying now reminds me of when people I know have told me, 'I saw an authentic kachina,' or 'I saw an authentic Hopi ceremony.' I told them, 'No, you didn't, because nobody sees the authentic versions of those things from Hopi culture, except the Hopis themselves,'" I said.

John laughed because he knows this is true. Not even all of the Hopis have seen those ceremonies. You have to be a holy person who is responsible for that ceremony to see the actual thing. What they strut out for tourists has been changed in some way to make it acceptable to demonstrate it, because those things are not meant for public consumption. No one ever likes it when I tell them that, after they thought they had seen something really "authentic." I'm a party pooper of the nth degree when it comes to setting people straight on those issues.

"How much responsibility do you think the consumer has to investigate that kind of thing before they make a purchase?" I asked, referring to the potential for someone to unwittingly buy some artwork that has imagery in it that isn't meant for public consumption, or that has been presented to them as "authentic" but isn't, or might contain pan-Indian imagery.

"I really don't know," said John. "It seems like a lot of my collectors and buyers know already. We always have a conversation about it when they have questions, so I can help them. But only to a certain extent, because there's rules in our culture...not everybody needs to know certain details. It's kept amongst ourselves. Some people think that's selfish. And then there are

those who say we never wrote our histories; that it was all oral histories. And we lost a lot of things in modern times. We lost a lot of ceremonies and things. But we're still trying to carry on with the newer stuff. Songs might have been lost. Things got shorter. Some songs were cut out or some people refuse to even bother with that stuff, saying it was lost forever." John was basically making the point that even if people were to try to educate themselves on these issues, they might not know who to ask, or where to go to get the information.

"We've already talked about how the IACA protects Indigenous artists by making it illegal for non-Indigenous artists to call themselves Native American artists, or claim that their work is Native American. But there is nothing preventing non-Indigenous artists from saying that their work is created in a Native American style, or that it's Native American inspired. It also doesn't protect tribes from inter-tribal cultural appropriation. Do you think it should? Should the IACA do more than it is doing to stop the kinds of cultural appropriation you've been talking about here? How far do you think they should go with those protections?

"The reason I'm asking you this is because when I interviewed Robert Martinez and asked him if there was anything I didn't ask him but should have, he said that I should have asked, 'What are you going to do to change the way people see Native American art?' and then he gave me a really good answer for that question," I said.

"There are people who do that, and then they get fined, but the fines are nothing compared to the money they're making by breaking the law," John said. "There's no jail time for doing it. There's really no significant consequences."

John talked about how tribes are still learning how to most effectively deal with the issues of cultural appropriation. The IACA offers only minimum protections and fines, and violations are rarely reported and therefore not enforced. John spoke of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA),[143] and how tribes are working with museums and the National Parks to recover sacred artifacts. NAGPRA offers stiffer fines and actual jail time for certain violations, but prison sentences max out at ten years. Even with NAGPRA in place, and after having some limited success at repatriating Indigenous remains and artifacts, and breaking up rings of "pot hunters,"[144] there are still artifacts (remains, and items of cultural significance) around the world that are not subject to NAGPRA. The IACA doesn't quite have the teeth of NAGPRA, and NAGPRA's teeth aren't particularly sharp anyway, as it only applies to federal agencies in the United States, and some institutions (like the Smithsonian) are exempt. Private collectors are not subject to NAGPRA and therefore are under no obligation to repatriate any remains or artifacts they may have collected.

John continued this line of thought by talking about how so many policies concerning Indigenous people in the United States are either simply for the purpose of "lip service," or they actually work against Indigenous people. IACA and NAGPRA are great examples of such "lip service." While federal agents did break up a big pot hunting ring twelve years ago, there are so many loopholes built into the law that it is not always enforced, especially where it would be most useful to do so (e.g., large collections like the Smithsonian). The issue of blood quantum

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[143] Staff writer, "Facilitating Respectful Return," National Parks Service: Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, August 7, 2021, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nagpra/index.htm.
[144] Howard Berkes, "Arrests Made In Sale Of American Indian Artifacts," NPR, June 10, 2009, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=105195472.

and tribal enrollment is a great example of a policy working against the people it seems like it is supposed to protect, because once there aren't enough people to meet the blood quantum requirement (because of intermarriage between members of different tribes, which eventually diminishes the minimum blood quantum required to enroll), then the tribes will cease to exist (making it a termination policy instead of a prtoection).[145]

"The blood quantum thing is tough," John said. "Even with art shows it's hard." John was referring to the limitations placed on participation in some art shows and festivals based on whether you are enrolled in a federally recognized or state recognized tribe. Even that ends up being subject to blood quantum, since tribal enrollment is primarily related to blood quantum.

"I have to learn more about it myself, even with the art rules," John said. "Art shows have all these rules. That's why I'd rather just do my own thing. So, I've just been doing my own thing, and everybody seems surprised. I've just created my own lane, so I can do things my own way. Nobody is going to tell me what to do."

"Well, you sound like a typical artist that way, John," I joked.

John laughed and said, "Yeah, I'm my own boss that way. I took control of my career. Especially as an Indigenous artist, people want to control your career. Like these museums and other art institutions; they used to think they could control us. But now a lot of us Indian artists nationwide are pushing back on that." We had now made a full circle back to our discussion

[145] This is precisely why some tribes are beginning to reexamine the blood quantum requirement. Blood quantum was a colonized strategy from the beginning, anyway. It involved Indian agents looking at an Indian person and estimating whether they were full-blood, one-half, one-fourth, one-eighth, and so on, and recording that estimate of their blood quantum in a record book. Phenotype has never been a reliable indicator of blood-quantum. There is a movement underway to shift toward evidence of descendancy and away from blood quantum as a way of determining enrollment eligibility. Every tribe has its own enrollment policies.

about the creation of the CIC and how forming that collective gave them the power to make certain demands and influence the venues at museums seeking to feature the work of Indigenous artists.

"We're doing it our way, now," John said. "Some people embrace it, like the Paris Gibson up in Great Falls--they love it; they love building relationships with Native Americans."

"I was glad to see that you guys had that panel there because that was encouraging; especially in Western Art Week Town, you know. That was sort of amazing," I said.

"It's a really tough question that you asked because it's still ongoing," John said, looping back to Robert's question. "I can't really tell you any solutions. It boils down to blood quantum, government issues, control issues, institutional issues…that we, as Indigenous artists, face."

"Well, I don't expect you to already have an answer to that question, because it's such a loaded issue. But having conversations like this one helps us get closer to the answers, I think," I said.

"Here's a question I would like you to answer though; and I think you will have one," I said. "What do you wish collectors of Native American Art of any kind knew that they do not know about your work in particular, and contemporary Native American art in general? And I guess I want to go back to the 'your work in particular' part, because of what you already told me about the tribal and cultural imagery and symbolism in your work; how those things have specific meaning tribally, and in your family…"

"And certain colors, too. Like, a lot of tribes use the same colors and they mean similar things. But with our tribe, the colors black, red, yellow have significant, specific meanings,"

John said. “Like traditional colors, how we paint our faces, and how we paint our horses...it has a lot of symbology. But most people don’t know that if I don’t tell them. For example, if you look at my artwork, I always put a sun in there.”

“I have noticed that, but I didn’t think anything of it,” I said.

“In our culture, a lot of our ceremonies revolve around the sun,” John said.

“Like the sundance. I’ve noticed the sundance lodges around the reservation, with the flags all over them. I’ve never seen that before,” I said.

