



## WHO ARE WE? WHO WE ARE.

*This tour seeks to showcase art created by contemporary Native American artists that tells their stories from their viewpoints, not from an Euro-centric one.*

*The imagery is diverse. The subject matter deeply reflective.*

*The intent is to un-mask the myths and stereotypes that are prevalent and untruthful.*

*These modern works - whether painting, prints or sculpture is steeped in cultural perspectives and also historical context., allowing a viewer to visually and emotionally experience how those who are Native see themselves.*

## Good afternoon ...

Welcome to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. My tour today will focus on Native American Contemporary Art and the artists who created.

Before we begin, I would like to speak to a few guidelines to remember as we walk through the galleries. First, no food or drink is allowed in the galleries nor smoking (of course!) I would ask that you “respect the space,” taking care to stand about 1 foot (or as indicated by artlines drawn on the floor) from the art. I'd like to ask if there are any of you who require an elevator rather than walking up stairs.

Finally I'd like to say I am pleased that you have chosen to visit us. Our museum has over 90,000 works of art from diverse cultures and societies worldwide.

Contemporary art encompasses concepts that embrace abstraction, experiments with different approaches to reveal realities (or not) and at times, use new media to shift the senses. It is, at times, aesthetically beautiful, at times, discordant, with the end result requiring one to “think different” and create a mind's dialogue with what is shown.

Native American artists are deeply invested in telling their truth and reflect a diversity and complexity of approaches. This may mean knowing a bit about their specific culture (as all Indians are not “of one.”) It may involve shapes or colors that speak of the ancestors. The work may incorporate recognizable images or reference historical events. The one theme in common – the dispelling of who they are from a non-Native viewpoint, and the assertion of who they are from their perspective. It definitely means “unpacking those stereotypes” and discarding what one thinks they know about Native people and their culture. In short, their work depicts their breaking free of the constraints imposed on their cultures and on their history, and accepting that there is much, much more to understanding and knowing “who we are.”

Let's begin ...



*“When I first came to Santa Fe, I vowed to myself that I would not paint Indians. Then I saw the numerous over romanticized paintings of the ‘noble savage’ looking in the sunset and decided that someone should paint the Indian from a different context.”*

- Fritz Scholder

***Unfinished Dancer, 1979***

Fritz Scholder, La Jolla Lusieno, California Mission  
Oil on canvas  
Gift of the Herefurth Family  
2022.68.5

**FRITZ SCHOLDER** knew from a very early age that he was going to be an artist. Though born in Breckenridge, MN, he went to high school in Pierr, SD where his art teacher was Oscar Howe, a noted Lakota painter. He attended college in WI moving to California where he studied with the artist, Wayne Thiebaud. Eventually Scholder joined Thiebaud in creating a cooperative art gallery in Sacramento. During this time he met the Cherokee designer, Lloyd Kiva New and also studied with the Hopi jeweler, Charles Loloma. These meetings allowed Scholder to “become Native” as he did not grow up on a reservation nor with traditional elders and so, he did not consider himself to be Indian (he was one-quarter Luiseno, a California Mission tribal nation; he became enrolled member in the LaJolla Band of Luiseno Indians)) he was not raised with his people. Thus began his journey to paint Native people as “real Indians” ...

His first series in 1967 was to be out front with the cliches, the implied slights, the guilt heaped upon by the White culture. Those painting showcased Natives with beer cans, cats (!) and most importantly, American Flags. His goal was to make one stop, think and rethink “who are we” and be open about the realities that he saw. FYI - it’s important to know that those first paintings of his (done at IAIA in Santa Fe) caused much controversy and heated discussions as he was painting truth which not everyone thought was a good thing! After the dust-up, he traveled extensively to Europe and North Africa, eventually returning to Santa Fe and continuing his journey to show Indians as “who we are” ... first with a significant major print project done at Tamerind Institute called *Indians Forever* and then having that work published as Scholder/Indians, which led to his first one-man show at Lee Nordless Galleries.

