



## Indigenous Identities: Here, Now & Always

By Clare Gemima

September 29, 2025



Installation view of *Indigenous Identities: Here, Now & Always* at the Zimmerli Art Museum. Photo Credit: McKay Imaging Photography

### *Indigenous Identities: Here, Now & Always*

Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University

February 01- December 21, 2025

Assembling more than one hundred works by ninety-seven artists from over fifty tribal nations, *Indigenous Identities: Here, Now & Always*—on view at the Zimmerli Art Museum through December 21, 2025—stands as both a landmark survey of modern and contemporary Native American art and a resonant elegy for its curator. Conceived over three years by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Citizen of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Nation), the exhibition is not only the most ambitious curatorial project of her six-decade career, it's also one of the largest museum presentations of Native American art ever mounted in the United States. Smith's untimely passing, just a week before the exhibition opening, recasts the group show with a poignant, profound gravity. What was envisioned as a sweeping celebration of survival now reads as her final act of advocacy, insisting that Native art is neither vanishing nor peripheral, but a vital force within the ongoing discourse of American art history.

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Organized into four guiding themes—political, social, land, and tribal—the exhibition spans generations and mediums, from acrylic paintings like G. Peter Jemison's (Seneca, Heron Clan) *Red Power*, made as early as 1973, to Joe Feddersen's (Okanagan and Arrow Lakes), woven Sally bag titled *Country Road*, crafted as recently as 2024. Carried forward in its final stages with the assistance of Diné curator Raven Manygoats, and the support of her own son Neal Ambrose Smith, the scope of the exhibition ensures that Smith's legacy as artist, activist, and cultural catalyst is strongly reflected not only in her own practice, but through the many voices of those she championed: **Bently Spang** (Tsitsistas/Suhtai Nation), **Marie Watt** (Enrolled Member of the Seneca Nation of Indians/European Descent), **Norman Akers** (Citizen of the Osage Nation), **Natalie Ball** (Klamath/Modoc), **Raven Chacon** (Diné/Chicano), **Corwin Clairmont** (Member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation), **Gerald Clarke Jr.** (Cahuilla), **Demian DinéYazhi'** (Diné), **RYAN! Feddersen** (Confederate Tribes of the Colville Reservation and of mixed European Descent), **Richard Glazer-Danay** (Caughnawaga Mohawk and Jewish Descent), **Edgar Heap of Birds** (Cheyenne and Arapaho Nations), **Douglas Miles** (San Carlos Apache-Akimel O'odham), **Diego Romero** (Cochiti Pueblo), **Philip Singer** (Diné), **John Hitchcock** (Comanche, Kiowa and Northern European Ancestry), **Rose B. Simpson** (Santa Clara Pueblo), **Tony Abeyta** (Diné (Navajo)), **Jason Clark** (Non-enrolled Algonquin, Creek, Swiss, and Scottish), **Marwin Begaye** (Navajo), **Bryson Goodrunner Meyers** (Chippewa, Cree, Sicangu, Oglala, Hunkpapa, Dakota), **Tomahawk Greyeyes** (Navajo), **Norma Howard** (Choctaw and Chickasaw), **Sarah Sense** (Chitimacha and Choctaw), **Patrick Dean Hubbell** (Diné), **Tom Jones** (Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin), **Sonya Kelliher-Combs** (Iñupiaq/Athabaskan), **Terran Last Gun** (Piikani (Blackfeet)), **James Lavadour** (Enrolled member of the Confederate Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation), **Linda Lomahaftewa** (Hopi and Choctaw), **Wendy Red Star** (Apsáalooke/Crow), **Michael McCabe** (Diné (Navajo)), **Chris Pappan** (Kanza, Lakota), **Luanne Redeye** (Seneca Nation of Indians, Hawk Clan), **Duane Slick** (Meskwaki/Ho-Chunk), **Melanie Yazzie** (Diné/Navajo), **Jordan Ann Craig** (Northern Cheyenne), **Brad Kalhamer** (Trially ambiguous), **Jackie Larson Bread** (Blackfeet (Amskapi Pikuni)), **Carly Feddersen** (Enrolled Member of the Confederate Tribes of the Colville Reservation and of mixed European heritage), **Keri Ataumbi** (Kiowa), **Joe Feddersen** (Okanagan and Arrow Lakes), **Jamison Chās Banks** (Enrolled Member of the Seneca-Cayuga Nation of Oklahoma), **Linda King** (Confederate Salish and Kootenai Tribes), **Roxanne Swentzell** (Santa Clara Pueblo), **Joe Baker** (Enrolled Member of Delaware Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma), **Erin Ggaadimits Ivalu Gingrich** (Nome Eskimo Community, culturally affiliated Koyukon Denaa & Iñupiaq), **Frank Big Bear** (Ojibwe), **Julie Buffalohead** (Enrolled Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma), **Raven Half Moon** (Caddo Nation), **Bob Haozous** (Chiricahua Apache), **Ryan Singer** (Diné/Navajo), **Nani Chacon** (Diné/Navajo/Chicana), **Lorenzo Clayton** (Navajo), **G. Peter Jemison** (Seneca, Heron Clan), **Judith Lowry** (Hammawi Band Pit River/Mountain Maidu/Washo), **Star WallowingBull** (Ojibwe/Arapaho), **Holly Wilson** (Enrolled member of the Delaware Nation, Lenape and Descendent of the Delaware Tribe of Indians), **George Longfish** (Seneca/Tuscarora), **Mario Martinez** (Enrolled Member of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe of Arizona), **Da-ka-xeen Mehner** (Tlingit, Nisga'a), **Native Art Department International** (Anishnaabek, Wasauksing First Nation / Canada), **Grace Rosario Perkins** (Diné/Akimel O'odham), **Cara Romero** (Chemehuevi), **Tyrrell Tapaha** (Diné), **Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie** (Taskigi/Diné), **Jeffrey Veregge** (Port Gamble Band of S'Klallam Indians), **Will Wilson** (Diné), **Alan Michelson** (Mohawk Member of the Six Nations of the Grand River), **George Alexander** (Muscogee/Creek), **Esteban**

