

W

Rose Simpson: "Doing It Their Way"

Written by Jori Finkel

Photographs by Tommy Kha

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Dyani White Hawk with Wopila | Lineage II (a work in progress). Photographed in Minneapolis, December 2022. Styled by Christina Holevas. White Hawk wears a Proenza Schouler coat; Vince blouse; her own pants, glasses, and jewelry. Hair and makeup by Peter Phung.

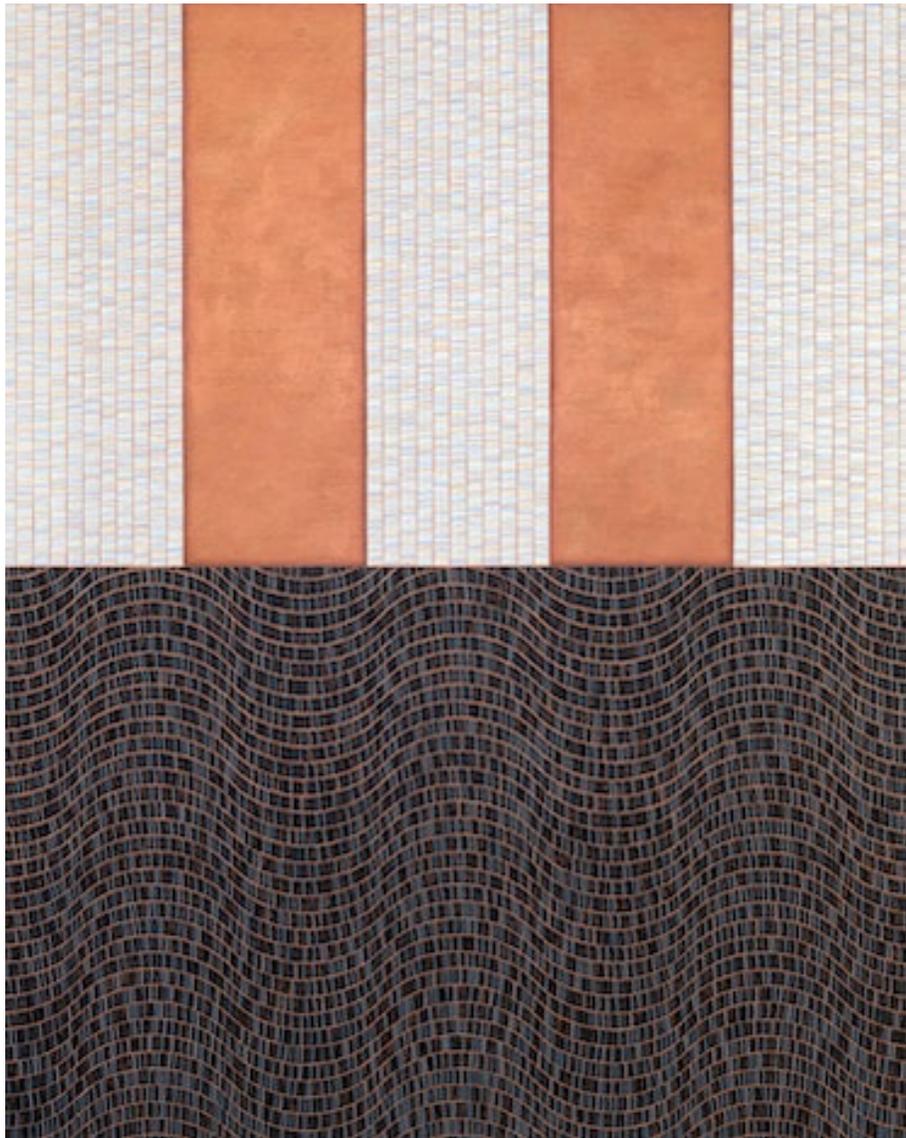
Native artists are finally gaining visibility in museums and galleries—upending long-held stereotypes in the process

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Up until recently, you could count on one hand the number of Native American artists valued by the contemporary art world. One of them, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, 83, has called it “the buckskin ceiling”—a rather vivid term for the institutional barriers or systemic racism preventing Native artists from landing regular exhibitions in mainstream art galleries and museums.

That much is finally changing. Thanks to work by artists and activists like Quick-to-See Smith, as well as the larger cultural reckoning that put the “I” in BIPOC, that buckskin ceiling has some serious cracks in it, with animal hides actually making an appearance in big galleries and museums. Also showing up: techno-themed Navajo weavings, abstract paintings inspired by Lakota quillwork, and more, as several artists are bringing ancestral techniques and materials into a contemporary art context, often overturning stereotypes about Native cultures in the process.