“That’s different. Those are from another tribe. Somebody gave them to someone here, so they’re doing that now. I’ve never been part of that; probably never will,” John said. “But ours isn’t a sundance. We don’t call it a sundance. Ours is called the Okan. It’s way different, and it was given to us from the sun. We have a lodge and everything. A sundance is what Sioux people and Cree people do. But our tribe wasn’t influenced by other tribes, so we have our own traditions. We have our own war bonnet, a straight-up war bonnet. We have our painted teepees. We have our own ceremonies. The Okan is like...we believe that the sun and the moon married each other and then had a son--Morningstar is their son.

“There was a man, a pitiful young warrior who couldn’t provide, who always wore rags. He wanted this particular woman and he had a scar on his face. She didn’t want to be with him because of his scar, and because he was pitiful and couldn’t provide. He got tired of being scrutinized, so he left the camp one day and went walking and walking and walking...He came to a lake and there were these giant birds; I think they were cranes. They were trying to kill this other boy, who was Morningstar. So, Scarface killed the birds and Morningstar said, ‘I’ll bring

you to my dad.' On their way, there were five bows and arrows laying on the ground, and there was also some fine buckskin. Scarface didn't want anything to do with them, so they just kept going. Those were tests. They kept going. They went to Morningstar's lodge; his teepee. The sun took pity on Scarface, because he helped his boy, Morningstar. So the sun took the scar off of his face, and gave him that stuff that he had passed by. The sun was amazed that he hadn't taken it because most people would have picked it up. But Scarface just kept going. So he gave it to him, because he didn't take it. Scarface spent time there and the sun gave him the instructions for the Okan. Then Scarface came back to his camp from the sun and brought the ceremony, the Okan, with him to our people. He ended up marrying a girl. Then throughout the years other things were added to it, from our people," said John.

"So, the moral of that story is that he saved Morningstar, and he wasn't greedy," I said.

"There's more to it than that. The reason there's a bow and arrow in our language...one way of thinking of it is Jesus Christ, and another way is the sun, known as Arrow Maker in our culture," John said.

"So, the Sun is the Creator then?" I asked.

"No, Napi is the Creator. He's an old man and a trickster. In the stories, he created us out of mud. Then there's thunder, and then there's the beaver," John said. "There's a beaver bundle ceremony, a thunder pipe ceremony, and the Okan ceremony. Those are three important ceremonies that happen every year."

"That's good to know. I'm getting a much bigger lesson than I came here for. Thank you for sharing that. I'm glad I asked you that question," I said.

"That's how deep meaning can show up in our art and people don't realize it," John said.

"That does answer the question,'What do you think they should know?' So, if non-Indigenous people want to collect Native American art, contemporary or otherwise, they really should learn something about the culture before they collect it," I said.

"Yes," John said. "I suggest that some people go so far as picking a tribe to learn about. Sometimes it feels like...being in the art world and working with artifacts in museums...I don't know why, but it seems like Blackfeet art is really hot right now; especially artifacts. You can always find magazines selling Blackfeet artifacts, or someone getting into trouble for selling Blackfeet artifacts. Even at art markets, Blackfeet stuff sells really fast."

"I have a theory about that. I'll tell you what my theory is just based on my experience here in Montana and in Native American Studies. Blackfeet people have become very good at advocating for themselves. You have language immersion happening in the schools up here, now. Language and culture are so deeply connected, and the tribes that are really focusing on reviving and propagating the language seem to be doing better than other tribes that aren't doing that. So, I think it has something to do with that. I mean, I know it's not perfect out here, but it seems to me that anywhere that there's a big push for reclaiming the language and propagating it in the present…" I said.

"And also reclaiming our ceremonies. People my age and younger are coming together and working together, and learning, learning, learning, more," John said.

"So, what's your feeling about that? Do you think the language, the ceremonies, revisiting all of these things, and reimmersing yourself in these are all connected?" I asked.

"I don't think we would be here or be anybody without our language. Our language is an important part of our culture. Me, personally--I have a certain understanding of it. I know certain words, but I don't speak it fluently. I have this desire to learn, and there are some methods of learning it faster that people have developed over the years, that have helped people learn it so fast," John said.

Circling back to talking specifically about art I asked, "What do you wish collectors knew about contemporary Native American art in general? I mean, the problems with traditional symbolism and all of that is obvious, and we've already talked about it a lot. But do you think it's harder to be an Indigenous artist making contemporary art than it is to be an artist who makes the more traditional work people expect Indigenous artists to make?"

"Yeah, because you're expected to paint a certain way, or be a certain way. Even as a ledger artist, sometimes I don't like to be called a ledger artist because I do other things. I like a term that was coined by...oh, man...I can't even remember his name now....Anyway, he called it Plains Indian graphic art. That's what I like to call it, because we've been doing this type of art for thousands of years, on hides, teepees, and we're still doing it on everything. Sometimes I'll get bored and maybe I'll put it on a phone case or something," John said.

"That makes a lot of sense. I like that too because it speaks directly to the fact that Indigenous artists are like all other artists, evolving continuously and choosing the medium and means of expressing themselves that suits them best in the moment," I said.

"Right. For example, here's Ernie Pepion's paintings, here," John said, waving his hand around the room where at least a dozen or more of Ernie Pepion's paintings were hanging. Ernie

was a well known and beloved Blackfeet artist who survived the Vietnam war only to become a quadripalegic in a car accident four years later. While in the VA hospital doing rehab and recovery, another disabled veteran taught him how to paint. Ernie later went on to earn a BFA and MFA from Montana State University. I actually knew Ernie back in the mid nineteen nineties when I owned a beauty salon in Bozeman. He was one of my hair clients, but that was before I knew much about him as an artist, or had any idea I would be doing this kind of work, writing about contemporary Native American art. Ernie died in 2005, before I had even finished my master's degree in Native American Studies. Prior to that, he had a career as an exceptional contemporary painter, illustrating his experiences as a quadripalegic Blackfeet man and war veteran in the modern world.

"Ernie had a hard time, and he always stood up for veterans' rights," John continued. "His work is very contemporary and a lot of people see it that way, and see him as one of the leading contemporary Indigenous artists, right up there with Fritz Scholder."

"Yes, and I am one of them, frankly," I said. "I'm so grateful that I actually got to know him before he died. I wasn't even really aware of him as an artist back then, but as a salon client he was a lot of fun."

"He was all about the humor," John said.

"He really was," I said.

"I got to know him when I was younger because when I was in eighth grade they picked me and a couple of other students and brought him to school, and we worked with him every day

for weeks. He taught us how to mix paint. He shared his stories and stuff, so I got to know him. Other than that, we come from the same family but I didn't really know who he was," John said.

"So, you are related, but distantly?" I asked.

"Yeah, my family's so big. My great-grandpa and his dad were brothers," John said. "So, I would be like his fourth or fifth cousin."

That led us to a side discussion about his relations on the reservation, and other things not specifically related to Native American art. We had a good visit and I began to wrap up our conversation.

"Is there anything that I didn't ask you today that you think I should have asked you? Is there anything else you want people to know about what you do, and contemporary Native American art in general?" I asked.

"When it comes to art, whether you're Native American or not, I think there's no rules or boundaries. Seriously. I used to think that successful artists must know all the rules. But over the years I've talked to so many artists, and I talk to people all the time about this. What I've learned is it's up to the person," John said.

John asked me what I was planning to do with what I had learned from him in this interview, and how I was going to write about it. That was a very good question, as he was only the second person I had interviewed at that point, and I was still working out how I was going to release everything I was learning back into the world.

"I'm not sure exactly how I'm planning to do that yet," I said. "But I do know this: I want to approach it differently than others have approached the topic prior to this. I'm trying to do

something that no one else is doing. There's not really much out there in scholarly work on contemporary Native American art, at all. What is out there is written in a very traditional way, using traditional art history methods, and categorizing "contemporary" as something that could include very old artwork, and artists who are mostly dead, primarily from the early twentieth century. I definitely have art history methods in my toolbox, but I am more interested in the lives of the artists, what they are doing in their work *now*, how they are not only creating modern and contemporary art, but how they are reconciling what they create with their struggle to *be* modern people, and to also *be perceived* as modern people in a modern world.