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**Cabeza de Baca** (Indigenous Chicano), **Andrea Carlson** (Grand Portage Ojibwe Descent), **Kelly Frye** (Tesuque Pueblo and Mescalero Apache Descent), **Chaz John** (Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska/ Mississippi Band Choctaw/European), **Athena LaTocha** (Hunkpapa Lakota, Ojibway), **Wade Patton** (Enrolled Member of the Oglala Lakota Tribe), **Dan Namingha** (Hopi, Tewa), **Michael Namingha** (Tewa/Hopi), **Darren Vigil Gray** (Jicarilla Apache), **Kay WalkingStick** (Member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and Anglo), **Emmi Whitehorse** (Diné), **Nicholas Galanin** (Tlingit/Unanga̋), **Mikayla Patton** (Enrolled Member of the Oglala Lakota Nation), **Zoë Urness** (Tlingit), **Neal Ambrose-Smith** (Descendant of the Confederate Salish and Kootenai Nation of Montana), **Jeffrey Gibson** (Member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and of Cherokee Descent), **New Red Order**, **Sky Hopinka** (Ho-Chunk Nation/Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians), **Roy Bigcrane** and **Thompson Smith** (Séliš, member of the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes), **Jeremy Dennis** (Shinnecock Indian Nation Tribal Member), **Luzene Hill** (Enrolled Member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians), **Anna Hoover** (Norwegian/Unanga̋), **Emily Johnson** (Yup'ik Nation), **Nora Naranjo-Morse** (Tewa, Santa Clara Pueblo), **Laura Ortman** (White Mountain Apache) **Nanobah Becker** (Diné), and **Charlene Teters** (Spokane).



Demian DinéYazhi' (Diné), My ancestors will not let me forget this, 2020. Letterpress print. 18 x 24 in. Gochman Family Collection. Photo Peter Jacobs. Photo courtesy of Zimmerli Art Museum

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*Through genocide, boarding schools, disease, hunger, rape, and abuse, we are still here* —  
Jaune Quick-to-See Smith

Works within the exhibition's political section confront the violence of settler colonialism, genocide, forced assimilation, and systemic erasure, transforming traumatic histories into strategies of resistance and endurance. Norman Akers's oil painting *Drowning Elk*, 2020, places the weight of history into a slowly sinking abstraction. Centering an elk—long a symbol of strength and endurance—submerged and struggling within debris-choked waters, the work captures a moment of a world in slow-motion crisis. A similar sense of survival under threat protests through text in Demian DinéYazhi's letterpress print *my ancestors will not let me forget this*, 2020. Repetitions of the phrase "EVERY american flag is a WARNING SIGN" in political red and blue implicate painfully ingrained memories of economic and political marginalization, forced relocations, and cultural suppression enforced by dominating US powers upon native tribes. Marie Watt's *Skywalker/Skyscraper (Twins)*, 2020, built of multicolored blankets stacked on two steel I-beams archives a warmth akin to the comfort of listening to shared oral histories in a group setting. At the tip of each column, engravings of *Flint* and *Sapling* invoke the Haudenosaunee twin brothers—embodiments of creation and destruction. Within many origin stories, Sapling is remembered as the benevolent shaper of humanity and the world's positive aspects, while Flint emerges as his destructive counterpart, bringing hardship and imbalance. By embracing this duality, Watt positions her sculpture within the tension of generative possibility and corrosive force, conceding that good and evil exist in equal measure, and not without the other.