Whether through his printmaking, his drawings, his photography, his monographs or his paintings, Scholder’s work focuses on Native people and how they “fit” in today’s contemporary world. His abstractions allowed him to show Natives as complex by not residing in a historical context; he may reference that world, but he does not mythologize it. His goal is to avoid the stereotypes and create “honest”, disruptive, uncomfortable imagery. *Unfinished Dancer* places a Native traditional dancer in a pose that is ambiguous and yet, grounded in who he is (though definitely not painted in a classic “proud Indian” pose).

His approach – finish with the subject matter, not start with the subject matter. His style – all about the color and all about the expression within the medium; his influences were Willem de Kooning and Francis Bacon, both “furious” painters of emotion.. His goal – as long as one experienced some kind of reaction, he felt he had done his job. His work challenges, provokes and strongly “assesses the situations’ that Native people experience, lived through and live as today.



*“A lot of Native people use humor as a way to talk about things” ...  
For me, it was always a way to draw people into a story that had sort of  
serious undertones, and I feel like that’s how life is – we’re constantly  
moving through things that are serious and things that are funny and  
why not paint what life is about?”*

- Julie Buffalohead

***Revisionist History Lesson, 2014***

Julie Buffalohead, Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma

Color Lithograph on tokuatsu paper

Highpoint Editions Archive, The Friends of Bruce B. Dayton Acquisition

Fund and the Christina N. and Swan J. Turnblad Memorial Fund

2020.85.9

**JULIE BUFFALOHEAD** is a mixed media artist who creates narratives told by various animal characters. She is of the Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma.

Though the appearance of her work is initially whimsical and yes, playful, this approach disarms though its apparent high-spirited and mischievous nature. In actuality her stories connect the mythical with the ordinary and the imagery with the read. By connecting the seemingly mundane with the otherworldly, she pulls the viewer in to discover the layers, the meanings within by using metaphor, wisdom and yes, humor!

Her storytelling is suffused with Native storytelling traditions, Creation stories are embedded in the telling. She asserts that animals possessed the ability to talk and are complex, just as we humans are. If we pay attention we will discover the many implications of the stories and relate to them as they are we, we are they.

Bringing one’s own experiences and lived lives means allowing one’s individuality, one’s personality, one’s place in the world to be front and center. This allows one to explore memory and one’s beginnings.

So these human/animal interactions are sometimes funny and ... not funny. They are unsettling. They are disturbing. They speak to contradictions that are inherent in our society. They represent (personally) how Buffalohead tried desperately to fit in and gain acceptance. By using animals - which she heard stories told during childhood – she put forth narratives that are difficult conversations and also convey teachings. Dispelling constructs that were invented by White Americans back in the day means taking back that incorrect narrative. Animals such as Coyote, Muskrat, and Otter are cultural “heros” and so using them within her work allows her to reference specific cultural aspects. Those interpretations invoke the inherent condescending notions that Native people are child-like and embrace nature by their “hysterical/historical” allusions - Not!

In *Revisionist History Lesson*, her technique beautifully expressive yet detailed in its characterization of those animals, Buffalohead lets the paint go where it wants, letting the painting come to her. She has said that ... “taking different elements and piecing them together and building upon things ...” allows the work to evolve; this means that where she started is not exactly where the painting ends up. “A lot of time I do not know where it is going.”



*Sometimes it's that it's starting to look too "traditional," so then I want to give it a jolt of color, or shiny reflective fabric, or holographic fabric. Maybe those are representative of time...and this object hasn't yet incorporated a sense of future. Then what would indigenous future look like? That's a struggle because there's not really a trajectory to build upon when you think about indigenous futures. So that's been a point of interest for me.*

- Jeffrey Gibson

***Know You're Magick, Baby, 2019***

Jeffrey Gibson, Choctaw-Cherokee

Color Screenprint on inkjet paper with cut-and-pasted printed paper

Gift of Mary and Bob Mersky

2020.96.2

**JEFFREY GIBSON**, a member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and of Cherokee descent, is a multi-faceted artist who works across all media. What is most important to him (and us) is his ability to connect with his culture and different communities, and bring people together in his colorful, inventive use of abstraction on many levels.

