

# HYPERALLERGIC

## The Undersung Art of Native American Women, Front and Center

Written by Erica Cardwell

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Christi Belcourt, "The Wisdom of the Universe," 2014, acrylic on canvas 71 x 114 x ½ x 3 ¾ inches (courtesy Art Gallery of Ontario)

MINNEAPOLIS – Upon first arrival to *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*, the feature exhibition at Minneapolis Institute of Art, visitors are greeted by a 1985 Chevy El Camino parked in the center of the gallery. "Maria" (2014), was conceptualized by Rose B. Simpson, alongside the exhibition advisory board. Simpson describes "Maria" as an "empowered vessel," similar to a pot or basket, with its rounded corners and "black on black" interior and exterior. While bold, the decision to place "Maria" at center stage, was both a measured pronouncement of the exhibition terms and an impracticality. However, Jill Ahlberg Yohe, the institute's Associate Curator of Native American Art, insists that it was easy to get the car into the building. On my first visit, I circled the car with Ahlberg Yohe, pausing from time to time to eavesdrop on people, particularly men, who were admiring its interior and new engine. On my second visit to the exhibition, I found myself subconsciously disinterested, being that I am not much of a car person, skipping the installation altogether, in order to move onto the "art."



Rose B. Simpson, Santa Clara Pueblo "Maria" (2014) 1985 Chevy El Camino 117 x 74 x 56] (courtesy Collection of Rose Simpson)

The car, as an object, is initially framed in distracting codes of machismo messaging and a ploy for engagement. According to Simpson, the car as art object represents the legacy of agency and power endowed by the Santa Clara Pueblo female experience. As a challenge to Western perception, "Maria" introduces a new dimension to the role of Native women's art in the cultural and institutional landscape. The car, and its charged position, is both a tool for unlearning and expanding interpretations.

In a 2013 conversation between Ahlberg Yohe and independent curator and beadmaker, Teri Greeves of the Kiowa Nation, the pair considered, why hadn't there been an exhibition dedicated to Native women artists? *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* sought to answer this question. To make it happen, Ahlberg Yohe, Greeves, and research assistant Dakota Hoska collaborated with an advisory board comprised of 21 Native women artists, as well as scholars, curators, and historians on Native North America. As the board convened, one central and more specific question was posed, "Why do Native women artists create?"



Kiowa artist, "Cradleboard" (1890) Wood, leather, venetian glass beadwork 43 ½ x 11 ½ x 10 ½ inches (courtesy Denver Museum of Nature and Science)

After three years of extensive meetings, phone calls, and emails with the advisory board, Greeves and Ahlberg Yohe narrowed down the exhibition into three themes, including several sub-themes: Legacy, or the continuum of resilience as it relates to children and ancestors; Relationship, or further, the Indigenous concept of interconnectivity and relationships called Kincentricity as well as Collaboration; and Power, which encompasses Honor/Diplomacy (certainly as it relates to land sovereignty) along with Dignity, Grace, and Balance. These themes uphold the confluence of spirituality and practice within Indigenous organizing structures, producing an exhibition that includes 115 diverse works spanning 1,000 years, with an impressive 70% of the ancestral art identified by name. This model is a crucial guide for dismantling more general ideas around diversity and inclusion in traditional curatorial

practice. Both curators were dedicated to presenting the show through an immersive collaboration process that centered Indigenous values, rather than the translation of these values into palatable white supremacist standards.



Ancient Pueblo artist, "Pot (Olla)" (c. 1000–1300) Clay, pigments (courtesy Minneapolis Institute of Art, The Putnam Dana McMillan Fund)

The predominance of Native art is attributed to pottery, beadwork, and textiles. Ahlberg Yohe has observed that Native women contribute roughly 90% of the art found within Native and Indigenous collections. Much of this work is craft, an artistic practice that is ingrained from birth. Given that these practices are usually intended for domestic use, Native art is typically perceived as "primitive novelties" or souvenirs. These creative methods, however, need not be relegated to oversimplified defining concepts such as "creative outlets" and "functional craft," especially as they relate to the history of colonization and subsequent Western trade and market production. As Ahlberg Yohe puts it, "it is important for experience and artistry to be on equal terms."

Given this duality, along with the breadth of the exhibition, *Hearts of Our People* will probably require a second look for most visitors. It is a massive undertaking with a substantial collection of art from Native North America. Containing sculpture, textiles, paintings, photographs, collage, video, audio, and music, the depth of the exhibition gives the viewer the sense of a retrospective survey, breathing new life into these works of art.



Louisa Keyser ("Dat so la lee"), Washoe, "Beacon Lights basket" (July 1, 1904–September 6, 1905) Willow, dyed bracken fern root, western redbud (courtesy Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York, Gift of Eugene Victor Thaw Art Foundation, Thaw Collection of American Indian Art)

The impressive 343-page exhibition catalogue further contextualizes the exhibition. It includes scholarly articles and personal essays from members of their advisory board and artists with work in the exhibition. In their essay, "Encircles Everything: A Transformative History of Native Women Arts," Janet Catherine Berlo, Professor of Art History at the University of Rochester and Ruth B. Phillips, Professor of Art History at Carleton University in Ottawa, recall Abe and Amy Cohn as major players in the colonization of Washoe baskets. Their intent was to collaborate, but instead the Cohns exploited the basket weaving artist Louisa Keyser by giving her the name "Dat-so-la Lee", making her fame a distraction from the broader community of basket weavers. Keyser's "Beacon Lights Basket" (1904) is representative of the artist's signature *degikup* style – the rounded curve of the baskets is formed through a meticulous style of taut weaving, resembling rows of corn. Washoe baskets were known for their shape and the ability to hold water. According to Berlo and Phillips, "[the Cohns'] propagandistic misinformation has until recently obscured the

artists' greatest achievements in providing a critical economic and artistic resource for their communities at a time of cultural upheaval so great that it threatened their very survival."

