“A TIME OF VISIONS”: CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN INDIAN ART AND ARTISTS

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Abstract / Resume

We look at contemporary Native art and appreciate it in some sense. The author notes, however, that there is considerable diversity in the cultural backgrounds of these artists. It is thus imperative that we hear the artists themselves describe the contours of their history and practice.

On étudie l’art autochtone contemporain et on l’apprécie dans un certain sens. L’auteur remarque cependant qu’il y a beaucoup de diversité dans le milieu socio-culturel des artistes. Il est donc important qu’on entende les artistes eux-mêmes décrire les grandes lignes de leur histoire et leur travail.
Introduction

Although 20th century art by Native peoples has unavoidably developed in relation to the Euro-American "mainstream," at the very least on the level of materials, that relationship has not been the sole determinant of the canon of Native American visual or verbal art. Native fine art has followed its own internal trajectory, regardless of critical efforts to channel it. However, the voices of the artists have often been regarded as peripheral to the assessment of their art. Because contemporary Native art is produced by individuals from diverse cultures and settings, and because these individuals offer the viewer manifold and evolving words and images, it is imperative that the artists themselves describe the contours of their own and, by extension, Native art history and practice. Contemporary art by Indigenous artists reflects the unique sensibility of the individual who produced it, and that sensibility is shaped in many ways. The voice of the artist can help us understand the contexts—personal, cultural, historical—out of which his or her art emerges. In 1986 Edwin Wade, in an essay in Southwest Art entitled "What is Native American Art?" sketched a brief history of Native art and wondered about its future. At the end of his essay he wrote:

Vital arts change. If ever we should succeed in truly defining Indian art, that definition would be an epitaph. But if we remove the restraints of stereotype and allow the creative impetus full rein, we can observe the development of an exciting art that draws on the richness of its own past as it continually recreates itself for the future (Wade, 1986:117).

In the nearly ten years since Wade's remarks, Native art has evolved because the artists have evolved, their words and images continuing to explore their experiences as artists and Indians in late 20th century America. The artists featured in this roundtable have reflected on a number of common questions involving their work, their sources, their role, and on the spiritual and political dimensions of Native art, and have tried to describe both in general and specific ways what they try to accomplish in their art. Whether the artists work with so-called traditional materials or with the most contemporary, what links all their work is a sense of continuity of past, present, and future, linked with a persistent desire to create. As Karoniaktatie/Alex Jacobs has expressed in his 1973 poem "Darkness Song":

it is a time
of visions
it is a time
of painting
no more do we
hide our dreams
we wear them
on our shirts
round our necks
they make music
in our hair

Anita Fields

Anita Fields, Osage/Creek, lives in Stillwater, Oklahoma. She received her BFA in Studio Arts from Oklahoma State University. She is a member of the Second Circle Advisory Board of Atlatl, and is a participant in the Artist-in-Residence Program for the Oklahoma State Arts Council.

Much of my work is an expressive response to the memories and personal experiences I have been inspired by. It is about transforming my thoughts, influences and dreams into clay objects and forms.

I work in a contemporary manner employing symbolic elements that reflect human nature and how we interact with each other.

My work has a narrative dimension. One piece relates to that is Women of the Stars Who Carry Bundles While They Dream. It's a box-shaped sculpture that has a window, a ledge, and shutters on the outside. Standing on the ledge are two feminine figures with two small bundles placed in front of them. The bundles are forms I have started utilizing in my recent works. The figures represent our inner spirit that makes us unique. The shutters on the outside have come to symbolize looking inside yourself and knowing who you are.

In Osage culture we give away to honor someone. We place the give-away items on a cloth and tie them in a bundle. Metaphorically speaking, I like the idea of the bundle and what it stands for.

My work is primarily slab-built earthenware that incorporates strong angular lines and negative space elements. I use terra sigillata slips combined with stains and oxides for surface color. Terra sigillata is a very fine clay slip that is applied when the clay is leather hard. I like experimenting with clay slips because the surfaces look and feel very natural after firing. My pieces are usually fired one time in an electric kiln, though sometimes I will finalize a piece by smoking them in sawdust, straw or leaves.

It is an act of faith every time I complete a piece and put it in the kiln because there is always the possibility of cracking or breakage during the firing. I have little control over what is happening during this time and I place my trust in the process. When I do sawdust firings I find the spontaneous
results the smoke and flames leave on pieces exciting.

I also make traditional Osage ribbon work where the patterns are very exact and geometric. On the level of technique there’s no similarity to the clay; however, my knowledge of ribbon work design is useful when I create patterns for my clay work. Sometimes I’ll use the patterns as design elements on large ceramic platters. I’ll start out with one of the patterns as an idea, but I’ll enlarge and alter it.

When I look at ribbon work blankets and clothing I have a deep admiration and appreciation for the workmanship, energy and effort it took to make them. I feel inspiration in knowing this art form, which is traditionally women’s work, and using it as a source for ideas in my clay work.

I hardly finish one piece when another idea comes that may evolve into the next piece. Even though they may be similar they will not be the same. Sometimes it takes a long time to execute the ideas I have in ways that are acceptable to me.

Recently I’ve been working on a series of clay still life resembling Plains beaded purses. Inside the purses are small clay objects, such as mirrors, bundles, pouches, and photographic images transferred onto clay. The objects are representative of the kinds of things women carry in their purses, and which reflect feminine sensibilities. This series took two years of experimentation before I was satisfied with the results.

For Native American artists the roles we play are similar to what artists do in other cultures. We have the ability to document events that are going on in the times that we know. We do that in the language that we understand, be it clay sculpture, dance, or poetry.

We create opportunities to relate in a true manner the impact that historical events have had on our people and our families. Art is based on experiences that a person has. I am expressing my own ideas, thoughts, and emotions as I view the world.

The artist’s role in history has always been to document what is going on in the here and now. I think that certainly applies for Indian artists. I see two types of Native American artists. One keeps the traditions and culture alive, those traditional people who create clothing and other objects that are created for cultural use. Then there are artists whose work is considered contemporary. Both kinds of artists create something from start to finish based on an idea, need, or inspiration.

There is art that reflects everyday things that we go through as Indian people, and that talks about the things that are happening today. I think that Native American artists have a unique opportunity to address issues that have impacted our lives and communities. The issues are going to be different form community to community, but we have the chance to show the truth as we know it, from our own point of view.
One time in my grade school art class we were asked to make what we wanted to be when we grew up. I made an artist out of coloured paper. I was always creating something with my hands, wanting to sew, to cut paper, to glue, and, naturally, to go out in the yard and play in the mud. Throughout my childhood these experiences were something I connected to over and over again.

I went to school at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe and shortly after I left there I married and started having my family. I have three children—a daughter who is eighteen, and sons who are fourteen and five. There was a long period where I would dabble in things and one of the things I did when my daughter was very young was ribbon work. I kept doing that, but as far as doing either clay or painting, I didn’t do them on a consistent basis. About six or seven years ago I made a conscious evaluation of where I was at in my life. I had a lot of experiences leading up to that point, but I really felt like art was the only thing I was ever supposed to do. So I decided that art was what I was going to do.

Harry Fonseca

Harry Fonseca was born in Sacramento, California and is of Maidu, Hawaiian, and Portuguese heritage. He has exhibited in solo and group shows nationally and in Europe and Asia. He currently has his own gallery in Santa Fe.

My ongoing Stone Poem paintings started in 1989. I'm still doing them. I'm working on three right now. I go back to the images in the Coso Range in California, but they aren’t literal depictions of what's on the rock. I will take liberties and change things around. I look at the images for what they are and then change them a bit, and make them mine to some degree.

When I started doing them—the first one was 6 x 7 feet—I really liked working that big because I hadn’t worked that large in a long, long time. I don’t know if I ever worked that large, actually. One was 6 x 12 feet, and I’ve done some small pieces that are 11 x 22 inches. The majority of them have a single, central figure in them; however, there are some that have five or six figures in them. The one that’s 6 x 12 feet has a lot of figures in them. I’m using big brushes and oil stick, and oil stick is a real awkward medium. You have to be really aggressive with it in order to pull it off. You can’t be tender with it, or at least I find a hard time being tender with it. Also, they are emotionally-charged when they are larger. You get a sense of depth because of the black base on the canvas. It’s like a hole you can go into. You could have a black canvas and put a white hand on that canvas
and you'll have space for days. That hand will hover there forever and the black will suck you in. I like that. With the *Navajo Rug* series, and working with the rock art, I became aware that Native American design was really American art.