Gibson was born in Colorado and is now based in New York City. He feels that as the art world has not traditionally valued Indigenous histories or their artistic representations he is determined to make it his goal to force the current contemporary canon to reconsider what is important. "There's this gap historically about these histories existing on the same level and being valued culturally." With his goal of fusing American, Native and Queer perspectives into his work, Gibson strives to gather "the space in which to place me" (from a poem by Lakota poet, Layli Long Shoulder).

This has meant working outside the strictures placed on what constitutes Native art. Gibson wants to build an art world that extends beyond representation for minorities and create deeper opportunities for these to create their own narratives and spaces. His work turns inward so that he can express what he really wants to see in the world, expanding the way viewers think about Indigeneity. This screenprint, *Know You're Magick, Baby*, captures the exuberance of being "out there" in its bright neon colors and the quilt-like cut-and-paste approach (which references Native quilt work).

He has always had a passion for punk music, raves and also, the pow wow traditions of Native people. His work encompasses the bright colorations seen through Native America and also bedazzles in his depictions of "quilts, beadwork, drums" and other representations of the culture. That said, Gibson pushes the boundaries of connections by creating work that captivates the eye and has one startled by the brightness and seeming incongruities. Oversized and in-your-face, these contemporary takes are a call for Indigenous and Queer empowerment and are an out-front celebration of strength and playfulness on his terms. Textural. Over-the-edge sensorial. It is bold, it is striking, it can not be ignored. His work forces "the conversation" as to who we are ... with no easy answer.



*“Don’t be afraid of expressing what you really mean in your art, what you really feel. Say it visually, as strongly as you can. Push as far a reach as you can, then go all the way!”*

- Kay Walkingstick

***Venere Alpina, 1997***

Kay Walkingstick, Cherokee

Oil on canvas

Right: Steel Mesh over acrylic, wax, plastic gems

The David and Margaret Christenson

Endowment for Art Acquisition

2018.346A.B

**KAY WALKINGSTICK** is a Cherokee painter who focuses on landscapes and their metaphorical significances to Native people and to us all. “The landscape sustains us physically and spiritually. It is our beautiful corner of the cosmos.” What is most arresting is her juxtapositions of who she is as a Native person and her memories of – and reactions to – place.

For Walkingstick her first question is ... what does a landscape visually imply ... what does the earth tell or convey to us ... and then, how does she express her own personal experiences. She expresses her Native and non-Native shared identities. Her work deals with the thoughts and feelings that are common to all, yet speak to a Native humanity. This is shown through her use of diptych paintings; the idea of two parts working together to create a dialogue that is powerful and unites an the recognizable landscape and abstracted disparate imagery. It shows the conflicts and the bivalence that exists in each of us. For one who is biracial, this approach has allowed her to show the duality within. Based on sketches, *Venere Alpina*, this landscape is imaginative and lyrical and suggests a more emotional, suggestive state. Her right panel suggests a steep decline, a worsening and degeneration. The “physicality” of the work invites the viewer to touch their inner selves; touch and connection in today’s work is suppressed in various ways and Walkingstick feels that her expressive brushwork.