"I'm always and ever addressing that original question that a student asked me back in that class I was teaching for MSU: what a tragedy she thought it was for Native American artists to create contemporary work and to use contemporary materials; that they have to compromise their traditional values to make contemporary art. That idea is just *wrong*, as far as I'm concerned. *Why* is it a tragedy to make contemporary things? Why are Native Americans *not* supposed to make contemporary things? Why aren't Native Americans supposed to be contemporary?

"All of that is centered, in my mind, around the errant expectations the public has of what it means to be Native American. So, I'm always trying to interpret everything that any of the artists I interview tell me through that original question," I said.

"That's exactly why I make choices about doing certain markets or certain shows, because of those expectations," John said. "There are shows I won't do because of some people's

expectations about how I should be or what I should be doing. I don't want to be part of perpetuating those wrong ideas."

Four years passed after interviewing John before I actually sat down to write about what we had talked about. John's career took off. He did drop out of all of the galleries he was in except for Old Main Gallery in Bozeman, but he also stepped up his online marketing efforts. John has had success merchandising his designs on his own website. He has continued to work with young artists, helping them to learn what he has learned about the art business. He's also very active in his community. During the pandemic, a temporary art teaching position opened up at the Heart Butte school. That turned into a long-term substitute position, and then he was asked to stay on full time. Since he has a college degree already, he was able to get a Class 5 emergency teaching certificate in Montana which gives him five years to get the additional coursework he needs to become a certified art teacher. John is from the Heart Butte community, so he has made a full circle back to his own roots, and is excited about having the opportunity to do more to encourage young artists.

My experience of John since I first met him was, and continues to be, that he is always centered in his culture, and he is always doubling down on serving his community. Even as he continues to pursue his own career as an independent artist, he takes everything that he learns through that experience and brings it back to his community. Becoming a K-12 art teacher in Heart Butte is just the most recent way in which he continues to transmit knowledge back to the people in his community who need it. I predict that John will be directly responsible for helping

Blackfeet kids find their own voice and artistic style, setting them on their own unique paths to successful art careers. The kids in Heart Butte are lucky to have John at their school.



Figure 45. John Isaiah Pepion, *Buffalo Trail*, 2019, ledger art, private collection.



Figure 46. John Isaiah Pepion, *Rez Dogs Need Love Too*, 2021, ledger art, private collection.



Figure 47. John Isaiah Pepion, *Dragonfly Floral,* 2020, ledger art, private collection.



Figure 48. John Isaiah Pepion, *Magpie*, 2020, ledger art,
private collection.

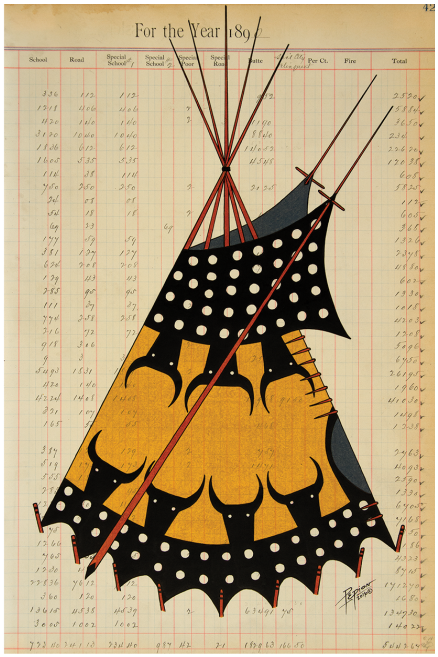


Figure 49. John Isaiah Pepion, *Piikani Painted Lodge*, 2020, ledger art, private collection.

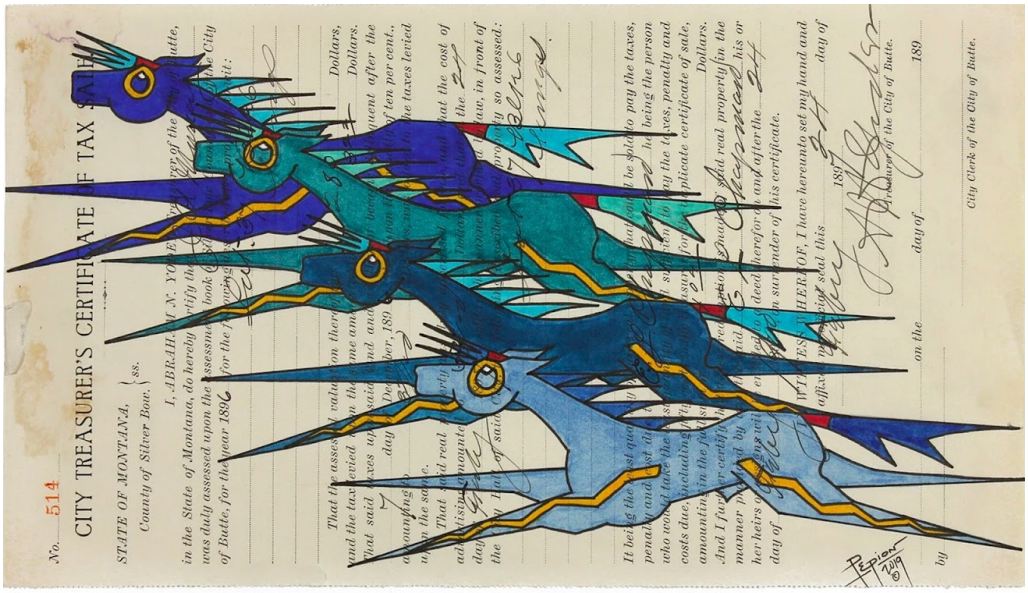


Figure 50. John Isaiah Pepion, *The Blues*, 2020, ledger art, private collection.



Figure 51. John Isaiah Pepion, *Red Horse*, 2020, ledger art, private collection.

MUSEUM REPRESENTATION OF NATIVE AMERICAN ARTISTS

The emphasis in recent years placed on increased representation of all people of color in America has brought about some positive changes for Native American artists. One of the places we see those changes is in museums. Until very recently, Native Americans could only be found in the natural history section in museums, along with the dinosaurs and other extinct species, or included with the exhibits on ecosystems or anthropology. This antiquated museum curation strategy placed Native Americans very firmly in the past, denying their full participation in the modern world as fully modern people.

The Smithsonian attempted to rectify this problem fairly successfully by creating the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, DC and New York City. The museum in Washington, DC went so far in their efforts to change the way American Indians are represented that they built it right into the construction of the building. Anyone with a basic understanding of Indigenous people and their world view can see the relevance of this arrangement when visiting the NMAI. Unfortunately, when the museum first opened, that ingenious design was lost on the majority of people visiting the museum. Initial feedback on the new museum from many non-Indian people was negative, with complaints about the “wasted space” in the entryway which takes up about half of the building and spans all four floors. There is a spiral staircase that meanders from floor to floor, representing the way in which most (if not all) Indigenous tribes in the Americas think about history and the passing of time--not on a linear timeline as is traditional in Euro-American thought, but as a spiral, circular timeline in which one can recognize the repetition and cycles of life and seasons. The openness of the space also speaks

to an Indigenous concept of land and space: empty space is *not* wasted space; it's merely empty, open, and sacred. Filling up every nook and cranny of space is a Euro-American concept, not an Indigenous one. There is room to breathe and think deeply in the NMAI, just as there is in the wide open spaces of the desert southwest or the western plains.