I had some black paint, red oxide and some artificial gold leaf around, so I started to do *The Discovery of Gold and Souls in California* series. I did four of them and thought I would not do anymore because these were just too brutal, but there was something that intrigued me about both their brutality and their elegance, so I ended up doing 160 of them, and I think that they probably are my most pointed, political statements. That doesn't mean a great, great deal to me. I don't think you have to toss a bomb at something that you dislike to be conscious of political situation. I think the most profound political statement being made today is by any Native American that is still breathing. They don't have to be marching, just breathing.

Why do I paint? I do it because I love to do it. I remember seeing some of Robert Motherwell's work and falling in love with that and starting to move paint around and drip paint and having a great time, but not really with any direction. It was almost art for art's sake. I didn't know what I was saying but the paint was really moving. Then I found out more about my Native American background, and became involved with the dances and that whole traditional base. That really gave me a foundation, not only for me but for my art work as well. At that time it wasn't even so much the painting. It was just the whole process of living, being involved with the Native American community, talking to Henry Azbill, talking to Frank Day, being taught by Frank LaPena, going up to the dances at Grindstone, being asked to dance with the Maidu dancers and being initiated as a dancer. Life just went on, pot luck picnics and stuff. But that base is still here. It's still very, very strong. It has a great deal of meaning to me, even when I am not doing as petroglyph or a coyote, there's still something there. I think the Maidu creation story anchored a lot for me, put a lot in perspective for me, because the story itself is so wonderful and creation stories don't end. I'm part of it, you're part of it, everybody's a part of this story that's continuing to unfold.

I met Frank Day when he was ill and so I wasn't able to spend as much time with him as I would have liked. I would go over and see him now and again and he would tell me stories. He'd just take you right out of the room with his stories, really amazing stuff, just like his paintings. I remember asking Frank what was the best way to paint? His answer was profound. He said, “The best way to paint is the way you know how.” What more could he have told me as a painter?

I don't know why I usually do what I do. One of the things that I do tend to go along with is when my art wants to change, I'll go along with it. I'll just
paint whatever I want to paint. If you look around the gallery it looks like there are maybe three or four artists that work here—or a crazy person—one or the other. I just do whatever I want because I don't care much about any art movements or art scenes in general.

I think the process of not knowing, and the continuous movement, is certainly what has kept me going. I think that might keep most artists going, but looking back over 20 years, there's another element that has been terribly important and that is the family and friends who have been so supportive. The number one thing is I just love to just paint. Looking back, I think it's because when I was 11 years old, I knew I was an artist. I already knew that at a real deep level. My work was going to be done the way I wanted it to be done. It has a certain emotional impact about it. It has a certain energy about it. It has a certain emotional impact that keeps the work alive.

Bob Haozous

Bob Haozous was born in Los Angeles, California, studied at Utah State University, and received his BFA from the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland. He has been exhibiting his work in the United States and abroad for twenty-five years. He currently lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he maintains his own foundry.

What I'm trying to do is reveal what has happened to Native American people by the oppression that they've undergone and are undergoing, to reveal how we are changing, but also to reveal how we romanticize ourselves and put ourselves on pedestals because of our ancestors' behavior. Too often we don't really look at ourselves today. In most of the galleries, you see an image of Indians that's untrue. It doesn't include who we really are—very unhealthy in a lot of ways: alcoholism, violence, poverty, suicide, political problems, loss of land, religion, and language—it's all continuing today, but here in Santa Fe, especially, if you look at the image Indians project, it's this beautiful image of the past. But our ancestors weren't having such a great time themselves.

About Steelhenge, I've always wanted to put my works together in a public space and the College of Santa Fe offered the space. They were kind enough to give me a major space where people could view all the pieces easily. Steelhenge is a complex show. It is a compilation of 11 pieces that are not really directly-related, but the concept comes from things I've learned about witchcraft, the things I've learned about the pagan religions of Euro-Americans—the pre-Christian religions, the Celtic religions—and the idea that people who come to Indians come to get not only the
craftsmanship or beauty they produce, but they are also trying to get some kind of wisdom or earth awareness, because in America we were told to divorce ourselves from that responsibility or that wisdom. We don't tie the attitude that the earth is a tool for man to the destruction that's going on in this world. I was taught to observe. I don't know who taught me, but to observe is good—that's the role of an artist. Maybe that's an idealistic way to live your life, to be able to criticize—but I think that the responsibility of an artist is to see and portray who he is. And so Steelhenge is really an offshoot of the Celtic religion they had at Stonehenge that showed to me that at one time they had a Mother Earth concept, an earth-related religion that tied them directly to the earth. There was a time when man was a part of nature and not dominant over it—and so I decided I'd go ahead and make Steelhenge to remind people who see it that they have a Mother Earth like Native Americans. I want to ask why you come to Native Americans for your Mother Earth when you have your own. That's basically what it was about.

One piece that's brand new is in the center of the exhibition; I don't know whether it's a caisson or a wagon, but it has a coffin on it. I made that especially for the show. It's full of red earth to show the death of the earth; most of the pieces are about death or destruction. Later on I filled the coffin with wood because wood is a symbol of the earth as much as dirt is, and then I put images of people from every race around it, because we are all trying so hard to become modern people that we are denying and forgetting the responsibilities we have for the survival of the earth. Native Americans included. I put Native Americans in and Chinese and Mexicans and Blacks and everyone else. It just is a statement of what's going to happen to the earth if we don't begin to see a living earth as opposed to a dead earth.

My female figures are kind of deceiving. A lot of people look at my work and they don't realize that there’s a statement. Some of my female imagery comes from a desecrated or obscene Mother Earth image. I do buxom women to show that we've sexualized Mother Earth. I try to overexpose the image, put it in awkward positions so that people feel awkward when they look at it or think it's humorous. They've taken a symbol of beauty themselves and made it obscene. That's what they're about; they're not whimsical in any sense, similar to my artificial clouds, which show the destruction of the earth. They didn't realize that I was talking about how we want to control nature, want to dominate nature so much that we destroy it to put this artificial nature in a Disneyland and so you feel good there, but it's not real. There's no insects, there's no real life there; there's no pain or sweat. It's just prettified nature.

I've always considered humor to be more than just making somebody laugh or entertaining somebody. I once read that to Native American
people, ridicule was a very serious form of social control, social entertain-
ment, education—it just had a very important role besides just getting a
laugh. I try to use humor to get past these barriers. When you say, “a political
Indian artist,” most people will turn around and walk away. They don’t want
to hear it. They don’t want to hear any of the things that make them feel
guilty about what their forefathers have done or they themselves are doing,
like in Iraq or Iran. They just don’t want to hear about it so they’ll walk away.
So I use humor to draw the viewer in but I basically make the same
statement. If you can get people’s attention by making them have a bitter,
bloody laugh, it’s much better and much more fun for me, too. I don’t want
to be taken seriously as an individual. I’d rather have my issues be taken
seriously. I think it has much more of an effect on people if they don’t take
you that seriously.

I switched to using steel when I realized that stone just wasn’t doing it
for me. I love stone, I love the three-dimensional form, but I think I changed
to steel when I went through St. Louis and saw the beautiful arch. I realized
that here’s man worshipping man again, worshipping man’s dominance
over nature, man’s control of the natural. It’s an engineering feat that’s just
marvellous; you have to stop and look. At the same time, what does it say
except, “aren’t we great!” And we’re not great, we have a long way to go
and we don’t even know who we are or what we’re doing. We don’t know
what we’re doing to other people to maintain our level of convenience.

Every art work in this world should be talking about that every day. Every
artist should go to the studio and say I don’t want this. Why doesn’t
art do that? What has our art become? Indian people have the key to tie
art into an environmental awareness of the future, yet we’ve been so beaten
down that all we care about is the money and entertaining White people.
So that’s why I went into steel. With steel you can make a big piece that
makes a political statement. I’m beginning to realize that the ignorance of
the viewer is important, and since most viewers believe that “big is better,”
why not make big pieces that don’t have the sensitivity to line and shape
and color that artists are supposed to make? Just put it out there, dump it
in front of their faces and they’ll respect it and they do. I think that sculpture
is the ultimate art form. A painting is on a canvas on a wall; it deals with
some kind of illusion. But a sculpture can be the object itself—you can have
a sunset right there. You can paint anything you want to on a sculpture;
you’re not restricted by a flat plane if you don’t want to be, or you can make
it a flat plane, whatever you want.