*Sheriff's Star*, 2022, a soft sculpture that combines neon glass and deer hide into a delicate yet charged meditation on law and authority was conceived during Natalie Ball's residency at Crow's Shadow Institute of the Arts in March 2022. The making of the work coincided with the artist being sworn in as a member of the Klamath Tribal Council in Oregon. The convergence of Ball's artistic practice and political responsibility infuses her piece with layered resonance, where material inventions collide with the duties and underbellies of governance. Bently Spang's *Modern Warrior Series: War Shirt #3 – The Great Divide*, 2006, reconfigures traditional regalia with a contemporary twist, and layers photography and mixed media into a collage that critiques the fractures Indigenous communities continue to face. Conceived as a photo-war shirt, the piece draws from the reciprocity inherent in its historic counterparts, particularly those adorned with hair and objects of power made by relatives to symbolically protect its wearer. Spang plays on this by tessellating images of Native land into a garment that binds modern warriorship to the endurance of ancestral practices. Dedicated to *The Divide*—an immense mountain ridge on his homeland—the work simultaneously celebrates a place inseparable from protection and kinship.

The works of Akers, DinéYazhi, Watt, Ball, Spang, Red Star, Ataumbi, and Jones critique inequality, embody resilience, and demonstrate a commitment to communal survival despite relentless attempts to erase or "civilize" Native cultures. Together they form a landmark survey that insists Native American art is impossible to ignore.

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Wendy Red Star (Apsáalooke/Crow), *Dust*, 2020. Lithograph, 24.125 x 23.875 in. Private collection. Photo Peter Jacobs. Photo courtesy of Zimmerli Art Museum

***Everything we create, harvest or perform is connected to a religious aspect of our lives, our spiritual world, and our metaphysical world — Jaune Quick-to-See Smith***

Songs, origin stories, oral histories, plants, terrain, climate, and food sources resonate through the exhibition's tribal section, and coalesce into a collective of work rooted in cultural specificity. From beadwork and animal spirit reverence to adaptations of traditional craft, each artist reaffirms distinct beliefs unique to their tribal nation.

In her 2020 lithograph *Dust*, Wendy Red Star depicts her great-great grandfather, a Crow Tribal Policeman, set against the radiant geometry of a star quilt in peach pink and grassy green—an emblem of honor and community devotion within Apsáalooke culture. By fusing archival portraiture with the visual language of tribal design, Red Star transforms familial histories into a testament of continuity and resilience. The work is an example of her ongoing practice that utilizes personal narrative to confront the censorship of Indigenous visibility. Tom Jones's *Forster Nash*, 2015, from his series *Strong Unrelenting Spirits* electrifies the conventions of portraiture. By overlaying beadwork onto a photograph of a smiling baby in a crib bordered by ornate, thorn-like motifs, the work channels a formative memory: a healing ceremony led by Sioux medicine man Robert Stead on the Rosebud Indian Reservation, where Jones remembers sitting in darkness as women sang and summoned spirits that appeared as drifting orbs of light. Rooted in Ho-Chunk identity, the beaded floral patterns give form to those very protective presences, and transform the piece into a vessel of ancestral watchfulness that honors the strength and beauty of Jones's people—those newborn, living, or guiding from beyond.

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*Antler Earrings*, 2022, fuses silver, gold, and diamonds into miniature wearable sculptures that shimmer with elegance. Grounded in Keri Ataumbi's Kiowa lineage and the Kogui/Elk band traditions of hunting and honoring the elk, the artist was raised to understand that every part of the animal—from meat to teeth—carries value. In jewel form, adornment becomes preservation, and directly links cultural refinement to ancestral continuity. Elevated beyond ornament, the work stands as a contemporary relic reflective of ancestral allegiance to being Ownday, Kogui, and Càuigù, and celebrates the deep ties between animal, land, and family practices.



Marie Watt (Enrolled Member of the Seneca Nation of Indians/European Descent), *Skywalker/Skyscraper (Twins)*, 2020. Reclaimed wool blankets, steel I-Beams, two textile towers, 12 x 40 x 24 inches. Tia Collection. © Marie Watt. James Hart Photograph. Courtesy of MARC STRAUS, New York. Courtesy of Marie Watt Studio and Zimmerli Art Museum

*Indigenous Identities: Here, Now & Always* proudly presents a constellation of artists who assert their multiplicity across geographies, generations, and materials. Its expansiveness is equally matched by its clarity, structured not chronologically but through aspects paramount to Indigenous identity. While Smith's absence is deeply felt, her vision remains insistent: Native art belongs not at the margins of history but at its center, and its history should continue to be written by those who live it—**here, now, and always**.

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