Additionally, the arrangement of exhibits has visitors start their tour of the museum on the top floor and work their way down to the first floor.[146] The fourth and uppermost floor hosts the Our Universes exhibit, which orients the visitor from the beginning of their tour of the museum in the mindset of Indigenous people. The third floor introduces the visitor to all of the Indigenous peoples of the western hemisphere, all of whom are subject to the major philosophies and mindsets presented on the top floor. The second floor hosts changing exhibitions on specific, short-term topics of concern to those Indigenous peoples, from more specific tribal points of view. The first floor is where visitors can eat lunch from the menus of a vast array of American Indian traditional menus.[147]

To the astute observer, this arrangement makes perfect sense from an Indigenous perspective. The vertical alignment of the building mirrors the ideal vertical alignment of a person's spirit: 1) the entirety of the Universe--something greater than ourselves and our individual identities--is topmost and first priority, 2) the culture groups and tribes within that Universe are second and subject to the Universe, 3) concerns specific to individual culture

[146] "NMAI-DC Floor Plan," National Museum of the American Indian, June 26, 2021, https://americanindian.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/visit/NMAI-DC-floorplan-2020.pdf.

[147] When I lived and taught in Baltimore for five years, from 2006-2011, my husband and I went to DC at least once a month to see as many museums and monuments as we possibly could while living there. The food at the Mitsitam Native Foods Cafe is so good that we frequently went there just to have lunch. I highly recommend it.

groups and tribes come third and are subject to broader cultural concerns, and 4) the individual needs and concerns of each person come *last*.

I have never personally visited the New York branch of the NMAI, but the floor plan of that building (which you can view on their website) makes it obvious that the building design was intentional at that location, also.[148] Although there is only one main floor of exhibits, it is designed in a circular fashion according to the four directions, which are represented in many American Indian cultures as the sacred wheel.

The NMAI locations in Washington, DC and New York were built relatively recently, with the DC location being built in 2004 and the New York location preceding it in 1994. The movement for better representation of Indigenous people in society and in museums was already gaining momentum at that time, and these buildings reflect those changes in their architecture. It goes without saying that older museums, built before the level of awareness that is apparent in the construction of the two NMAI locations, might not have the luxury of extensively redesigning the entire building to reflect the cultural values of one group that it represents. In those museums seeking to make significant, positive changes in the area of cultural representation, those changes are made primarily in the collection practices of the museums.

Before I move on to talk about exactly what changes some museums have made to their collection practices concerning Native American art, I will make a bold assertion: museums are not the best place to see contemporary art in general, much less contemporary Native American art, by the definition of "contemporary" primarily used in this work. What I've been focused on

[148] "NMAI-NY Floor Plan," National Museum of the American Indian, June 26, 2021, https://americanindian.si.edu/sites/1/files/pdf/visit/NMAI-NY-floorplan.pdf.

for the past ten years is how Indigenous artists and their work are affected by the identity politics surrounding their Indigenous status and the public's expectations of what Native American art should look like. This is an issue that strikes at the heart of their identity as artists, and how it affects their ability to make the kinds of artwork they want to make, and still be able to make a living at it. For these artists, contemporary art refers to what they are making *right now*.

Most museums classify contemporary art by a completely different standard. Most curators agree that contemporary art is anything made in the latter half of the twentieth century, or in the twenty-first century.[149] However, even if an artist's work falls within that time frame, there's also the issue of many museum curators seeking to examine the entire body of an artist's work over the span of the lifetime of that artist *before* deciding to collect work by that artist. They are looking for consistency, originality, strong themes, and work that will continue to speak to viewers beyond the lifetime of the artist. While it is not impossible for an artist to have their work collected by a museum within their lifetime, it can be quite difficult to develop that track record early in one's life. It can become a sort of catch-22.[150] Artists who are collected when they are young (or even simply before they die) usually get the attention of a museum curator by participating in gallery shows, themed festivals, juried competitions, applying for fellowships and internships, and working very hard to accumulate a following and loyal collectors, before gaining that recognition from a museum. Working artists who want to make a living selling their work are hardworking hustlers. They depend on people enjoying their work *now*, not after they

[149] Various contributors, "Contemporary Art," Wikipedia, June 26, 2021 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Contemporary_art.
[150] Various contributors, "catch-22", Merriam Webster Dictionary, June 26, 2021 https://www.dictionary.com/browse/catch-22.

have died.[151] While it is becoming more common for museum curators to be more circumspect about this issue, collecting younger artists whose work satisfies all of the other criteria (except perhaps the lifetime retrospective view of their work), it can still be quite difficult to find oneself collected in a museum while still alive on this Earth.

However, in recent years, Native American artists have benefited from the movement for more equal representation in museums by having had their work collected while they are still quite young by museums like the NMAI, the Eiteljorg, the Autry Museum of the American West, the Heard Museum, the Field Museum, the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, and (closer to home for me) the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, and the Missoula Art Museum.

There is one primary reason for this change. As I mentioned previously, until relatively recently it was typical to see Native Americans represented only in the natural history section in museums, along with the dinosaurs and other extinct species. Also until recently, so much of contemporary Native American art was manifested in the modern recreations of traditional items. While made by Native American artists living today, the items and the styles incorporated into these items were reminiscent of Indian life in the 1890s. That made sense to a certain degree since so many Americans--inside or outside of the art world--still hold Native Americans in their minds as people only existing in that time period, despite their presence in our country in the present day as fully modern people, just like the rest of us.

Contemporary Native American art--not by the definition used by art historians and curators, but rather art that is made *today*--is turning out to be one of the best tools for museum

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[151] This is such a common and unfortunate trope in the art world--the starving artist who only achieves notoriety after they have died (e.g., Vincent van Gogh), that Mark Twain wrote a play about it (a comedy) called, "Is he dead?" Various authors, Wikipedia, June 26, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Is_He_Dead%3F.

curators to bring the non-Indigenous population and their antiquated idea of who Indians are into the twenty-first century. Thoughtful curators have used contemporary Indigenous art, carefully placed among Native American history exhibits, or in stand-alone art exhibitions, as a way to connect the rich and vibrant history of Native Americans in the past with their equally vibrant presence in our contemporary world, today. These are connections that are made easily and naturally, as most of the contemporary art being exhibited in museums today contains key visual elements and styles that are obvious in historical artifacts from more than a century ago, making it easy for non-Indigenous viewers to make the cognitive leap from the past to the present.

This is all well and good, but what about the Native American artists, themselves? What's in it for them? People do not go to museums to buy art. They go to museums to see cultural installations. Museums generally collect art for its cultural or historical value. That immediately minimizes the role of the artist to that of culture bearer. The focus of the work I've been doing for the last ten years has been on the lives of the artists themselves and the way in which they express themselves as they choose to (or the way in which they find themselves prevented from doing so), and how their Indian identity either conflicts with or enhances their efforts as artists. It can be difficult to innovate and be creative in an environment that only allows room for them to be seen and experienced as part of the larger narrative of their respective cultures. Most non-Indian artists would probably not consider themselves culture bearers before considering themselves innovative, creative, art makers. But most (if not all) of the Indigenous artists I interviewed for this work have found themselves being ambassadors and apologists for Native American life and contemporary issues. Their individual desires, motivations, and unique artistic

journeys have become subsumed by the larger cultural stories from which their imagery springs. For this reason, I don't think museums are the best places to see contemporary art of any kind (art that is being made *now, today*), least of all Native American contemporary art, because the museum definition of what constitutes contemporary art usually backdates "now" by between seventy to a hundred years ago.