Courtesy of Various Small Fires and Bockley Gallery. White Hawk's *She Gives (Quiet Strength IV)*, 2018.

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"It's exciting to see how many Indigenous voices are being amplified in this moment, even if it only scratches the surface," says Marie Watt, 55, an enrolled member of the Seneca Nation of Indians who lives in Portland, Oregon, and shows with galleries there, in New York, and in San Francisco. In effect, these artists are bridging at least two worlds: their ancestral communities and the rather nomadic—some would say rootless—contemporary art set, which typically hews to a white, male, Eurocentric colonizer's version of history, with minimal knowledge of Indigenous cultures. One telling example: When gallerist Jessica Silverman took a group of figurative sculptures by Rose B. Simpson from the Santa Clara Pueblo to Art Basel in 2021, some viewers assumed at first sight the work was African.

"It's wild how much isn't known or understood," says the Sičánǰu Lakota artist Dyani White Hawk, 46, calling it "one of the biggest issues in navigating the contemporary art world as a Native person." When the curators and other gatekeepers "don't have a mental library that allows them to see and unpack and uncode things in your work, there can be a real communication breakdown," she adds.

This knowledge vacuum puts a lot of pressure on Native artists to serve as educators or interpreters for non-Native audiences. While some embrace the role, going up against centuries of disinformation or outright cultural erasure is not easy. "It can be exhausting to show up and carry these conversations continually," says Nicholas Galanin, 43, an artist of Tlingit and Unangaġ heritage. But that also gives some of his work its urgency. "The artwork can carry these dialogues too, and break through to people without lecturing them, by sharing ideas, stories, dreams."

Or, as White Hawk puts it, "beauty is medicinal." An enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, White Hawk makes exquisitely detailed abstract paintings that combine the meditative appeal of, say, Agnes Martin with a textured sense of Indigenous history. "I am intentionally making beautiful things as a gift for the audience," says the Minneapolis-based artist, who just signed on with the gallery Various Small Fires, which is showing her work alongside that of weaver extraordinaire Diedrick Brackens at Frieze Los Angeles in February. "But it's also my hope that my work offers a moment of reciprocity that encourages people to stay longer and think more deeply."

White Hawk made her most ambitious artwork to date for the Whitney Biennial last year: a 14-foot-long painting consisting of more than half a million glass beads that took her and a team of 18 nearly a year to create. Her visuals nod both to 20th-century Color Field paintings by the likes of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman and to Native examples of abstraction that predate those painters by centuries and, in some cases, inspired them. "Our abstract painting was happening here with earth pigments on hides well before stretched canvases showed up," she says. She is especially interested in Lakota quillwork, a form of adornment that typically involves softening and stitching porcupine quills onto fabric or other surfaces in a way that prefigured beading.

In graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, White Hawk used actual quills in her paintings, but the process is extremely time-intensive. These days she is more likely to honor Lakota quillwork through her use of paint or glass beads, especially cylindrical "bugle" beads. She also makes video- and photo-based installations that emphasize Native women's individuality and

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skewer stereotypes. "I am not a conservationist or preservationist, but an artist participating in an artistic lineage upheld for generations," she says. "I get to jump in at this time and play."

Melissa Cody



Melissa Cody with an untitled Germantown Revival-style sampler (a work in progress). Photographed in Long Beach, California, December 2022. Styled by Kat Typaldos. Cody wears a **Lafayette 148 New York** dress; **Leigh Miller** earrings; her own necklace, rings, and bracelet.

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Traditional Navajo wood looms in Cody's studio.



4th Dimension, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York; photographed by Sam Minkler

Melissa Cody, 39, an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation who identifies as "a fifth-generation Navajo weaver," does see herself as a preservationist to some extent, describing one of her goals as passing down her specialized loom-based knowledge to younger generations. She provides museums with consultations on their textiles and likes to give demonstrations of traditional Navajo weaving.

"I think education is very important," says Cody, who received a BA in Museum Studies from the Institute of American Indian Arts. "And I want the work to be understood not only aesthetically, but in a really deep way: who I am as an artist, a Navajo artist, a female artist, an urban Indian artist." Raised on a reservation in Arizona, with some "hopscotching" to California and Texas, Cody learned to weave around the same time she learned to read and write. It took a couple of years before she realized that not every girl grows up with a loom at home.