Her landscapes are her opportunities to share the feelings and thoughts that are common to all, and encourage the viewer to see our shared humanity, one that is gritty, awkward, funny, beautiful and at times, frightening. Her specifically Native work – which was denser, gouged, carved, cut, scratched and more formal with respect to line and color – expressed deep spiritual emotion. In essence she took what was abstract expressionist painting - originally created by New York-based White middle class men primarily – and adopted a vocabulary that was hers and her people. Her Cherokee sensibility acknowledged humility and gratitude; that work has the same dignified feeling that is indicative of Cherokee sensibility. Her scratches were evocative and filled with angst and controlled aggression. They were abstract landscapes that appeared calm yet were filled with intense emotion. Not surprising when one remembers the Cherokee Trail of Tears. And in this work at Mia we still experience of density, opacity and lucidity, and the reveal of her history through a very personal lens is telling of who we are.



*“There’s a battle for and around history going on at this very moment... The intention is to program, to stifle what I’ve called ‘popular memory’; and also to propose and impose on people a framework in which to interpret the present.”*

- Andrea Carlson

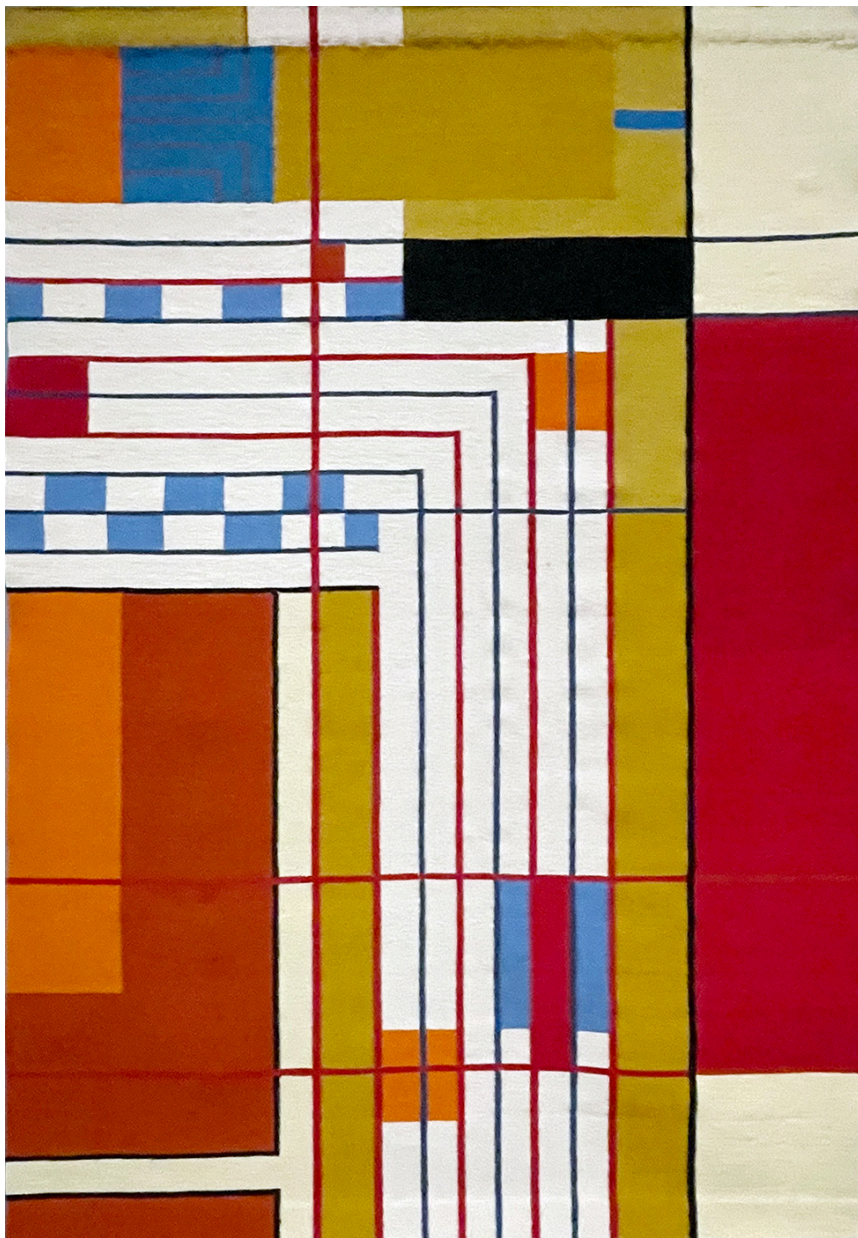
***Anti Retro, 2018***

Andrea Carlson, Anishinaabe (Ojibwe)  
Color Screenprint  
Highpoint Editions Archive, The Friends  
of Bruce B. Dayton Acquisition Fund and  
the Christina N. and Swan J.  
Turnblad Memorial Fund  
2020.85.18

**ANDREA CARLSON** is a visual artist from Grand Portage, MN who maintains a studio practice in northern Minnesota and Chicago, Illinois. Carlson’s works primarily on paper, creating painted and drawn surfaces with many mediums. Her work addresses land and institutional spaces, decolonization narratives, and assimilation metaphors in film. Through painting and drawing, Carlson cites entangled cultural narratives and institutional authority relating to objects based on the merit of possession and display. Her current research includes Indigenous Futurism and assimilation metaphors in film. She is Anishinaabe.

The print *Anti-Retro* is about reframing the past. Landscapes are political. The title *Anti-Retro* comes from a Michel Foucault interview. Although Foucault was talking about the filmic representations of struggles relating to Europe and WW2, it is hard to imagine his conversation of reframing popular memory not applying to films and images of the invasion and conquest of North America. This battle has been fought with images, and fought hard in the colonization North America. The images may seem to reproduce images of the triumphant “West”. She reveals the truth of the Old West in this particular print asserting that “culture is in a continual state of change and assimilation” through visuals that are familiar (cowboys) and also, distorted (just as the truth is).