Having said that, there are some museums that are collecting Native American art work made today and displaying it very effectively while bringing Native Americans into the present, as well. While working on this project, I was fortunate enough to be able to visit with representatives from four museums in my region, all of which collect Native American art, about how their collection practices have changed with regard to contemporary Native American art: Rebecca West of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West (BBCoW) in Cody Wyoming, Michael Fox of the Museum of the Rockies (MOR) in Bozeman, Montana; Brandon Reintjes of the Missoula Art Museum (MAM) in Missoula, Montana; and Rafael Chacón of the Montana Museum of Art and Culture (MMAC), also in Missoula. Some of these museums are disrupting some museum traditions by collecting art made by artists in their thirties. Unlike the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM), who only recently collected its first work by a Native American artist (Jaune Quick-To-See Smith,[152] a prolific Indigenous artist who has been making art for more than sixty years), the BBCOW and the MAM are collecting works by Native American artists very close to the beginning of their careers. In that respect, museums formerly focused only on a Native American past, but which are now seeking to rectify issues of cultural appropriation and

[152] Staff writer, "Jaune Quick-To-See Smith," SAAM, The Smithsonian American Art Museum, June 27, 2021, https://americanart.si.edu/artist/jaune-quick-see-smith-4505.

misrepresentation (or a lack of representation), could be setting the bar for other museums, perhaps even art museums, whose focus has not traditionally been on Native American art or artists.

I started making my rounds through the regional museums I have mentioned by visiting with Michael Fox, curator of history, culture, and art at the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman, Montana. Having lived in Bozeman for the better part of thirty two years as of this writing, I have been to the MOR many times, and am very familiar with their Enduring Peoples exhibit, which is dedicated to representing the seventeen tribes living on seven reservations in Montana (one of which, the Little Shell Chippewa tribe, is landless and resides primarily in the city of Great Falls).[153]

The Enduring Peoples exhibit has done a great job of acquainting visitors with our Indigenous neighbors in the state, but it has followed the pattern of celebrating a version of Native Americans that existed primarily in the past. This is valuable knowledge, regardless of the time frame. However, Michael shared with me that the MOR has recently made some changes to its collection policies concerning art in general, Native American art in particular, and they will soon be completely renovating the Enduring Peoples exhibit to reflect a more contemporary representation of Indigenous peoples in Montana. Once completed (several years from now), the exhibit will be divided into three main sections: 1) the seventeen tribes will continue to be represented, 2) a communication section highlighting oral histories, language preservation, and

[153] Elizabeth Sperry and Happy Avery, "Welcome to Montana Tribes Digital Archives," The University of Montana and Montana's Office of Public Instruction, 2009, https://montanatribes.org/

the seasons of storytelling,[154] 3) and a contemporary Native American art exhibit, the first of which will open in 2022.

Until very recently, the MOR did not collect art at all. They have art in their collections, but it has not been a policy to intentionally collect it. That is changing now. Not only will they be collecting art but their focus will be on collecting contemporary Native American art. This new shift to collecting contemporary art is a direct response to the fact that they have an extensive collection of Native American art and artifacts from 1915-2003 in their Hamilton Povah Yellowstone collection.[155] This collection was donated by Eleanor Hamilton Povah of West Yellowstone in 2009 and contains Native American objects that would have been represented in the inventory in the Hamilton stores, the concessionaire for Yellowstone National Park from 1915 to 2002.

I asked Michael what definition of contemporary Native American art he and the MOR will apply to the works it collects moving forward. He said that it must have been made in or after the 1970s; it must be moving in a more artistic direction, where the artist is making an intentional artistic statement, rather than simply adding adornment to utilitarian objects; and it might be celebrating the past through contemporary media. Additionally, their focus in new collections will be on art made by people of the tribes of our region. This is because the Hamilton Povah collection contains Indigenous art and artifacts from all over the west, and not all the pieces have a direct connection to the area served by the MOR. Michael went on to

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[154] Among the tribes of the plains and northern plateau, certain stories are only told during certain seasons, with a division between summer stories and winter stories.

[155] Staff writer, "Museum of the Rockies receives Hamilton Povah collection," MSU News Service, https://www.montana.edu/news/7474/museum-of-the-rockies-receives-hamilton-povah-collection

explain that the contemporary Native American art they will be collecting should connect the present to the past in a meaningful way that emphasizes the continuity of Indigenous peoples in our region, underscoring the fact that they are still here and are a vibrant part of our community, statewide.

Rebecca West, Executive Director & CEO of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Curator of Plains Indian Cultures and the Plains Indian Museum, explained to me how collection practices are changing at the BBCOW, too. The BBCOW has ten thousand pieces of Native American art and artifacts spread throughout the entire complex, which includes five different museums. Eighty percent of that collection consists of adorned objects, and she told me that she considers all of that to be art of some kind or another, because it's all adorned in some way.

The biggest change in collection practices at the BBCOW has come in the last ten years, as they have begun collecting contemporary art. The reason for that change is that they have put more emphasis in their Native American collections and at the Plains Indian Museum (PIM) on outreach and not collecting things. Rebecca considers collecting of Indigenous artifacts to be an old model of museum curating. The shift at the PIM has been on modern methods and different priorities, primary among which is developing relationships with the tribes in the region which the BBCOW serves. Because of this shift, the museum conducted a comprehensive review of their collecting goals and created some more rigorous standards. They also created a collections committee to make sure that those goals are met and the standards are upheld. Rebecca's definition of contemporary art was broader than the MOR's, going back as far as the 1920s, depending on the objects and their significance. They have also been attempting to leave behind

the term "fine art," because it is a limiting term that tends to only include Euro-American genres such as sculpture, painting, printmaking, ceramics, etc. Native American art goes so far beyond those limited (and limiting) genres, and has traditionally been considered a handicraft rather than "fine art." The BBCOW is removing those boundaries, broadening the definition of art, and being more inclusive in their collection practices.

I met with Hunter Old Elk, Curatorial Assistant at the PIM and a member of the Apsáalooke (Crow) and Yakama Nations. She grew up on the Crow reservation and has done a lot to bring a more Indigenous world view to the museum. In 2018, she worked with Robert Martinez and the other members of the Creative Indigenous Collective (CIC) to put together an exhibition at the PIM called *Native Nations Now: An Exhibition of Contemporary Native Art.*[156] This was the first time that the BBCOW had partnered with modern artists. The exhibit closed in October of 2018, but contemporary pieces by some of the artists in that exhibit still adorn the PIM, interspersed among the older, more traditional artworks available in those galleries. In this way, the BBCOW is doing what Michael Fox of the MOR talked about: showcasing Indigenous people and their art as fully contemporary and modern while making a direct connection to the past in a way that is obvious to the museum visitor.

Dr. Rafael Chacón, a professor of Art History and Criticism at University of Montana in Missoula, took over as the Director of the Montana Museum of Art and Culture about two years ago. One of the first things he did was to organize a collections committee for the purpose of developing a document to provide direct guidance to the staff concerning collections and

[156] Kamila Kudelska, "New Exhibit Focuses on Modern Northern Plains Artists," Buffalo Bill Center of the West, May 21, 2018, https://centerofthewest.org/2018/05/21/new-exhibit-focuses-on-modern-northern-plains-artists/.

exhibitions. He wanted the MMAC to take a new approach but also wanted it to be a grassroots effort rather than a top down directive.

The purpose of the new collections committee would be to change the culture of the museum and its collections practices with emphasis on social justice and more equitable representation. Prior to his entry to the MMAC, the museum had been very siloed and disconnected from the academic community on campus, and also disconnected from the university's curricular concerns. Since collections are such a pivotal part of the museum's identity, he decided to start there.

All of the committees working with the museum are volunteers. Because of this Rafael felt that he couldn't really tell them to do anything, but he asked them to start working on a set of principles to guide present collecting, future collecting, and maybe re-evaluate what they currently have. MMAC has the largest art collection in the state, which Rafael felt needed a set of guiding principles.