It’s constantly changing. One word from somebody can change a whole
concept. I can cut a piece in half if I have to. You can’t make a work and
worship yourself because it’s there. If you see a piece and you’ve evolved,
you know, a year or a week or a day, why not cut it apart?
I want to see people participating in my work and claiming the statement—claiming to be a part of the statement. I think that's totally contrary to what we're taught in America—the artist is an individual, the genius. I don't want to see that in my work at all. I'd rather see, at the most, a cultural reflection of being an Apache. That cultural reflection comes out in a contemporary mode that you can't trace back to the feathers or the beads. But at the same time, that culture formed my thoughts, and not just my specific culture but many, many generations back gave me the right to be who I am, and I have to be responsible and acknowledge that I don't own that. And so I like having groups of people join in to my statement. If an artist doesn't portray himself as being a part of you, as part of life today—then he or she is failing. That's the mirror I want to give people. I've been fighting those concepts of individualism, uniqueness, and universalism, those concepts that are totally contrary to tribalism. Individualism immediately denies a future or a past awareness. You claim it, you own it, but you're not a part of it.

Joanna Osburn-Bigfeather

Joanna Osburn-Bigfeather, Western Band Cherokee and Mescalero Apache, was born in England. She received her BFA in Art and American Studies from the University of California at Santa Cruz, and her MFA from the State University of New York in Albany, where she taught Art and Humanities. She is currently the Director of the Gallery and Museum at the American Indian Community House in New York City.

When I consider creating an object, I think about what materials represent and about their meaning. If it is bronze, I refer to the Bronze Age, or if it's aluminum, it refers to the 20th century. The meaning goes beyond what's on the surface and examines the origins. This piece "Cultural Signs" is also looking at the history of Native people, and if we follow that history there is small pox, there is Christianity, there are issues of how the environment has been treated for the last 500 years with the coming of the Europeans. It also looks at alcohol issues and at Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

When I decided to go back to school, I looked at R.C. Gorman and what he did and I looked at Helen Hardin, and I looked at some other people. At that same time, I was the "starving artist" and there was a point where I just had no money to pay the rent. I didn't have any money to put food on the table—I ate a lot of rice and beans—and I went to bed this really cold night in February, and then this image, this visual image like a film across the room, started showing me working in clay. I hadn't worked in clay then and
the voice was saying, “Trust me.” That showed me to do my art first and then the money would follow.

In the Liberty Series I tried to rewrite our history through images on clay and other media. I think that’s the way I communicate. I’m not a great writer, but I feel that I know how to work with my hands. People aren’t familiar enough with the history of the United States. They either know it in bits and pieces or they just keep their eyes closed. Native people are always working very innovatively; we use whatever comes into our hands and take ownership of it and work it in new ways. I think of the people of the Southwest building their cliff dwellings with irrigation systems—that was beyond most people’s imaginations.

Our art is a reflection of our culture, so I think that humor is important too…and I try to articulate that in some of the work. I think if you start putting a lot of objects together and juxtaposing them with other kinds of imagery, you’ll get interesting results, something that makes them seem ridiculous.

Some of my use of materials has a symbolic dimension, especially the clay slabs that have the barbed wire around them. I think that barbed wire and the chicken wire that I’ve used are important because they represent being in prison. I think the wire is very effective. I thought the use of wire was self-explanatory, but sometimes people get it and sometimes they don’t. When a Navajo man came up and saw “The Turtle Series” pieces he had tears in his eyes. They evoked so much emotion in him. I did another series with ledger drawings. I re-presented the ledger drawings on clay and wrapped them with wire. You hold the clay and you hear it clink and then you have abrasive wire in between each page. There was a veiling in between and you needed to hold that. I remember my husband saying “you really want people to handle this?” and I said, “yes, I really do.”

I make all the objects that I use in my installations and I started seeing how things worked together. My first installation was two-sided and was titled Boarding School Experiences. It depicted where a child had lived and then where they were going to. It showed some of the things that they had at their house and then things that they had to deal with at school, like having to cut their braids off and wear different clothes, worship this strange Christ-figure…so I was juxtaposing different kinds of imagery, with a sense of loss on one side and the other side showing that the house the child came from wasn’t a terrible place.

This piece, called White Man’s School, is a very strong piece. These are turn-of-the-century baptismal gowns, stretched out and splayed. It was very hard cutting these beautiful, elegant gowns and just ripping them apart and then pulling them like rawhide would be around these birch bark pieces and then hanging them over these three pieces, over a chalkboard where our language, the Cherokee language, is being erased out and the English
language is replacing it. There is a school desk in front of it.

Working with clay has been a vital part of my life. You get in tune with it and something else emerges that you lose yourself in and become part of.

I wasn’t thinking that my work was taking on more explicit political concerns, but I needed to understand how our country was put together in order to work from that knowledge. My work gradually became more politically charged. I just started creating work and wanting people to look at the things that I was noticing. Indian people have undergone massive colonization and things that other people haven’t had to experience. I want people to look at their own identity. I want them to create work from their own background. So my work has progressed from decorative work that had a very spiritual context to focusing on issues of identity and history.

I realized that we can write our own books. We can start bringing our history into the forefront. It may not happen in my generation but as it was pointed out to me, we do work for future generations, seven generations, so even if things don’t happen today whatever we do now will affect later generations.

Melanie Printup Hope

Melanie Printup Hope grew up on the Tuscarora Indian Reservation where her father is an enrolled member of the tribe. She received an AAS and BFA in graphic design from Rochester Institute of Technology and an MFA from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in electronic arts. She has spent the past twelve years working as a graphic designer and is currently proprietor of Printup Graphic Design. Melanie has also taught graphic design at Sage Junior College of Albany and video at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. She is currently using the tools of technology to give her Native community a voice.

As I’m putting together a video piece, I’m always trying to learn something about the culture, something that’s very traditional while using the contemporary tools available to me. I find video to be a very powerful tool. With video, I can capture a message and send that message to a broad audience.

I want people to see what it really means to be a Native person and to understand the philosophy of respect for nature and all living things. In our society, my culture has been so misrepresented throughout history that it’s only now that Native people are gaining control of their voices. There’s more Native artists being shown in galleries. There are more Native filmmakers and videographers being shown at film and video festivals.
The Hollywood Western films of the '60s depicted Native Americans as violent savages. These negative images have been accepted and perpetuated. I feel that these stereotypes need to be reexamined and changed.

I begin my work with sound—a voice to send a message. The visuals are built around the sound to reinforce that message. As I was putting together They've Seen the Land the Way It Was, I knew I wanted to have the sound of water to reflect the flooding of the Cree Nation. I also incorporated flute music by Dan Hill because his work creates a special mood which allows the viewer the space to interpret the piece as they wish. For another video, My Spirit Speaks, I learned to read music, to play music, to input sounds, and to create an entire composition on the computer. A lot of what I did was experimenting: sampling, layering, and playing with sounds.

I wanted to work with words that are important to the Iroquois so I used quotes from The Great Law of Peace. The poetry I wrote reflected my feelings about my traditional roles in a contemporary society and my attempt to find a balance. I chose the drum to reflect the traditional sound of our songs and dances. I selected the sound of the wind, a natural sound, to create an ambience within the space of the installation. I also included the hymn, He Lives, a Christian hymn from my childhood. I wanted to make the hymn sound like the familiar old piano I heard every week at Sunday service.

My aunts would take my sisters, brother and me to church. My aunt played the piano and the hymn, He Lives, was the song I remember singing. I decided that I was going to use this hymn to symbolize my own religious upbringing.

I had to first locate the sheet music for the hymn because it had been so long since I had heard He Lives. My father actually found a hymn book that was my grandfather's. It has his name scribbled on the torn yellow page and the score was inside. When I found the hymn, it was humorous because that was the one page in the entire book that was crumpled, pulled out and torn.

When I finished the piece on the computer and played it back in real-time, it was unbelievable how the memories came flowing back. I think my sisters recalled the same memory when they heard it again after so many years.

I'd like my work to offer a voice for those in need. I think that I finally understand how important a culture is to its people and that its people understand other cultures and respect them. It's important that we start to see the positive things that different cultures have to contribute to society at large. I think, as a society, we have not recognized the contribution of
the Native cultures. We’ve often focused on the negative. I want people to understand what Native cultures are all about, and I can help to do this by giving my people a voice. At this time in history, Americans have sophisticated technology to communicate diverse ideas. We are all dealing with the same issues and our voice could be stronger if we stand together.

