

'It's long overdue': the first exhibition for Native American female artists

By Nadja Sayej

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Christi Belcourt (Métis) - The Wisdom of the Universe, 2014. Photograph: Art Gallery of Ontario

Walk into most museums and there might be something missing on the wall labels beside Native American artworks – an Apache dress from the 19th century might just read: “Title, year, materials.” What’s missing? The artist’s name. Though many of the artists’ names were not recorded, and will forever be anonymous, many that have been recorded are now being recognized as never before.

Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists is the first ever museum retrospective of Native American and Canadian female artists. It opened at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and until 18 August, over 115 artists from 50 Native communities are being given the credit they deserve. “This is the first, believe it or not, show devoted to Native women artists,” said Jill Ahlberg Yohe, who co-curated the exhibit with Teri Greeves. “It’s the first to honor Native women from ancient times to the contemporary moment.” Then why did it take so long?

Most 19th-century art collectors were “men with a Victorian sensibility,” Yohe said. For the most part, these men weren’t interested “in identifying women, or individualizing Native people”. She added: “90% of Native art is made by women. Native artists know this. It’s just non-Native people who haven’t recognized that.” Yohe has been working on this exhibition since 2015. “It dawned on me after scouring the collections that all the work is made by women,” she said. Putting together the show meant more than just plucking out items from renowned collections. Rather than repeating the same old narratives, the co-curators wanted to incorporate fresh voices. That led them to working with 21 women, both Native and non-Native scholars and artists, to curate this show as part of their “exhibition advisory board”. “That’s what made it special,” said Yohe. “We have the voices, expertise and knowledge from all these women.”



Rose Simpson's 1985 Chevy pays homage to Maria Martinez. Photograph: Collection of the artist.

Upon entering the exhibition, there's a parked 1985 Chevy El Camino by Rose Simpson, a work which pays homage to the 20th-century potter Maria Martinez, "the first self-identified non-anonymous Native artist," said Yohe. That sets the tone for the entire show, which is divided into three sections: legacy, relationships and power. The exhibition includes the work of 12 Canadian artists to trace tribes and communities that were established long before borders between the two countries. "The borders between the US and Canada weren't created by indigenous people, but by outside influences," said Yohe. "All this work is connected to our history, whether it was made in 1500 or 2019. It's all a part of the American and Canadian story." Métis artist Christi Belcourt shows *The Wisdom of the Universe*, a painting from 2014 that features animals on the endangered species list in Canada, alongside Haida fashion designer Dorothy Grant, who sketches Haida artwork on to clothing, is showing her wool Hummingbird Dress from 1989, the same year she debuted her first collection. Though craft and fashion play a role in this exhibit, it's not where it ends. "It's the gendered aspect of women's work," said Yohe. "These categories don't work; they just don't work in Native communities."



Jamie Okuma's *Adaption II* from 2012.

Photograph: Charles Walbridge/Minneapolis Institute of Arts

One of the most fun pieces in the exhibit is a pair of heels by the Luiseño/Shoshone-Bannock artist Jamie Okuma, who is showing her Adaption II shoes from 2012. The artist has taken a pair of Christian Louboutin heels and covered them in what Yohe calls "Native couture" – including the likes of glass beads, porcupine quills and buckskin. The work counteracts the stereotype that Native art lives in the past and lacks sophistication. The Creek-Cherokee artist Joan Hill is showing her 1990 painting Women's Voices at the Council, which shows the head of a tribe, a woman she refers to as the "Beloved Woman", meeting with other women as part of the decision-making for their tribe. Haida artist Freda Diesing shows Mask, Old Woman with Labret from 1974, which depicts a woman with a labret, a body modification known as "lip plugs", which were recognized as status symbols for women on the north-west coast. (Diesing was one of the few female carvers of her generation and her Haida name Skil Kew Wat means "magical little woman").

The artworks here are more than just decorative or folk-art masterpieces. They offer an overlooked, often silenced narrative. "Their work tells the story of Native people, the idea of resilience, despite all measures of annihilation of federal policy, settlers and acts of genocide," said Yohe. The Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore shows Fringe, a sculpture from 2007, which draws attention to the violence against First Nations women with a gaping back scar the artist believes will never disappear. But this exhibition is, in part, about healing. For one, it aims to be a counter-narrative. They're calling it "corrective art history" to the dusty old textbooks that ignored them for decades. "It's long overdue," said Yohe. "Native women's art history is American history."