Her studio, now in Long Beach, California, has three supersize wood looms constructed by her brother—traditional Navajo vertical looms that are manipulated by hand, no pedals—where she is making artworks for her first solo museum show, this coming fall at the Museum of Art of São Paulo. Each weaving, in electric shades of colors like pink, turquoise, purple, and orange, takes a minimum of three or four months to make.

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Known as Germantown Revival, Cody's style involves the use of commercially manufactured bright, aniline-dyed wool yarn. She tends to mix traditional Navajo symbols such as the Spider Woman cross ("a symbol of balance," she says) with personal and pop-culture references like superpixelated video games. "Being a child of the 1980s, I grew up with Atari and the first Nintendo, and all of those influences are definitely evident in the work," she says, also comparing her line-by-line process on the loom to the motion of an inkjet printer.

The techno imagery sets her work apart, but that's far from the only source of innovation. Cody describes the history of Germantown weaving as particularly creative. It originated in 1864, when Navajo peoples from different regions were persecuted by the U.S. military. If they survived the death march known as the Long Walk, they were imprisoned at Fort Sumner, in New Mexico. As supplies, she says, they received brightly colored blankets made from wool milled in Germantown, Pennsylvania. Navajo weavers then unraveled these blankets and rewove them into their own styles, creating the mash-ups called samplers as patterns were "exchanged among the weavers from different regions who were corralled together," she says. "That's what I'm really drawn to—the idea that during such a dire time, the creative spirit of people couldn't be broken and couldn't be stolen."



Marie Watt with *Untitled—Work in Progress*, 2022, consisting of panels from Whitney Sewing Circles. Photographed in Portland, Oregon, December 2022. Styled by Rachael Wang. Watt wears a **Toteme** sweater from Frances May; **Chimala** jeans from Frances May; her own glasses and jewelry.

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Stacked blankets in the artist's studio.



Watt's *Skywalker/Skyscraper (Ghostwriter)*, 2022.
Photographed by Kevin McConnell; courtesy of Detroit
Institute of the Arts and Marc Straus Gallery.

Marie Watt also skewers the myth that Native art traditions, too often dismissed or devalued as "craft," are conventional or static. One of her examples of historic innovation is how Native peoples shaped tin lids, typically from tobacco cans, to make the bell-like jingles used in the Jingle Dress Dance, which is associated with healing and, some say, originated during the influenza pandemic of 1918. She is currently making cloudlike, suspended sculptures out of jingles for a June show at Kavi Gupta in Chicago, noting that she is interested in the "reverberations—sounds, stories, actions, and relationships—that are a part of gathering."

Watt is best known for using blankets as a way to evoke and also create community: building tall sculptures, sometimes supported by steel beams, out of used or "reclaimed" blankets that are folded and stacked. "I've thought a lot about how blankets are exchanged in our community," says Watt, who got her MFA from Yale. "And, of course, we all have these intimate experiences with blankets: We're received in blankets, and, in a sense, we depart this world in blankets—and in between that, we're constantly imprinting on these humble pieces of cloth."

But more than any material, Watt sees gathering and communal forms of storytelling as the through line of her work. She has facilitated sewing circles, loosely modeled on the storytelling circles run by her educator mother, in which she invites people at a museum or elsewhere to meet up, chat, and stitch text panels that feed a larger collaborative artwork. (One at the Whitney Museum last year drew hundreds; the result is going on show at Marc Straus Gallery, in New York,

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on March 12.) And the public art project she is now developing, a huge neon sign that says "Turtle Island," the Seneca name for North America, promises to be a conversation starter. She doesn't expect people to know the creation story behind the name, but she hopes they will be inspired to learn more and maybe see their homeland differently. "If we rethink what we call a place," she offers, "it might change the way we steward it."



Nicholas Galanin with his new totem, carving in progress.
Photographed in Sitka, Alaska, December 2022. Galanin wears his own clothing and accessories.

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The curator Candice Hopkins, a leading advocate for Native artists, says that the question of land stewardship is central for many of them. "We're seeing artists coming together to talk about the importance of land and land rights in relation to our cultural sovereignty," she says. "These topics are no longer taboo like they were in the '80s and '90s, when Native artists were told to put their identity aside to be taken seriously."