My creative process begins with an idea, and it slowly changes from the time I have the idea until the time I finish. The creative process is actually my research process, learning about the culture and trying to understand where I fit into it. The ideas come spontaneously. They’re not planned. Well, it’s kind of planned in the beginning but it does change throughout. While working on My Spirit Speaks, I documented myself during this creative process and used the footage for the visuals. That video portrays my creative process.

In My Spirit Speaks I installed a video monitor inside a clay pot. The actual pot I did for this was part of the total creative process. In my research and reading, I found an old book that described how the pottery was designed with the rounded bottoms and the square tops. These characteristics are representative of Iroquois pottery. I had the idea of putting a pot in the center of the complete work because, in the longhouses, there would be corn soup cooking while the storytellers told their stories. For me, My Spirit Speaks is a storytelling piece.

I took that idea and put the story inside of the pot. By putting it there, I also wanted to deconstruct the way that we view the TV monitor. It’s in our living room and we’re always viewing it as this rectangular box. It’s feeding us information, and it’s usually information that the media or the government controls. Somebody is controlling what we’re seeing at all times. I wanted to challenge the way information and imagery are presented to us in our society, to question that idea.

By putting the monitor in the pot, by viewing it from different angles, and by using a circular format on the video, I was able to allow the viewer to see the monitor in a totally new way. The dissolve that I use throughout are a nice smooth way of going from one idea to another, making a slow transition. Most of my pieces have that dissolve throughout. I also found that in working with so much technology, I had to develop and preserve my own style.

I really don’t know which direction I want to go. I’d like to do some sort of multimedia program where I can teach children something about the Native culture, and I’ve had this idea of doing something related to language. There are not a lot of people living on the Reservation where I grew up who speak the Native language. There’s maybe a handful of people. Once that’s gone, the culture is gone, so I’m thinking that that might be my next direction.
I’m also talking with Joe Bruchac, an Abenaki storyteller, poet and author. We may collaborate on an animation of the Iroquois creation story which Joe will tell and I will visualize.

Some of my work might be called personal exploration or reflection, while other pieces are concerned with political issues. One of my professors is an activist and she has been very influential in guiding me in this direction. When I began They’ve Seen the Land the Way it Was, I knew very little about James Bay Hydro-Quebec dam project. There are certain things that we just don’t hear about and this was one of them. This project has been going on since the ’70s. I heard about it first when I videotaped Chief Mathew Coon Come of the Cree Nation give a speech. I remember feeling numb after hearing him and thinking to myself, “I have to do something.” I can’t sit here and watch James Bay happen.

I transcribed Mathew’s speech and read it over and over. Then, these ideas started coming to me, and I started doing some research to find out about what was happening there. There weren’t a lot of resources available. The purpose of this piece is to inform other people about the hydro dam project.

The video begins with a miniature tepee on the ground with a small stream running along side of it. I use my hands to create a dam in the dirt and my tasselled shoe to crush the tepee. I tried to make a statement about corporate America and how it is crushing the culture. It’s all about money. It’s always about money. It was just so sad to see a culture that has survived for many thousands of years lose their traditional way of life for the sake of economic development in Quebec. It was a difficult piece to do. I remember just sitting in the editing studio and crying at times, realizing that this injustice is still going on today. How do we stop it?

I feel like all Native people have a stronger voice through me, and hopefully our message will raise awareness of Native culture. It’s only a few people that make the grand decisions that direct the course of our future.
Lisa Mayo

With sisters Gloria Miguel and Muriel Miguel, Lisa Mayo performs worldwide in Spiderwoman Theatre. She has studied at the New York School of Music, and is a performing member of Masterworks Laboratory Theatre in New York. She is also a member of the Second Circle National Advisory Board of Atlatl, a Native arts service organization based in Phoenix, and sits on the Board of Directors of the American Indian Community House in New York City.

We are comedienne, and that's something we didn't work hard for. It's with us, with me, that's our way. It just makes me laugh because I remember when I was in acting school, I was given a scene from one of the Chekhov plays. It wasn't a funny scene but people were laughing and I realized that the choices that I made were very natural choices but they were not right for that particular scene. The teacher—Uta Hagen—laughed; she was saying, "You are a natural comedienne, but you have to learn to make other choices. I wish I could get laughs like that." It was just a natural thing. Both of my sisters are like that too.

The issues that we decide upon are generally what you would call political, things that are happening with Native people in this country. It's a heavy subject—annihilation and survival. We were not supposed to be here in 1994 if the people who came here had their way. So you think about that and you see how it is political.

I think we picked up our timing from our family. My mother was like this too and another thing is the fact that it's a way of survival. We were brought up in Brooklyn in an Italian neighborhood, first generation Italian. We were the only Native American children and I was always the only one in my class all through grade school. We were different, other kids made fun of us. I had long braids and I'd get my braids pulled. When we walked on the street, people would "whoo-whoo-whoo" us and call us Injun Joe and all kinds of stuff like that. So finding the funny part of that is a way of survival. I really believe that I have that and my sisters have it and other members of our family because it was a survival mechanism . . . to get along where we were.

In almost all our work, there is a theme of survival. That layer is there. It's not only survival for us and but also for the future. We're concerned for future generations and as we get older now we're passing on our information to younger Native people and young people in our own families who have decided to prepare for theatre as a profession. So we're passing it on. That's part of survival, too.

We're deep in the throes of writing right now. We've named the project
Nis Bundor/Daughters from the Stars. My sister Gloria and I have started it and we have gigs for it in 1995 as a work in progress. The first five performances were done through the Playwrights Center in Minneapolis. We'll open the show officially at the Dance Theatre Workshop in New York City in November.

We write separately and then we use our method of weaving it together. We work with a dramaturg so we'll see how everything fits. I write and my sister Gloria writes and then it will be put together. I write volumes of things and we'll see where we're going to take it. And we collaborate with other people too. We'll be collaborating with a painter, a fine artist-sculptor, Ernie Whiteeman.

We begin with a particular thing that we have in mind; it's not at all random. The Kuna Project concerns two different groups, the Kuna and the Rappahannock. The Kuna people are Central American. We travelled down there this past February to spend a month with my father's people and our family on San Blas Island. When we were down there, we brought them videos and tapes and talked about the Indians here. So we're bringing the information from the Kunas to North America and taking information about North American tribes there. That's part of it. The other part is, well, it's to make yourself whole. We're thinking we're Kuna, we're Rappahannock, and we're brought up in New York City and we're actors in New York City and we travel all over the world. This tends to do something to one's psyche, so this is kind of a healing piece. That's how it's turning out, but I'm using all kinds of things, like magic, and I'm also learning different European stories because that's part of the healing. I meet many, many non-Indians who are interested in Native people because they, the non-Indians, feel that they don't have anything, that we have a way of helping ourselves through our religions and the ways we worship. They feel that they don't have anything. They're not happy with who they are. So I want to let them know that they have a lot, so I went to some of the really old stories that I've heard and that have been told to me by non-Indians, European people, and so I think I'll be talking about some of that in this new piece.

It's who I am. I'm a mixture of all these things, it's me, it's my sisters. That's how all of our pieces are. But all those things are part of who we are, the Kunas, the Rappahannocks, the people up in New York, the information we're getting about our names from the Kunas, there's a lot going on. I love writing and going into myself. I love this part of it; we all do. It's exciting. You know, you get up in the morning and you write.

I think healing is the main thrust of what we do. Not healing like a spiritual people who are trained and who inherited that, no, but we have a feeling for what makes us feel bad about ourselves, I mean, all of us Native people. Why don't we feel part of what is going on around us? If we do go
into the mainstream society, how do we feel about that? Do we feel as though we're “sell-outs” and so on? I think that the main thrust is to make ourselves feel good, to realize that we are wonderful, wonderful people. Our ancestors gave this all to us and that's what we do.

I've only been working for the last 40 years. What can you learn in 40 years? You don't have enough time to learn it all.

George Morrison

George Morrison, Ojibwe, was born in Chippewa City, Minnesota, and graduated from the Minneapolis School of Art and completed further study at the Art Students League in New York City and at the University of Aix-Marseilles. Morrison has taught at the Rhode Island School of Design and was Professor of Studio Arts at the University of Minnesota for over ten years. He maintains a studio and residence in Grand Portage, Minnesota.