The first thing the collections committee did was to develop a *MMAC Collections Committee Directive on Social Justice*, which they adopted on September 11, 2020 after just one week of forming a task force around developing that document. They submitted it to Rafael for review, but he said it was so well written and coherent that there was basically nothing to review. Additionally, Rafael had asked for some guiding principles, but the committee called it a directive because they felt its role in changing the culture of the museum was too important to be left to mere guidance.

They also "didn't dawdle with the history of the institution," said Rafael. None of the people on the committee felt they knew the collection enough to be concerned with its past, and even extensive research of the institution and its collection might not yield any relevant information as to where they should direct their efforts in the future. So, the committee decided to focus on what the museum should be now and moving forward, and called their document a directive because it provides direct guidance to the institution and all its staff as to how to structure all collections, present and future, from a position of social justice. Now all the committees that work with the museum use this document to guide their actions and their work in the museum.

The directive developed by the Collections Committed has been in place for a year. It is a very short document that reads as follows:

> The Montana Museum of Art and Culture, the state's largest publicly-owned collection of art, aspires to be an inclusive organization that supports, collects, and represents creative expression that rises from the breadth of the human experience.
>
> Our efforts are strengthened by welcoming people of every race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, disability, age, national origin, and citizenship.
>
> The MMAC Collections Committee pledges to prioritize the acquisition of work by Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC), LGBTQ+, women, and other historically marginalized artists.
>
> We further commit to seeking broadly diverse leadership, input, and participation in all aspects of the MMAC Collections Committee's work.[157]

[157] Staff writer, "Montana Museum of Art and Culture: News Features," University of Montana, September 11, 2020, https://www.umt.edu/montanamuseum/.

This new document resulted almost immediately in two new hires: Aspen Decker, Native Community and Museum Education Coordinator; and Kaitlyn Rawhouser, Program Coordinator. Aspen Decker is Salish, just finished her master's degree in linguistics in her native language of Salish, she teaches Salish, and is raising her children to speak Salish, and she is also a visual artist. Aspen and Kaitlyn work to serve the College of Arts and Media--alumna, students, faculty, and staff--by creating museum programming to serve the needs of the university community with an emphasis on inclusion and representation of University of Montana's diverse student body. They also cultivate relationships with the Indigenous communities of Montana to accomplish the goals of the collections committee's directive for the museum.

The MMAC recently acquired one hundred and ninety one new pieces of art through a generous donation from Stan and Donna Goodbar. This collection includes a wide range of western art which also includes paintings of Indigenous people. This new acquisition immediately put the new collections committee directive to a test: how will curators use Native voices to reinterpret the west through western art that might not have been particularly concerned with positive representations of Indigenous peoples? Rafael shared that this new document guides all such work, helping curators to ask the right questions when making notations in permanent files about the pieces in the collection, as well as helping them to confront western from perspectives that no longer romanticize it without challenging the viewer to think about the content more deeply. The primary objective of the MMAC and its new directive is to conduct mindful collecting, curating, and display of both new collections and ones that have been with the museum for a very long time.

As we drew our conversation to a close, Rafael then gave credit to the Missoula Art Museum for doing this kind of work all along. He said that the MAM started this conversation thirty years ago, which has made it easier for other museums in the state to do the same.

Just a few days after I spoke with Rafael, I also met with Brandon Reintjes, the senior curator at the MAM, which has the largest collection of contemporary Native American art in the state. Their contemporary American Indian art collection began with an inaugural gift of two pieces by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith from the Rutgers Center for Innovative Print and Paper (which has since been renamed the Brodsky center),[158] preceding the first survey exhibition of her work, which was circulated by the Newark Museum in the following year. She quickly responded to that donation by committing herself to give one print from every series that she ever produced thereafter to MAM. She has fulfilled that commitment, providing the museum with over forty pieces throughout the years. Initially, she spoke of that commitment as putting a stake in the ground by way of establishing a presence for contemporary Native American art and artists. She also challenged the MAM to collect other contemporary American Indian artists, which they have faithfully done. MAM now has over one hundred and thirty pieces of Native American art in their collection. Making somewhat of a full circle, the MAM hosted a retrospective of Jaune Quick-to-See's work in 2017 entitled *In the Footsteps of My Ancestors*. Brandon said that she has been central to their vision and commitment surrounding the contemporary Native American art collection.

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[158] Staff writer, "Rutgers Center for Innovative Print and Paper Renamed in Honor of Founding Director Judith K. Brodsky," Rutgers the State University of New Jersey, October 24, 2006, https://www.rutgers.edu/news/rutgers-center-innovative-print-and-paper-renamed-honor-founding-director-judith-k-brodsky

It's important to note that the selection of the MAM for Quick-to-See's work was not a random incident. Quick-to-See Smith is an enrolled Salish member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai nation.[159] The tribes reside on the Flathead reservation in western Montana, just north of Missoula. The MAM is located in Missoula (obviously), which is the closest metropolitan area to the Flathead reservation. Quick-to-See Smith is originally from St. Ignatius on the Flathead reservation. Although she has lived in New Mexico for many years, she maintains close ties with the community in St. Ignatius.

Brandon went on to say that the MAM had been exhibiting Native American art all along since the founding of the museum in 1975, but they hadn't always had a clear focus. The donation of Quick-to-See Smith's work, as well as her challenge to them, helped them develop a more specific focus and strategy. In 2005 they created a gallery dedicated to contemporary Native American art. However, that spurred a discussion within the museum about whether creating a specific gallery for Native American art would ghettoize it. They decided it was better to feature the work of an underrepresented group of artists than to *not* do it. They also don't limit the display of Native American art to that gallery.

Brandon shared that the purview of their representation of Native American artists is the intermountain west. However, they do not require that Indian artists prove their Indian identity through enrollment or descendancy. They honor an artist's self-selection of their ethnic identity. As I already mentioned earlier, identity politics for Native American artists can get really tricky for a variety of reasons. The MAM does not make that problem more difficult for its artists by

[159] Staff writer, "Biography," Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, July 14, 2021, https://www.jaunequicktoseesmith.org/.

requiring them to prove that they are Indian, like so many venues for Native American artists. Their policy of inclusion and diverse representation prevents them from discriminating on the basis of blood quantum.

The MAM does have a collections committee, and their focus is targeted acquisition consistent with their mission to collect contemporary Native American artists. They have not made any recent changes to their collection practices because their practices have been ahead of the curve for the last thirty years. However, Brandon did tell me that they did make some changes to their practices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to improve access to the collections. They have expanded their goals to include deepening relationships in Indian communities, starting with outreach to each of the seven reservations and all the tribes they represent, with visits and developing friendships. In 2020, they developed an Art Host program in collaboration with all seven tribal colleges in Montana. This program helps to get art out to the reservations while also providing an opportunity for collaboration between the MAM and the tribes.

Because the MAM has had progressive collection practices concerning contemporary Native American art for about thirty years, and since some museums have recently begun to address how they should perhaps change their practices to be more inclusive and have broader representation of underrepresented groups, I asked Branden what advice he would give to those museums seeking to update their practices. His advice is simply to take risks and have conversations with those whom the museums are seeking to represent in a more inclusive way.

The best way to overcome obstacles is to build relationships. That's good advice for all museums, really.

The last person I talked to was Alissa Kost of the Montana Art Gallery Directors Association (MAGDA)[160]. I was referred to her by Rafael because he thought it would be good for me to find out what member organizations like MAGDA are doing to help art museums in their service area move toward more inclusive policies and broader representation of underrepresented populations in their collections. MAGDA has thirty two members (all non-profit organizations), mostly in Montana, with two organizations in Wyoming and one in North Dakota. Montana has about one hundred and fifty museums, which means only eighteen percent of Montana museums are members.