Lea S. McChesney, curator of ethnology at the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology and director of the Alfonso Ortiz Center for Intercultural Studies at the University of New Mexico, uses the term "soft power," in her essay "Carrying On: Gender and Innovation in Historic Pueblo Pottery, to further elaborate on the significance of women's pottery and makers. McChesney believes that through aesthetics, women's pottery can influence and transform space and relationships.



Arroh-a-och, Laguna Pueblo, "Storage Jar" (1870-1880) Clay, natural pigments, 12.5 x 15 inches (image courtesy the School for Advanced Research, photograph by Addison Doty, © School for Advanced Research)

While clay and pottery have unquestionable links to women within Indigenous cultural practice, the expansiveness of gender is more clearly recognized within these communities. The Native concept of gender is configured much differently than biologically focused structures found in the West. Often, in the framing of artistic production of pre- and post-colonial work that is not rooted in the West, artists with gender identities that do not fit within a binary or linear framework are either lumped into the category of "woman" without distinction, or disregarded.

The artist Arroh-a-och is described as *k'u kweemu*, or "like a woman and sister/brother" by Laguna community member Max Early and utilized she/her/hers pronouns and Laguna female gender words. Though little is known about the artist, Arroh-a-och, her "Storage Jar" is widely recognized as a signature piece of Pueblo pottery.

The debut of *Hearts of Our People* occurs at a particular watershed moment in the art world, when several shows centered around women artists have opened or are forthcoming, thus producing a further examination of the concept of endangerment. Many of these shows had been in the works for years prior to the lead up to the 2016 election, a fact highlighted by the foolhardy name of a recent *New York Times* article, "Female Artists Are (Finally) Getting Their Turn." This recent surge of art shows dedicated to women artists offers the retrospective sense of preservation, at a time when our physical bodies are at stake, a critical shift in power at an uneasy juncture in history.



Cherish Parrish, Grand Traverse Bay Anishinaabe, "The Next Generation – Carriers of Culture" (2018) Black ash and sweet grass 23 x 12 x 14" (courtesy Gun Lake band of Pottawatomi)

Edmonia Lewis, the neoclassical sculptor, is another example of an under-recognized woman artist in this show. Lewis was of Haitian, Mississauga and African American heritage and trained

and lived in Rome, Italy. One of her most famous sculptures, "The Old Arrow Maker," is on view in the exhibition; it depicts Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, "The Song of Hiawatha." Widely known for her sculpture "Forever Free," which represents two freed slaves, Lewis was known for creating narratives of Black and Indigenous people as a dogged means of inclusion. However, in spite of her efforts and mastery of Western sculpture, Lewis is rarely included in contemporary discussions of neoclassical art, even when these discussions are centered on women artists.



Edmonia Lewis, Mississauga and African American, "The Old Arrow Maker" (modeled 1866, carved c. 1872) Marble, 20 x 14 x 14 inches, (courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art Bentonville, Arkansas; photo: Sotheby's)

*Hearts of our People* addresses this categorical denial in a signature painting from the exhibition, "The Wisdom of the Universe" (2014), by Christi Belcourt of the Michif tribe. The painting displays an ornate midnight covered in coiling, rooted vines. Birds, flowers, and golden stars are nestled into the foreground, and upon an even closer look, round-faced clover, berries, hanging spiders and fresh herbs can be seen. The pastoral impression of the work seems familiar on first look; it is in the presence of such vibrance and lushness that one could experience both possibility and

prosperity, somewhat disguising the sinister absence coursing its way throughout the piece. Unless you read the wall text, it would be hard to discern that every element of animal or plant life in the painting is either nearing extinction or endangered. The viewer, now privy to Belcourt's knowledge, can more adequately perceive the intuition of the painting, and experience the connection between life and art, with measurable injustice in between. The future, while ominous, is also ongoing within this context.

From the advisory council who gathered for long-term curatorial visioning, to the engagement with ancestral artistic inheritance, *Hearts of Our People* has developed new traditions within the institutional complexity of the fine art world. *Hearts*, a prescient title, is an appropriate front-facing sentiment as both a mode and a context for looking.

*Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* is now on view at the *Minneapolis Institute of Art* through August 18. The exhibition was curated by Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves, with the *Native Exhibition Advisory Board*, a panel of 21 Native artists and Native and non-Native scholars from across North America, [fully credited here](#). The exhibition will travel to the *Frist Museum* in Nashville September 27, 2019–January 12, 2020, to the *Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum*, Washington, D.C. February 21, 2020–May 17, 2020, and to *Philbrook Museum of Art*, Tulsa June 28, 2020–September 20, 2020.