My Horizon paintings are not literal translations of sky or water. They are interpretations of sky and land and water and organic elements, but they're translated into contemporary terms. The landscapes, by definition, are the horizon lines. We only know it's the sky because it is above the water line. And the organic structural elements are being spelled out in different ways in thick, bright colors.

In order to get a nice variation in my Horizon Series paintings, I deliberately made an attempt to use all the techniques I picked up through the years in my own painting career, all the tricks of the trade. I used thin paint in some, and others are almost a one-shot thing where I do it all as one layer of paint but thick. That's another style. And then another style would be where I layer the colors, layer over layer. In some of the paintings there are many layers, maybe two or three or four, up to twenty or so. I wanted to let the other colors show through on even that third and fourth layer, to gain a shimmering or textural effect. I find that to my liking. The texture was a characteristic all during my career, so I really made the attempt to get a variation on the textural effects that were coming through. A few of them were painted somewhat flat, but even the so-called flat ones were done in layers. Maybe there is very little color coming through from underneath, but it's still there. Also, some of the shapes were butted up against each other to gain that flatness. Some other ones had more subtle edges where the colors are more pastel in tone and lower in value so that they blend into one another.

There is spirituality of the landscape at my studio in Grand Portage: the water and the air and the atmosphere. All those elements are coming
into me from what I see. I'm not looking at it like I'm painting it. But all of these things are in my mind even though I'm not looking at the lake when I'm painting. I'm looking at the lake at other times, just for the sake of looking at it because it's there. I'm always very conscious and aware of this large body of water, which is like a presence in itself. It is alive and it changes by the hour. Perhaps that very thing has been transplanted into my head, and then I'm transforming that onto the canvas. I think that's the kind of transformation that an artist does—taking what's in his head and putting it on canvas to create his interpretation of what is there.

I also create totems—my version of totems. The inspiration comes from many sources. The most common one is the big carved cedar poles from the Northwest Coast area. Mine are not images derived from human heads and animals, but were more of an abstract version of a carved totem. But I did not carve mine; they were abstract or constructed as shapes and put on a plywood core. They were like mosaics, created to give the illusion of being carved or incised. That was my version of a totem pole and I didn't paint them in bright colors at first. I stained the redwood a very dark, rich earth red to give it an Indian-ness. That's why I gave it that earth red, to give it just the mere suggestion of being a pole that would relate indirectly to the big poles of the Northwest Coast.

Subsequently, I became more interested in the idea of the "totem" itself, which is a very universal form used by Indigenous peoples from all over the world. I gradually began to be interested in various kinds of totem images. I made smaller versions of my abstract tall totem. I did some out of brass and then I did some more vertical columns within the larger column that were more "constructivist" in their imagery. I like the idea of the transformation of imagery which becomes, in the end, a totem piece.

I was also inspired by the Australian Aboriginal chiringa form which led me to create my own chiringas. I didn't incorporate their exact form, but I made my own version. I also introduced my signature mark, which is a horizon line at the top, just to give it my "mark," instead of inscribing it with a history as some of the Native people did in Australia. I did the same with the linga forms, which were inspired by the East Indian linga, which is a sexual term. There was a cult in India that worshipped male and female sexual organs. So the linga was very obviously a phallic shape. I like the beauty of the shape. I introduced the horizon line at the top. I use exotic woods—padouk from Brazil or bubinga from Africa, and other foreign and domestic woods, to give a beauty that is very appealing. From my own standpoint, it becomes an art form or art object, or even a sculptural form. The tactile quality of the wood also gives it a certain kind of beauty.

I think that all art from every source has a certain element of magic. I like to feel that every work has that kind of special quality by virtue of the
artist doing it in some reverential manner. When I say that, more and more of the word “magic” is coming into my own head. It's not like I'm saying that I want to do a magic piece today, but by and large, in the back of my mind, I like to think that way. Even in the Horizon Series there was a certain spirituality coming from the subject matter that somehow enters into the work from my head and through my hands, and then the images come and they give forth their own kind of power through the essence of what the subject is.

Ramona Sakiestewa

Ramona Sakiestewa was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Her work has been exhibited in numerous individual and group shows throughout the United States. She has been a design consultant to the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indians (Washington, D.C.). In 1994 she established the Sakiestewa Textiles Ltd., Co. to design and issue The Ancient Blanket series.

I have had an ongoing desire to let the world know more about the prehistoric textile tradition of the Southwest. People are not fully aware of its importance and impact in this area, and certainly the extensive trading between Mexico and the American Southwest. The Ancient Blanket Series hinges around sites in the Southwest, like Canyon de Chelly, Gila, and Wupatki by utilizing and abstracting actual textile or other designs from pottery or rock art. As part of the project we've been endorsed by The Southwest Parks and Monuments Association. Each of these sites has a unique history. There are cultural qualities that I wanted to share with the public. So it's an educational textile, if you will, but it combines the beauty and the technology of the early people in the Southwest.

My creative process for designing these blankets requires my assembling a lot of materials, reading different books, looking at other objects for visual clues. It becomes a very emotional process because I have to feel what the colours are and what the imagery is at each site. It is also important for me to have an impression of the place itself. The series will be developed over three years, through 1997.

Hopefully, when collectors see the series of six blankets they too will feel the color, the emotion, of each place. For example, the Gila blanket is largely gray, white, black, and red, which is to punctuate the graphicness of the Mimbres pottery for which this area is so well-known.

The three etching series in 1994 is really a variation on a theme. Each Divination Series piece talks about time and space, which is an ongoing
obsession I have about places, people and events. The *Divination Series* is really a much more metaphysical and abstract an idea than *The Ancient Blanket Series*, but it's really not any different because each one of the etchings is based on an actual event at a given moment in time. They also have an interconnected relationship to each other. For example, the “Oraibi Divination” reveals what the complete horizon looked like in 506 B.C. The “Corn Divination” documents the blue moon phenomenon which I happened to see here in Santa Fe. The “Bean Divination” was a full moon in Punta Bete, which is on the coast of the Yucatan. So they're all meant to make a person think about the time and location of a particular event.

For me the elements of divination become the tangible tracks of past, present, and future events, like leaving microscopic tracks in a photographic emulsion. I think divination is similar to the tracks that you see from quarks; you don't actually see the quark itself, you just see its tracks. In the divining process you don't necessarily see the event at the moment. It's almost like it's perceived in the future or in the past but then the physical elements become the visual footprints of that past or future event.

I really don't remember how I began weaving. I didn't have any formal training. I actually taught myself to weave, but my underlying interest came from my childhood when I collected lots of scraps of fabric from sample books or from wherever and I would sort of hoard them like a mouse. Then I'd get them out and arrange them for my dolls or sew doll clothes. I just loved the color and the texture of the fabric. I'm still attracted to how fabric feels first, so tapestry is an extension of that tactile sense, and it's different from most painting or other visual arts because you can actually get a much richer and different depth of color in tapestry work than you can in painting. It has a fluidity about it; it's much more dimensional than painting. I also like the aspect that *The Ancient Blanket Series* is still a functional piece of fabric, a piece of fabric that has a very long-standing history and tradition. Weavers in pre-Columbian cultures and even in European cultures have been highly valued. People recognize the labor-intensive aspect of weaving. Basically, though, I just love seeing how an idea comes out in fabric.

An idea has to be completely worked through because I'm much more process- rather than product-oriented. Even an unsuccessful weaving gives me something finished that I can change or do something else with in the future. I think if you change your idea in midstream, you don't actually get to resolve a single idea.

I don't feel that Indian art is any more or less spiritual than the art of other cultures. When one views art there is some deeper personal expression. One feels the other person's spirit or presence in their work, if it's good work.

Globally, in all Indigenous cultures, artists were really a combination of
shaman and artisan and respected for being able to create anything from great mosaics and buildings, as well as textiles. They were, in some ways, much more functional and, in some ways, specifically ceremonial. There's now a separation between art and artifact which is regrettable. For example, while there's a lot of very beautiful pottery it would be nice to see that beautiful pottery being used on a day-to-day basis, and that its function was as apparent as its beauty. You see it in some things like beadwork in costumes, but it's slowly been segregated out in all media. I just love beautiful design—if I buy a teapot, I'll buy a nicely-designed teapot. It's less important whose culture it comes from. Aesthetically, everything that you use on a daily basis should be something that you're fond of, that's beautiful, that evokes something, that elicits some kind of emotion.