The member from North Dakota is NDAGA (North Dakota Art Gallery Association),[161] and they in turn serve member galleries throughout the state of North Dakota in a way similar to that in which MAGDA serves its member museums.

The two members from Wyoming are both art museums.

According to Alissa, the main programs that MAGDA offers are two annual professional development opportunities for members, and traveling exhibitions that enable their larger and more well-funded members to share their exhibits with smaller members in rural communities. The professional development topics they offer include curatorial ethics, installation procedures, healing relationships with Indigenous communities and education about cultural appropriation,

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[160] Alissa Kost, "Serving the non-profit museums and galleries of Montana…," Montana Art Gallery Directors Association, July 16, 2021, https://magdamt.wordpress.com/.
[161] Staff writer, "2020 Member Galleries," North Dakota Art Gallery Association, July 16, 2021, https://ndartgalleryassociation.weebly.com/member-galleries.html.

inclusion, and more equitable representation of underrepresented communities in museum exhibits and collections.

MAGDA's outreach provides a great opportunity to give guidance to its members. However, MAGDA members are not required to follow MAGDA's guidance. While MAGDA is emphasizing just the kinds of changes discussed by all of the museum professionals I talked to for this work, Alissa said that all they can do is suggest. Montana is a primarily rural state stretched over one hundred forty thousand and forty square miles. It takes eight hours to drive the full breadth of the state in any direction, and with only six metropolitan areas (Missoula, Bozeman, Helena, Kalispell, Great Falls, and Billings), there's a lot of rural space in between. The smaller communities of Montana are a little slower to catch up to the changing times, especially where issues of race and ethnicity are concerned, because Montana is a very white state. Many of them do not see a problem with how they represent (or don't represent) BIPOC people in their exhibitions, largely because their communities have very few (if any) BIPOC people in them. Native Americans in Montana (our largest non-caucasian ethnic group) make up only six percent of the total population, and the Indian reservations are scattered in the most remote parts of the state. The Montanans with everyday exposure to Native Americans in those areas can have a very limited view of their Indigenous neighbors.

To attract members from these communities, MAGDA must be welcoming to everyone, and not put them on the defensive. Critical Race Theory and the Black Lives Matter movement have taken a very confrontational approach as BIPOC people have sought to disrupt the status quo around the country. That has worked to a certain degree in urban areas nationwide; but in

Montana, news coverage of those events and that approach has created a deeply divided response in our largely rural state. Many Montanans have dug into their entrenched but outdated positions when confronted with the idea that perhaps we are not equitable in our treatment of BIPOC people. Anyone openly promoting CRT or BLM, or anything that includes the words "inclusion" or "equitable representation" is likely to have the proverbial door slammed in their face. Rather than make a forceful statement about inclusion, MAGDA has chosen to set an example through their more progressive member museums, and subtle introductions to inclusive topics in their professional development offerings. This can make for slow change, but causes fewer setbacks. Alissa said that moving forward, as they make inroads, they are putting their principles more in the forefront.

In speaking with all of these museum professionals, it became clear that none of them were unaware of the need for more inclusive collection practices and better representation of underrepresented populations, especially those integral to their own communities, and our statewide community. All of them expressed not only an awareness that changes must be made, but they also had already begun to implement them; the only exception being the MAM, which has been doing for the past thirty years what other museums are seeking just now to do. In many ways, these Montana and Wyoming museums have been implementing more progressive policies than many of the largest, most respected institutions in the country, such as the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. While it is a good thing that the National Gallery is finally recognizing the value of Jaune Quick-to-See's work and purchased a piece for their collection, it was long past time for them to have done so, and one can only wonder if they would have done it

at all if not for the attention brought to the contributions of BIPOC people in our country by the BLM movement. Likewise, the Metropolitan Museum of Art very recently appointed its first Curator of Native American Art, and hired an Indigenous person for the position.[162] Patricia Marroquin Norby (Purépecha) brings an Indigenous perspective to the collections in the Met that hasn't existed there before in its entire history. Perhaps those members of the push for social justice and better representation, who say that being patient is *not* a virtue when it comes to social justice, are right. Perhaps shaking our national cage is what it took to raise our collective consciousness. Perhaps it is what will continue to be required for the foreseeable future to affect real, lasting change.

[162] Elizabeth Pochoda, "Patricia Marroquin Norby Is Bringing a Native Perspective to the Met," New York Times, July 9, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/09/arts/design/patricia-norby-met-museum.html.

CONCLUSION

Writing about real Indians making real art was quite the journey. I had an idea of what I would find, but encountered a few surprises along the way. There were some issues that I knew were challenges for Native American artists, or were misconceptions about them and their work, but interviewing eleven artists uncovered even more issues that I had not previously considered or even conceived of. All of the artists that I spoke with experienced a core set of issues that are common to all of them, but each of them revealed a unique angle on those issues; some way that the issues had played out in their lives that was different in some way from all the others. The issues specific to each of the artists were individual to them in ways directly related to their respective gender, their perceived blood quantum, their education, their day jobs, their level of visibility to the public, where they live, the art media they choose to work in, and even the kind of artwork they choose to make. All of them are affected by the same issues we see broadcast on the daily news related to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and which are addressed by Critical Race Theory (CRT). As I was nearing the end of the writing, a new CRT issue emerged that also affects them: a movement by some to ban the teaching of our collective American history from the point of view of Black and brown-skinned peoples, as well as a movement to ban any reference to BLM or CRT from school curricula where people find the truths revealed by such to be inconvenient. It seems that the potential importance of this work increased during the ten years it took me to complete it.

I've mentioned that I interviewed eleven artists, but you may have noticed that there are only eight chapters featuring the artists that I interviewed. This is simply because I ran out of

time to write it all up before the deadline for completing my doctorate rolled around. While my interview with Kevin Red Star[163] did reveal that he had faced some of the issues I was addressing here, honestly there is so much written about him already that I don't think it matters that he didn't end up with a chapter here, as not much new would have been added. My interviews with Valentina LaPier[164] (a Blackfeet artist living in East Glacier, Montana on the Blackfeet reservation) and Debbie Magee[165] (a Blackfeet artist living in Cut Bank, Montana, just east of the Blackfeet reservation), revealed some important additional perspectives that I hope to revisit later. In addition to providing more female voices to this discussion, they had experienced alternate scenarios that I had not anticipated. Among other things, Valentina has the unique perspective of being an LGBTQ artist as well as being Blackfeet. Debbie Magee offers the perspective of someone who was not only disconnected from her Blackfeet culture as a child, but once reconnected she took up and mastered the vanishing art of quillwork. While quillwork is an old, traditional Indigenous art form, Debbie employs it in new ways. She also pointed out to me, when I asked how quillwork might be considered contemporary, that "everything we do is contemporary." It seemed obvious once she said it, but prior to that I had classified quillwork as an "old" artform. There are other ways that her work is contemporary, also; but I'll leave that to you to investigate for now.

And then there are all of the other artists that I met along the way who I would have liked to interview, but the timing and logistics never worked out.

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[163] https://kevinredstar.com/
[164] https://www.valentinalapier.com/
[165] https://www.firstpeoplesfund.org/deborah-magee

Wendy Red Star,[166] like Kevin Red Star, is now so well known that I don't think I could have added anything to what has already been written about her either, but I still think that would have been a fascinating conversation that could have provided me with additional insights into her work. She is an Apsáalooke (Crow) artist living in Portland, Oregon who makes photographs, mixed media collages, paintings, environmental installations, and (my favorite) large dioramas which she also photographs. Her work addresses a variety of Indian stereotypes, including that of the "Indian Princess." I have probably left out some art media from her repertoire, because as far as I can tell she does not allow herself to be limited nor pigeonholed by media.