Stylistically Carlson’s work breaks all the rules of formal art. She hand paints, using kaleidosopic mirroring patterns and seemingly endless repetition. A contemporary storyteller she is presenting acts reflexively to what has been said about Indigenous communities and taken as truth. In short, she is saying “I see you” and the harm that you are doing. I am making a record of the wrongdoing that has happened and showing a reverse gaze documenting the violence, oppression and blood libel. She is taking back her peoples story!



***Old Fashioned Window/2***, 1989  
Ramona Sakiestewa, Hopituh Shinumu (Hopi)  
Weaving: Wool, dye  
Gift of funds from Mary and Bob Mersky, 2021.82

**RAMONA SAKIESTEWA** always knew she would be an artist. Her life was one that was filled with ups and downs and in her words, “I did artmaking as a way to create order out of uncertainty.”

As many who are Hopi, she began as a weaver as that allowed her to blend shapes, layer colors and also connect her to her people. Much of her early work was quite graphic and evolved into abstract and more painterly approaches.

The thematic thread through most of her work – puzzle pieces, astronomical configurations and divination; she even has reached back to her childhood to retrieve an early design lexicon! She loves manipulating the complexity inherent in disparate images, patterns and surfaces, and “deconstructs” what she sees. As she grew up in the American Southwest, much of her tapestry work has been informed by the land and the sky, taking inspiration from the ever-changing days, light and movement.

This beautiful weaving is one of her collaborations, one with the architect (now deceased) Frank Lloyd Wright. The Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation at Taliesin West commissioned her to weave about a dozen tapestries to raise funds for the fabrication and an exhibit of a replica Usonian House. She immersed herself in Lloyd’s archival work and ethos before choosing the elegant window designs to weave. She found that his bold colors inspired her to choose rich hues and geometric shapes. This particular weaving is truly modernist ... yet, also plays on the patterning and weaving techniques inherent in the classic, iconic striping seen in Hopi, Diné and Pueblo weaving. This tapestry is intricate, it is exacting, it is filled with “lights and darks” and it is, from my point of view, a manifestation of the creative power of spirituality. For many traditional weavers, weaving is not seen as an act in which one creates something by oneself; it is seen as an act in which one uncovers a pattern that was already there. Granted, that pattern that was there was thoroughly Lloyd Wright’s however, Sakiestewa has made the design her own, imbuing it with an energy that is very much her own. She has held on to what is truly her culture and has transformed her tradition to one that is a contemporary take on who we are.