Being an Indian artist is a wonderful springboard to have begun from, but my personal goal is not necessarily to have any label attached to my work, be it woman or Indian or Southwestern or American. In the world I just want people to see my work and have some feeling about it. I know these are lofty goals but they are mine. I also feel equally strongly that people who choose to be seen as part of a group, or identified with a group, should be equally supported in that endeavor.

All cultures look to artists for some other vocabulary and language to express everything from conceptual ideas to tangible feelings. I think artists can do that in a variety of ways. You can do it in architecture, in a well-designed car, in a painting or a sculpture, or in beautiful jewelry—that special vocabulary should be everywhere.

My weaving is called American Southwest tapestry, because it's developed from Pueblo weaving techniques. Probably more people know Navajo weaving, but it's technically similar. In terms of design, it's just constant ideas. I work through a series and then I very often go back to stripes, which are a very classic. The stripes are real wide, and there are cultures who do them extremely well, like in Peru, Japan and Italy. They have ongoing stripe traditions. The Southwest has had an ancient one, and that's another component, I guess, of my brain that finds it very soothing. Yet there's always some new challenge in developing a series of stripes and I know for some people this is pretty esoteric and fairly boring, because, you know, a stripe is a stripe, but for me there's just a kind of patterning that happens when you design striped work. Very often I will work through a stripe series, then work through another new series and it's just trying out new ideas all the time. As one piece is being finished up, I'm really on to the next idea. I sort of have to be on to the next idea or I can't finish the piece I'm working on. For example, The Corn Series is really one of a kind while The Mediterranean Series is basically a variation on the same idea, but is essentially one of a kind. If I've gone to Japan or some place and I
have some compunction to do two of something then that's it; it's over and I don't ever do it again.

Duane Slick

Duane Slick was born in Waterloo, Iowa, and received his BFA in Painting and Art Education from the University of Northern Iowa and his MFA in Painting from the University of California at Davis. He has been a Fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and has exhibited his work nationally, most recently as part of the Heard Museum's 6th Native American Fine Arts Invitational in 1994. He currently teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Rhode Island.

Do I paint my own history? Yes, I do, but it depends on the project. Part of it is Duane the person at the present moment. The book *Looking for Orozco* is something like that. And the newer project, the transparent book *Coyote's Mind* at the Heard Museum is more of a sketch about a character. I just finished a project in the spring for a show called *Memories of Childhood* at the Steinbaum-Krauss Gallery in New York, which was specifically autobiographical about childhood. For that show I used the figure of Coyote again because they told me it was for children. So, I wrote a story and I used Coyote. Coyote finds me in Provincetown and we go through Provincetown to his house in the dunes and we're talking. One of the things that's happening is that I'm an artist living in Provincetown, having a hard time figuring out what I'm going to paint next. That's the start of the story. And that's why Coyote's in town. He comes to town and he tells me that he wants to help me remember why I paint. So we're looking into a fire and he starts talking about my grandfather. It slips into what the assignment was, "Memories of Childhood," and Coyote starts talking about the Native American church. He starts talking about the fireplace as a kind of altar place...something you're looking at during Native American church ceremonies. It's a point of departure where you're just meditating on that, and he's talking about the importance of that and trying to get me to relate to that as a place to go in memory, as a source of strength. So I'm staring into the fire and all of a sudden I remember being in one of these ceremonies as a child and I remember one of our elders who is brought in in a wheelchair. It's 3:00 in the morning. They ask her to say some prayers in Winnebago. The fire goes down real low and there is incredible silence. That page and that image is supposed to be about that silence, where I can hear her speaking. Whatever she's saying, the world has stopped to listen for a few minutes. Then I say that I began to feel alone in the world, and I
look into the fire and the smoke starts rising out of the fire, out of the tepee, and it falls as the wet dew on the morning grass. Stories start coming out of the fire. The stories are what it's like to be a bird flying through the trees, the branches of the trees, maneuvering. Then, the next image is the water, how creeks connect to rivers and rivers always march slowly to the ocean, the interconnectedness, the human community . . . it's supposed to be about everything. The story was written first and the images followed.

The figure of Coyote is able to move you through the world. That's why I respond to him. I see him as a guide. Sometimes in the childhood memories story, he was a guide. Because he was for children, he was a gentle guide. In others he is able to flash some ugly images. To me it's important that he is able to do that. He's a figure of survival and adaptation.

The whole idea of that body of work was to focus on this kind of story momentum. These are like diary pages. There is a sense of a dialogue taking place. What you're seeing here is almost a snapshot out of that entire dialogue. The important thing was for the dialogue to be for myself and then the audience catches up.

Painting is a record of the self, much like handwriting; you can spot the artist by the types of marks he makes. Everyone has a certain style, or a way of making marks, or making a line. And with the latest work I've been doing, I've been sanding things, a certain erasing of the hand. After the Coyote project I wanted to play with the authority of machined processes.

My work has shifted over the last couple of years from abstraction to more political imagery, but I think it's just become more complicated and I quit worrying about trying to make a distinction between the two. I like to make paintings and I like to do the story telling so I maintain the two methods. My book Looking for Orozco is mostly in red, black, and white. In the book I have this: I was walking down the street in Provincetown, and I heard a man tell his friend that he is HIV positive. He said that he is adjusting his life to living on grace. I think of my brother who was attacked by a gang of White boys. When he was down they poured kerosene on his legs and attempted to light him on fire. But he wouldn't burn. Then I remember my great-grandfather Sam Slick. He was the only surviving child out of seven after smallpox hit the Sauk and Fox nation in Oklahoma. I tell Coyote that part of being Indian is learning young what it means to live on grace.

Everyone talks about tradition, about what is traditional. For me, tradition equals accountability. You are accountable to something. Tradition should be able to adjust to things, should be able to speak to the quiet moments and the loud moments and the angry moments and all the other kinds of moments. Coyote is supposed to be traditional and what I want to do is put him to the test. Can he respond to this AIDS epidemic? How would he respond?
Richard Ray Whitman

Richard Ray Whitman was born in Claremore, Oklahoma. His photographs have been exhibited throughout the United States and Europe. In 1987 he received the Martin Luther King, Jr. Humanitarian Award for his contributions to human rights and social justice. Whitman has studied at the Institute of American Indian Arts, the California Institute of the Arts, and the Oklahoma School of Photography.

In this last series of images, I'm asking questions later, or letting the image ask the questions, while before, the process for me was to ask the question first, but now the work asks its own set of questions. Some of the text with the imagery is pretty obvious, but I was trying to turn things around. I was looking back at the viewer, challenging the idea of being in front of the camera or being the subject matter.

In one of the newer pieces from '93 and '94, Look at Them Looking at Us Looking Back at Them, I use very familiar images from my student days at the Institute in Santa Fe, from 1969 to '70. I presented the images as negatives just to make the people more anonymous, anonymous Indians in a way.

Another piece, The Absence of Our Presence, took off from a billboard and is more specific to Oklahoma. We've been experiencing for the past few years a tourist campaign called “Oklahoma Native America,” and it's a big deal all over the state, but in a way it's a play on words, and a reminder to us how many times they've used the language against us. Of course, sometimes we feel that maybe it's even a moot point to call ourselves “American Indians” or “Native Americans” or “Indigenous people” because in our own languages we are specific in reference to ourselves. But, for me, it's just the obvious contradiction or moral paradox that in this state, when the suppression of Indian people is a daily occurrence, and our status, and our recognition, and our sovereignty, and our land base is very much threatened at every turn, at the same moment the state does this campaign of “Oklahoma Native America.” We're invisible, dangerously invisible, until they want us to sing and dance and be tourist attractions. So this campaign is used against us. Our ancestors paid the price for us to be here today, you know. Fifty years ago in this state it wasn't good to refer to yourself as an Indian, or to claim any of your Indian blood, and now it's just a very trendy kind of thing. It's too much of a slap in the face for me to let it slide by without commenting on it.

I've never really marketed myself as an Indian artist, and I've never downplayed my Indianness, but I have always considered myself a vital, creative person. Everyone has his own options and I hope now that non-
Indians and young Indians would choose their own options. I experience my individuality much differently in the context of how I was raised compared to how an average non-Indian would consider his individuality. I know that in terms of how I express myself or what my experiences are, I'm a Yuchi person. It was never an issue for me because if I'm a success or a failure I still come from the perspective of being a Yuchi person. It's never an issue for me or a conflict to say that I'm a Yuchi person or an artist first. My art and my Yuchi individuality have been about educating myself through my art process and my art-making, and it's helped me believe in my ideals, to trust in myself, and the marketing is secondary to me. I know that too often we gauge our success by marketing and I am not a believer in that. But I also know the economic reality of trying to live from your work.