I attended a workshop, run by Oregon artist Sara Siestreem[167] of the Coos tribe, at the Missoula Art Museum in 2013 in which she discussed a lot of issues I was already mulling over concerning contemporary Indigenous art. Participating in her workshop helped me sort out my ideas and narrow my focus a little further. It would have been interesting to have a more in depth discussion with her about her work.

Ernest Marceau[168] is an artist I met twice during this project. He is yet another Blackfeet artist living on the Blackfeet reservation in Montana. Ernie is a painter whose style is vibrant, fluid, and completely unique. He is also extremely friendly. Unfortunately, Ernie is "old school," and didn't have email or other digital means of connecting, so it proved to be too difficult to track him down to do an interview, although he said he was willing both times that I met him. I

[166] https://www.wendyredstar.com/
[167] https://missoulaartmuseum.org/exhibits/sara-siestreem-ballast
[168] https://www.doi.gov/iacb/artwork-ernest-marceau-featured-online-exhibit

would have liked to talk with him about how he developed his style of painting and where his rich sense of color comes from.

Jackie Larson Bread[169] agreed to an interview, but she is extremely busy so we were never able to connect. Between her being booked out for three years in advance with art commissions, being a caregiver for her grandchildren, and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were unable to work out a time and place that worked for both of us. I have not given up hope yet, and would still like to interview her at a later date for a future project. Jackie is also Blackfeet and lives in Great Falls, Montana. She is a beadworker who "paints" portraits with beads. Her craftsmanship and rendering skills are superlative. It is no wonder she has years of advance commissions. Besides her being the only beadworker in my list of artists, I would have liked to have gained her perspective as a female artist. It would have also been nice to have been able to find out more about her involvement with young Indigenous artists. When I took my Brockton students to Western Art Week in 2017, we ran into Jackie at the C.M. Russell museum where she had a booth of her artwork on display. We have several mutual friends so I introduced myself. I also introduced my most talented high school beadworker from Brockton (a fourteen-year-old boy), and she immediately gave him an impromptu pep talk that may have changed his life.

Louis and Gina Still Smoking are the only two members of the Creative Indigenous Collective that I was not able to interview because of timing, logistics and (at times) six hundred miles of distance. Louis[170] (yet another Blackfeet artist) is a painter, and a really good one. He

[169] https://www.nativeartsandcultures.org/jackie-larson-bread
[170] https://livelytimes.com/event/louis-still-smoking-bozeman/

and John Pepion teamed up to paint murals on the Blackfeet reservation once upon a time. Some of Louis's paintings are simply the most sublime of portrait interpretations. Others re-interpret patriotic American tropes, or religious themes, through an Indigenous lens. Gina is a member of the Kul Wicasa Oyate/Lower Brule Sioux tribe. She is a fashion designer, which would have added not only another female Indigenous voice but also an additional art medium and a different artistic perspective. In 2017, she organized a fashion show at the Paris Gibson Square Museum in Great Falls that drew attention to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women initiative, which not only raised consciousness about the issue among people who might not have been previously aware. It also provided my students from Brockton with the comfort of knowing that there are people in the world who *see* them and understand their issues.

Corwin Clairmont[171] (knowly locally as Corky) is a Salish artist from Ronan, Montana who also founded the Art Department at Salish Kootenai College in Pablo, on the Flathead reservation. All of the other artists I have mentioned prior to Corky are ones I met naturally through mutual friends, or were referred to me in the same way, or I just stumbled upon them while visiting museums or other venues. Since they both teach at SKC, Frank Finley could have introduced me to Corky. However, I didn't even have time to write about all the artists I *did* interview over the last five years, so it didn't make sense to keep adding to the list. Additionally, Corky is well and widely known and, like Kevin Red Star, I'm not sure that writing about him here would have added much to the body of knowledge about him that is already available. Even so, I would encourage you to look up his work if you don't already know about him. He is

[171] https://artmobilemontana.org/corky-clairmont/

definitely worth mentioning here, and I hope to be able to discuss his important work in person someday.

Aaniiih (White Clay People, also known as Gros Ventre) artist Sean Chandler[172] would have made a great chapter, as he is from a part of Montana that has very few Indigenous artists. Sean grew up in Glendive, Montana. Like Lauren Monroe, he is an Indigenous artist whose art career was interrupted by his education. Having received his EdD in Educational Leadership from University of Montana, he currently serves as the Director of Indian Studies at Aaniiih Nakoda College on Fort Belknap Agency in Harlem, Montana. His work is exceptionally modern but he also works in Indigenous imagery as well as experiences from his life. I would have loved to have interviewed him, but I just ran out of time. He is definitely worth checking out.

One of the saddest missed opportunities, which I've already mentioned in the chapter on John Pepion, was letting too much time go by before looking up Jay Laber.[173] He was the Blackfeet artist who created larger-than-life warrior sentries at the four entrances to the Blackfeet reservation out of rusted junkyard auto parts. The story of his artistic life and introduction to art-making would have provided yet another perspective on issues faced by Indigenous artists. I wish I had been able to speak with him before he passed away.

In addition to the practical limitations of time and space, I also had to find a way to limit the number of artists I would speak with based on what those interviews might yield in support of my thesis: Indigenous artists who make contemporary/modern art that deviates from what the general public errantly deems "traditional" are real artists, and real Indians; the style or media

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[172] https://indiancountrytoday.com/the-press-pool/exhibit-opening-at-missoula-art-museum-showcases-entirely-new-work-by-aaniiih-artist-first-in-over-a-decade

[173] https://missoulaartmuseum.org/exhibits/jay-laber-reborn-rez-wrecks

they work in does not nullify their Indigenous or artistic identities simply because it might not fit the field of receptions erroneous definitions of Native American art. Even as much as I narrowed down the topic, I had to find a way to narrow down the lens through which I would look at it. The most practical way for me to do that was by limiting it to artists from my own region, to whom I could easily travel to conduct an interview.

I've already mentioned several times the way in which Blackfeet artists seemed to dominate this work. I very well could have limited my approach to just Blackfeet artists, based on the large number of volunteers from that tribe. However, that would have narrowed the view too much and the loss of the other voices from other tribes would have failed to prove that the issues highlighted here are faced by all Indigenous artists regardless of tribal affiliation.

I almost limited the interview list to just Indigenous artists residing in Montana, but that would have robbed me of the pleasure of getting to know Robert Martinez, and the important work he has been doing in the studio as well as out in the world raising awareness and consciousness about contemporary Indigenous art.

After doing all of the reading in the attached literature review, and after eleven interviews were completed, it became clear and obvious to me that while continuing to add more interviews would likely add more individual artistic perspectives, it would also continue to reveal primarily the same answers to the questions I was asking. All of the artists I interviewed had experienced the same types of issues at museums, galleries, festivals, and dealing with the public. It became clearer and clearer that some aspect of their personal identities was at stake when they put their art out there for the world to see, whether it was their artistic identity, their cultural identity, or

their tribal identity. Making contemporary art is a great risk for them, but one all of them found worth taking.

I've been thinking for ten years about what I hope this work will accomplish, and now that I'm wrapping up the project I realize that it's as simple as this: that anyone reading this will allow it to educate and inform them not only on the subject of contemporary Indigenous art, but that it will also serve to acquaint the reader with the fundamental issues that Indigenous people deal with day in and day out for the duration of their lives. It is my sincerest hope that this will be a tool in everyone's cultural toolbox for gaining a better understanding of Indian people as fully modern human beings, and when looking at their artwork it is my hope that, whatever your preconceptions about Native American art or Native American artists, you will begin to see them as real Indians making real art.

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