These issues play a major role in the work of Nicholas Galanin. Born in the coastal Alaska village of Sitka, he learned to fish and hunt ("harvesting" animals, he calls it), make jewelry, and carve wood, which all show up in his art making. He returned to Sitka in 2006 after earning his MFA at Massey University in New Zealand and is currently working on a new totem pole that honors his father's Tlingit clan, the Kaagwaantaan. Carved with the help of his uncle and cousin, the totem includes several crests from the clan, starting with a bear on the bottom that transitions into an eagle and then a killer whale.



Galanin's studio.



Loom, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York; photograph by Jason Wyche.

"This work isn't just about removing wood; it's connected deeply to culture, community, and land," he says. "Woodcarving was the foundation of my creative apprenticeships when I was younger. For me, this is life work, and the joy is still there." He's also a musician who does "a little bit of everything—a lot of vocals, lyrical writing, instrumentation," he says. "'Creative sovereignty' is the phrase I use for it, for this intentional freedom in the process."

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The totem was commissioned by Sealaska Heritage Institute, a nonprofit based in Juneau, but Galanin is also a regular on the international art circuit, having shown work in the Whitney Biennial in 2019, the Sydney Biennale of 2020, the Desert X of 2021, and, next up, the Liverpool Biennial of 2023. For Desert X, he installed a huge sign near the visitor center of Palm Springs, California, which said "Indian Land," riffing on the original Hollywoodland sign. It was a hit on social media, but more than an Instagram meme, it was intended to be a call to action to support the Indigenous Landback movement, complete with a GoFundMe page.

Much of his other work is politically pointed too, like the "Architecture of Return, Escape" series: museum floor plans painted on deer hides that map out escape routes for the Indigenous art, artifacts, and remains "collected" or stolen by a particular institution. The first piece in the series charts the paths of these sacred objects out of the depths of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The theft of these objects, he says, "is connected to the removal of our bodies, the removal of our land, our language, our children—it's all part of the same thing."



Rose B. Simpson with works in progress. Photographed in Española, New Mexico, December 2022. Simpson wears a Jamie Okuma jacket; Issey Miyake shirt; Hermès pants; her own necklaces and sneakers.

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Rose B. Simpson, 39, is also using her access to galleries and institutions—she recently had her first East Coast museum survey, at the ICA Boston—to share something of her deep relationship with land. Like her mother, her grandmother, and generations of artists from the Santa Clara Pueblo, which is north of Santa Fe, Simpson is most at home working in clay, saying it's "like a family member for us." But instead of the glossy, thick-walled, red and black pottery the pueblo is known for, her powerful vessels take another form: hollow human figures, sometimes in the shape of a woman holding a child, sometimes androgynous. And she literally roughs up the traditions, in a way, often using a technique she calls "slap-slab" that leaves signs of her handiwork instead of smoothing them out.

She invented this method, which owes something to Japanese aesthetics, when she was a graduate student at the Rhode Island School of Design, one of the few periods in her life when she was away from home. She currently lives on the pueblo and works nearby on a family property that includes a ceramics studio and a metal shop where she fixes up old cars. "This is where I'm happiest, where I'm home, where I refuel," she says, adding that "for pueblo people, our religion is place-based, so you can't practice your religion elsewhere."



Simpson's *Remind* (a work in progress), with her 1964 Buick Riviera.



Groundbeing IV, 2021.
Courtesy of the artist and Nevada Museum of Art, Reno.

For her new show, at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, opening on February 23, Simpson made a dozen sculptures that feel like "signposts on a self-reflective journey." Two of the largest figures,

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in a work called *Vital Organs*, explore "how to trust our instincts," she says. One of them carries on its head a clay vessel representing a heart; the other, a gut.

But as for serving as interpreter or spokesperson for her culture, Simpson says that's not her style. It's also not her job within her family—her eldest brother is the one on the tribal council working to uphold their traditions. "I am not an educator," she says. "I have the privilege of making these things that go out there into the world to do that work, so I don't have to. They go out and speak for the pain, and, ideally, that brings awareness to the hard truths of our history."

Melissa Cody: Hair by Tanya Melendez for Hair Ritual by Sisley at the Only Agency; makeup by Jessica Ahn for Makeup Forever at Tracey Mattingly Agency. Fashion assistant: Ainyne Aiken. **Marie Watt:** Hair and makeup by Cecilia Salinas for Dior. Fashion assistant: Kai Magobenny. **Nicholas Galanin:** Grooming by Cedar Pook. **Rose B. Simpson:** Hair and makeup by Kata Baron for Makeup Forever. Hair and makeup assistant: Kimberly Garley

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