I guess the question I am asked many times is, "do I consider myself a traditional Indian or a contemporary Indian?" Well, I consider myself both, but not at the same moment. It's not an either/or situation. Our traditions, and our experiences in contemporary life, are here at the same moment. Our ancestors left us a way; they brought it right up here, right up to this moment, to this very moment that I speak to you. So, the moment we are born we are political, especially America's Indigenous peoples. Because we have been colonized, the nature of our experience is political. There's no denying that. It doesn't lessen our experience, though. Many of our Indian people have been beaten down, conditioned, brain-washed, if you will. Somehow we have to live the lie to survive. But we have survived. I think that there's no denying that we are a political entity by our very status in America, our dual status. I'm a tribal citizen and also I have American citizenship, so there's a lot of things to consider whether the work is obviously political or not. Sometimes you make very simple paintings, very simple statements saying, "This is who we are. We are still here." I think the fact that we express ourselves by saying, "We're still these people," is a political statement. In our particular instance, with our tribe, it's a very fragile thing. Regarding our culture, our traditions, our ceremonies, it's not up to our generation to weaken them and feel we can manipulate them. As I said earlier, our ancestors, our immediate ancestors, paid the price for us to remain together and to keep these traditions and ceremonies together. They paid the price in blood. I'm always reminded of that and I never take it lightly. I've never even accepted the notion of the category of being a political artist. I'm an artist with my people and the challenge for me is how to be within my community, with my people, and still interact with the larger art world or the larger non-Indian context.

From early on I've been interested in the power of expression in whatever form that takes. Maybe I'm still looking for my medium or my discipline, but I haven't really settled on anything particular, although I've
been experimenting in video, incorporating image, text, and voice. I still consider myself a painter. There is nothing that will ever replace the feeling of being in front of a blank canvas or a blank sheet of paper or a blank space. It's just you and that space, and that is very organic. I don't think that feeling of unity, of communication with the medium, will ever be replaced. Sometimes when I take the photographic process to a certain point I pull back and then I pursue the writing some. Then, I'll run into a dead end and do video. But I'm always ready to come back to painting. I don't consider myself a mature artist, and I don't possess a single aesthetic philosophy. I'm constantly open to new ideas and ideologies. There's something new at every turn.

I'm not a visitor to my experience and I don't see my people as merely subject matter. I don't arrive someplace and make the images and leave. In all the years with the Street Chiefs many times I had to stand beside the work and explain it to non-Indian curators and even the viewers. In some instances the work is misread. I don't want the work to be considered in the context of the recent phenomenon and concern about homeless in the '80s, homelessness in Philadelphia or New York or whatever major metro area you want to name, but to bring out the idea that America is based upon and built upon displacement, displacement of Indigenous people, the host people of this country. I focused on Oklahoma. Oklahoma became the dumping grounds for many of the tribes who stood in the way of progress. Indians were taken out of the East Coast, the Southeast, and west of the Mississippi. Of course, then it wasn't called Oklahoma; it was Indian Territory, and it became a kind of Siberia where dissident tribes or people who were resisting were sent. Oklahoma has it's own kind of unique experience. I wanted to consider the Street Chiefs in that context, not just the recent homeless issue of the '80s or '90s. The context was the removal of Indians, always pushing them off their land. I gained a lot from the people I photographed. I never went there with a telephoto lens, and I didn't leave when I finished shooting. It was a part of my experience.

In a mixed media piece called Relocation Assimilation I began to see the boxes. I was trying to understand the linear thinking of the non-Indian world as opposed to the circular thinking of the indigenous cultures. I began to see the box as representing more of our identity today, as dictated by non-Indians. I began to see the box as kind of a colonizer, an enforced identity. The box is a linear enclosure, entrapping us, keeping us contained. It was more symbolic, or metaphorical, I guess you could say. I see us not as artists but as cultural workers. We have to struggle to push through the colonizer's identity model. We can't answer up to that because it is totally out of context. It is out of our reference. It's about what they want us to be, what they think we are, what they wished we would be. So, the use of the
box is a question directed toward non-Indians. I wanted to somehow inspire our people, our young Indian artists, our generations, to sound the challenge, too.

I spent some time at Wounded Knee in 1973. It influenced my art and my role as an artist, as a culture worker, and as a tribal citizen. I had left Santa Fe and went to Cal Arts and then went to Wounded Knee and I never returned to art school. I went on to see the artist's role, the struggles at that time, the ongoing struggle, and at that time it was confrontational, but I always felt that the artist—and when I look to Central and South America at the indigenous cultures there—the artist, the poet, the writer, was always in the forefront and part of the vision, the larger vision for the people, and, of course, they are the ones who are usually assassinated or who become the political prisoners. Going to Wounded Knee had a very strong impact on me, and still sheds light on what I do today. It empowered me with the strength and responsibility to carry on, and allowed me to recognize that the struggle has survived. It showed me that you must believe in your own experience.

Wolf Song

Wolf Song, a member of the Abenaki Nation, was born and raised in Vermont. He is a touring artist for the Vermont Council on the Arts. He currently lives in Vergennes, Vermont.

The stories that I tell are mostly Native American stories, and most of those are Abenaki stories from my own culture and traditions. I occasionally tell some of the stories my grandfather told about life growing up and the pranks people pulled on each other. And then I have two or three or four stories that are from my life, or from my married life, so stories obviously come from many places. As I continue to mature and go along as a teller, I'm sure there will be more stories that will find their way into my repertoire, if you will, but I don't think of the stories as being mine. Most of the stories have lived for thousands and thousands of years and I'm just a voice for those stories. These are stories that have outlived many tellers. They have been told many, many times through the centuries. So it would be arrogant for me as a human being to say this is "my" story. It's a story that has come to be told, I'm a voice for it and if you listen to these old stories, you will discover history because this is the way it was then.

Some stories are categorized as sacred stories, for example, creation stories, trickster stories, but even a trickster story has a certain level of "sacredness" to it because it's an old story and it teaches us something. All
the stories are there to teach us lessons, to remind us how to be good human beings. There are ghost stories and there are historical stories, but the reasons people choose to tell those stories, whatever category they fit them into, is because they tell us something we need to know. Using the word sacred is a little bit tricky, I guess, because if it's considered sacred, then it can be told only at certain times and in certain ways and you get into all kinds of control issues. Yet if you don't use the term, then it makes things too loose. Different Indian nations have different traditions and different people within any given nation work with traditions in their own way so all stories, I think, are special. And there are stories that are not, obviously, to be told in certain settings. Sometimes a creation story is not appropriate to be told in a particular setting. One of the ribald, raunchy Coyote stories is not appropriate in some settings in the dominant culture. I know that some Native tellers will often tell one of those Coyote stories of a ribald nature in a place where most Anglos wouldn't dare tell it. They do it because it's part of their tradition and there's good teaching in the story.

Community, culture, and history are all interconnected and yet they can also be seen separately. In stories you will discover culture and values. I actually believe that stories, no matter where they come from, whether they're Native American or Asian or African or Europe, if you can find the old versions that have not been modernized, in some cases Christianized or Anglicized, whatever other people did to change them to make them acceptable—if you can find stories from the old traditions from which they originally come, you will discover many of the elements of that culture. The story comes from the culture; the story is the culture; the culture is the story. So you'll find out what people valued in that culture—what they thought of, what they considered to be dishonor. Stories teach us about the people they come from.

Stories have an inherent sacredness because they teach us who we are. If we know who we are and where we have come from, then we have an idea of where we are going. And that's one of the challenges I see with the dominant culture is that there aren't old stories that give the integrity and continuity to contemporary people. So for many people today, their idea of history is that World War I or World War II is ancient history; for young people today, Vietnam is ancient history. Their story is Bill and Ted, Beavis and Butthead, Roseanne. Some of the TV stories—the media—they tell stories about life, but they're not true. When I tell an Abenaki story that's five- to nine-thousand years old, it keeps me in touch with my ancestors. It helps me to understand who we were and where my ancestors have come from, and it gives me a sense of identity and continuity. I'm a person who knew five of my great-grandparents who lived, several of them, into their late eighties, almost into their nineties. One of them lived to be 104. She
Larry Abbott was born around 1880; she lied about her age as she got older so it's not real clear, but officially she was born in 1880 and died in 1984. This was a woman who was born prior to the automobile, prior to the airplane. She was forty years old before she could vote. Her name was Zana Cole; she was my great-grandmother and I knew the woman. Having known my great-grandparents, I think of it as a gift and it gives me a sense of my own history, my own family history, which goes back into the 1800s. Zana's second husband, my step-great-grandfather Fred Fleming, was born right after the Civil War and I know some stories about him and his boyhood. So I have my own self through the great-grandparents, not just Zana and Fred, but the others that I knew. My own history goes back into the 1880s and before. I think that stories, whether they're family stories, national stories—and by national, I mean any nation, any group of people who have a common culture—they all give us a sense of where we have been, who we are, where we have come from and if you don't have that, how do you know where you're going to go?