*“I like the idea of having this little bit of woven history” ... For me, it’s really interesting; I think it’s a really interesting metaphor. It’s literally like a thread through history that you can attach many things to. Fireproof fabric, lightweight fabrics, imperial clothing — there is nothing you can’t reference back to weaving at some point.*

- Ramona Sakiestewa

**RABBETT STRICKLAND** taught himself to paint the epic images that center on his Anishinaabeg creation on re-creation stories. His paintings each tell a story of Nanabozho that takes viewers to new and unexpected realms of personal relevance and universally meaningful content.

Early in his career he studied the forms and studio practices of Renaissance and Baroque masters whose influence he is quick to acknowledge. Indeed, His figures are muscular, sculptural and he paints them in a variety of dynamic poses, with limbs faintly outlined in black and modeled in lifelike color; they recall the figures that artists such as Michelangelo did for the Sistine Chapel. This - as others he has painted - brings to mind those early Renaissance frescoes that are bounded by far-off outcroppings of jagged peaks like those seen in Leonardo de Vinci's work. By using traditional glazing, he marries old-world European techniques and forms together with a classically-drawn subject matter deeply rooted in Anishinaabe culture, to create an oeuvre which is uniquely his own.

His paintings usually feature Nanabozho, a complex character from Ojibwe stories passed down the generations. Nanabozho, a trickster, is part human part spirit, being both of the Earth and a creator of all things and creatures on Earth. Strickland's paintings, received in dreams, feature moments from Ojibwe stories (mythology), a genre which continues to grow along with Ojibwe history. As in all mythology, there are lessons in the stories, and thus lessons in Strickland's paintings. What is most striking about these paintings, though, is their coherence. Not only does this painting convey a sense of unity through color and composition, but it is also unified in subject matter, tone, and style: the work is unmistakably his own. Eloquent in its suggestion of the the cliché that "a picture is worth a thousand words," this moment in time seems to have collapsed upon itself with his minute details seeming impossibly earthly (though very real to one who believes). It is his truth.

*"All I did from 15 through 18 was explore through color. I started out doing figurative art and morphed right into a Picasso style." It took another 10 years for me to develop his distinctive style ... "The supreme entity or being for Nanabozho is the Earth, Kitchi Manitou. He is an emissary who did not come into the world but rather came out of it" ...*

- Rabbett Before Horses Strickland



***Nanabozho and Toad Woman***, early 21st century

Rabbett Strickland, American, Anishinaabe

Oil on Canvas

Gift of Rabbett Before Horses Strickland, 2023.14





*“My work comes out of me, who I am, through my dreams, my imagination, and my memories. Dreams and imagination are similar, but different: one is sleep dreaming and the other is daydreaming. My memories come out of my intelligence, education, and personal history.”*

- Jim Denomie

***A Beautiful Hero, Woody Keeble, 2009***

Jim Denomie, Anishnaabe

Oil on canvas

Tweed Art Museum, University of Minnesota, Duluth,  
Alice Tween Tuohy Foundation Purchase Fund

**JIM DENOMIE.** His Ojibwe name is Asiganaak (Red Wing Black Bird). Born on the Lac Courte Oreilles reservation near Hayward, WI he grew up in Minneapolis. Though acknowledged as very talented, he was discouraged from becoming an artist full-time by his teachers and went down the path of partying, drinking and working in carpentry and construction. When he decided enough was enough and got sober he went back to school to the University of MN and while there took an art class. And thus began his path to “telling our stories how we see and know them.”