Stories have a preservative function, preserving the culture from being lost. There's nothing wrong and there's everything right in Indigenous cultures having a long memory, to still feel good about old victories, about something that somebody did long ago still being told and remembered. Defeats are remembered, too. You know, people in America say, “Yeah, but we talk about George Washington and the Revolution and the Civil War and all,” but people don't talk about it that much and it's not a major focus. It's looked at as if those were different people in some way. Those Abenaki people who are artists—whether they're musicians or storytellers, writers, basket makers, jewelry makers—are keeping the old ways alive and yet we don't stay stuck in the past. So many people in the dominant culture, if you say you are Native American, want you to look a certain way, dress a certain way, and behave basically like what they see in the movies. The fact is that there's no artist who is frozen in time, so as a storyteller I see my purpose as keeping the old traditions alive, being a voice for the old stories, the stories of creation, the stories of good people and not-so-good people and the tricksters and also bringing that voice into the contemporary era because the lessons are timeless. We humans haven't really changed that much. All this modern stuff is a very thin veneer. Basically, underneath, we're still the same people. Some of us are good and some of us not so good. People have dreams and weaknesses, lust and honour—there's always the trickster, whether it's Azaban, which is the Abenaki raccoon, or Coyote out West, or the Spider—there's always the tricksters—there's lots of tricksters around these days. I just see the stories as preserving, continuing, breathing life into another generation because that's what it takes to be a people. You must have, once again, that
continuity, that connection with your past, an awareness of your present, and some idea of your future. I think that what is great about the old traditions is that they provide us with that.

Elizabeth Woody

Elizabeth Woody is a poet and visual artist. Her first book, Hand Into Stone, received an American Book Award in 1990. In addition to her three books of poetry, she has collaborated with artist Joe Feddersen in a number of projects, most recently for the Tula Foundation in Atlanta. She was born in Ganado, Arizona, and lives in Santa Fe and Portland, Oregon. She is a member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs in Oregon.

My first book Hand Into Stone came more out of feeling, more out of intuitive responses to situations that were happening around me and in particular stories that were being told to me by individuals. Seven Hands, Seven Hearts is a reprint of Hand Into Stone. The second section is comprised of new poems that I wrote within the last two or three years with maybe one resurrected poem from the early ’80s. Initially, the publisher wanted me to write short stories. I did write some but it seemed like a lot of the stories didn’t want to come out as stories so they came out as poems, so they are kind of narrative. I have three stories in the first section as well as two essays that I expanded. Basically, these provide background information for the general reader because she felt that most of the reading public were going to be outside of the Northwest and may not be familiar with issues such as the possible extinction of salmon, some species of which were added to the endangered list in 1993 and 1994. The poems became pieces of work that were informed by personal stories and by research on my part. They deal with one specific region in a lot of ways and they also dealt with the specific individual, which is myself, so it is a part of a process of continuation.

Labels and their connotations don’t originate from me and that’s the problem with labels. Often, when people think of Indian writers, they think of a certain type of writer, and in different areas of the country people have different reactions to the word “Indian” and the word “Indian” means several different things. It could be derogatory or it could mean for some people an image from various media—the movies and television—so I feel that when people meet me, those kinds of words are no longer appropriate for them because they begin to see me as a compassionate human being. People respond to the qualities that they find in me and that come from me. I think labels are oftentimes misconstrued, used for manipulative reasons, or used
for categorical dismissals of entire groups of people. If you’re dealing with
art you’re dealing with something that is greater than just one human being
or greater than just one civilization or one society. Labels can trivialize
what’s left over from a person’s creativity, what they’ve given out in their
work.

I really don’t know what the boundaries are for the differences between
White culture and Native culture. In America I think there are many cultures
combined, but if you are talking about White culture as something derived
from Europe, there probably is a difference. I don’t think that White culture
and Native culture are separate in terms of the making of art. Bell hooks
was here in Santa Fe and gave a lecture in which she said that “art is the
location of hope.” I don’t think, if you take that as a definition, that hope is
exclusively for one people or another. I do know that people have differing
opinions about what makes art. Some people like velvet paintings of Elvis
and think that is art. Other people think that art is a lifestyle, not separate
from the human being who is actually the creator or the force of energy
that’s making these objects possible. I think that, for me, the connections
between Indian art and spirituality are very strong. That is because the
world view of spirit is different than my understanding of some of the other
religions—what I think of as the younger organized religions, like Christi-
anity and the Muslim religion and Buddhism, which are not as old as a lot
of Indian religions, which were practised 14,000 years ago in some form.
Religious Indian people do not feel that other religions are of lesser
importance. Then as each generation came about, the religions were
passed on and, of course, the world changed. So the spirituality in Indian
art is probably much stronger for me because that’s what I respond to. The
center of that spiritual world is passed down through divine methods or
messages. They talk about celestial beings, they talk about animal beings,
they talk about rock beings, and so Indian cultures do not include just
humans, but is immersed in all things.

Art has to do with ethereal issues. We can’t live without our physical
bodies on the planet but we can continue to exist as spiritual beings or as
an essence of the earth. For me, the word “political” is inaccurate. What
people see in my work as political has to do with being active. I see politics
as reactive, people just reacting and responding to patterns of power in the
society that we’ve made. For me to heal from the processes that I think are
prevalent in society, which can best be described as addiction, my own
sense of direction and my own thoughts about correct action are derived
from a spiritual sense, not from a political sense. Most of what I see that is
destructive happening to people, the animals and the earth isn’t based on
politics, it’s based on addiction. To heal from the effects of that kind of hard
exchange—giving up life to make money—I had to look at a spiritual way
of addressing that. Western thought fragmented itself when spirituality was divided from science, whereas traditional Indian beliefs, expressed through differing peoples that I've encountered, don't talk about science and spirituality as being separate. In fact, an aunt of mine—an extended family kind of aunt—said that in the Wasco language the word for science also meant collaboration. So we're not individuals in that sense—making art all alone—but we are in collaboration with community, with the natural processes of the earth and we also are limited by the physical reality of what we can actually create. To think of the repercussions of what sound means and to think of the repercussions of what words mean and what light means when it hits something—that's spiritual to me. I don't know if I actually step into the political mode when I write poetry. It's just that those are the terms of the language I have to use for other people to understand what I have witnessed, because that's the common language—the political language—or if it's talking about environmental things, you have to talk about it in the form of language people can understand. The English language, I think, is very limited in that way, whereas Native language speakers have said to me that things are much more understandable and make associations and find answers easier in the language because it's much more inclusive and collaborative.
The art of contemporary Inuvialuit artist Abraham Anghik Ruben explores the social, cultural, and spiritual lives of his Inuvialuit (Inuit) ancestors and the influences of Viking adventurers and Norse settlers who came to the North American Arctic. Poolaw, a Kiowa Indian from Anadarko, Oklahoma, documented his community during a time of great change, witnessing with his camera the transformations that each decade of the twentieth century brought to his multi-tribal community. In the 1960s and 70s, the notion of American Indian art was turned on its head by artists who fought against prejudice and popular cliches. The beautiful creations included in this book reveal the artistic vision of many individual makers as well as different regional styles and tribal designs. Contemporary Indian artists are responding to faith and gender politics, the country’s contested territorial boundaries, and wider geopolitical agendas. India has a history of debate around the nature of Indian art and the development of an idiosyncratic style of modernism spurred by the country’s independence in 1947. Contemporary Indian artists continue to be critical and engaged with issues linked to the country’s turbulent and fraught history of colonialism, decolonization, and division. The legacies of crafting nation-states which continue to be felt in the present and questions of representation often underpin works. Artists respond to faith and gender politics, the country’s contested territorial boundaries, the nuances of secularism,