Denomie’s paintings are laden with symbolism. Tree stumps and chickens denote colonization, while owls indicate bad omens (sometimes). Elvis taking a selfie speaks to modern America’s obsession with media, popular culture and shallow imagery; bingo cards evoke the history of Indian gaming, with reservations being forced to rely on casinos for steady income. He loved the use of color as he saw color as joyous yet also ironic and funny depending on its use. Inserting visual “jokes” or ironies was a natural for him as his work zeroed in on Native culture vs. mainstream culture, and incorporated his perspective on the two. He used humor to illuminate the uneasy relationships - both past and present - that exist between each other, Surreal landscapes paired with his unique “darkness” allowed him to deliver a Native viewpoint that was definitely his own yet also, conveyed a universality of how many Native people saw their place in today’s society. He was controversial and intrusive, and that was OK by him. His dream-like imagery allowed him to remember the horrors that took place and the political climates that still exist within almost a hallucinatory approach. His painting-a-day series allowed him to use his powerful use of paint to amplify and contain so many honest, disturbing and wide-open thoughts on Native issues. One can spend days, months, even a year discerning that is being said (and unsaid). A perfect example is this piece, *A Beautiful Hero, Woody Keeble*, which speaks to a decorated Native soldier in American history that few have ever heard of, showing him charging forward and facing active combat ... ableit leading the charge with rabbits (an animal that Jim was particularly fond of!)

He became a champion of many in the arts, many calling him their “art dad” as he encapsulated traditional Native values of kindness, generosity and humor. He loved gatherings of artists and supported so many by just being there, offering support and encouragement.

## And here we are ...

As all have seen, who Native people are is not how Native people see themselves. As diverse of the world may be, it's not always the best "stomping ground" for understanding what authenticity means. For the Native artists – and the work that has been spotlighted today – how they push "who we are" is vastly different than what has been presented as truth. This has meant that their lives, their peoples' cultures and the varying outlook on their representation throughout history and in schools, books, and all media has made these artists rebel against the stereotypes and through their art display their hearts.

By showing their truths, they believe it will create a ripple effect in understanding. None are worried about what the opinions of others mean. What is most important is that their work, their imagery opens the eyes to listen, to reflect, to re-evaluate, and so, cut through "the noise" and perceive, discern and appreciate what has happened, how the dominant dialogue needs to be changed and who owns their story (guess what? it is not you).

By leveraging their various artistic techniques, each artist reaches out to teach and inform from their perspective. In doing so, these Native artists reach across the knowledge aisle to ask that you meet them for a discussion of authenticity from a place of visual language that tells their personal stories and communicates their beliefs, their tribal experiences, the harm and destruction that was done (and why), and paint truthful images that serve as "the new storytelling."

Yuch-aan (I thank you) for joining me today at the Minneapolis Institute of Art and ask that you continue the journey and learning the heartfelt stories throughout the Americas galleries.



**Above:**

**Ring (from Pocahonta jewelry set), 2014**

Keri Ataumbi, metalsmith, Kai'gwu (Kiowa)  
Jamie Okuma, beadworker, Comanche

Antique glass, 24 karat electroplated beads, buckskin, 18 karat yellow gold, sterling silver, wampum shell, fresh water pearls, rose and brilliant cut diamonds and diamond beads, diamond brilliants  
Gift of funds from The Duncan and Nivin MacMillan Foundation, 2014.93.2



**Below Left:**

**Kaanze/Wazhazhe (Kanza/Osage), 2020**

Chris Pappan, Kaw, Osage and  
Cheyenne River Lakota descent

Pencil on Paper

Collection of Michael and Jody Wahlig, L2023.12.7

**Below Right:**

**Groundbeing: Resonance, 2022**

Rose Simpson, Santa Clara Pueblo

Clay, glaze, twine, steel

The Mary Ruth Weisel Endowment for Africa, Oceania, and the Americas and gifts of funds from Mary and Bob Mersky, and Mary and Paul Reyelts, 2022.48

