art by and about
Native creation

September 27, 2016 – January 28, 2017
This project is supported in part by the following: an award from the National Endowment for the Arts, Jeanene and Ron Hulsey, Mary Ann and Ken Fergeson, the Chickasaw Nation, the Oklahoma Arts Council, OSU/A&M Board of Regents, and the OSU Museum of Art Advocates.

In addition, the OSU Museum of Art would like to extend a thank you to Bockley Gallery in Minneapolis, MN and the Institute of American Indian Arts Museum in Santa Fe, NM.
“It is from this bold rainbow of possibility that these women inspire and dream outside the boundaries of what is collectively termed Native art.” — Heather Ahtone
From the Belly of Our Being: art by and about Native creation provides a special opportunity for all visitors to experience contemporary Native American art making, many examples of which are being seen here for the first time. We are most grateful for the inspired vision of guest curator, heather ahtone. The exhibition she has brought into being brings us face to face with Indigenous female–centered creation stories. A theme shared by all tribal nations, it comes to us in an array of versions, each one part of the family yet distinctive, like an offspring, each story belonging to one of the artists’ cultural traditions. The catalogue accompanying this remarkable exhibition builds on the insights of the creation story, using heather ahtone’s long personal relationships with these artists as a conceptual platform. The stories the artists share with the curator—each relating their personal stories through their artwork—as well the curator’s comments about their art, offer a deeper appreciation of the role of Native women.

For the OSU Museum of Art, this exhibition inaugurates our third year of programming, with an extraordinary array of events—discussions, artist workshops, and performances—to enhance our understanding of the exhibition narrative.

We are especially grateful to Jeanene and Ron Hulsey, the Chickasaw Nation, the National Endowment for the Arts, Mary Ann and Ken Ferguson, Burns and Ann Hargis, the OSU/A&M Board of Regents and the OSU Museum of Art Advocates for their support of the exhibition, programs, and catalogue for From the Belly of Our Being. Finally, I must commend my over-achieving team of colleagues—collectively the museum staff, interns, university colleagues, and the OSU Museum of Art Advocates for their ongoing contributions to the success of projects like this. I’m inspired daily by their work and dedication.

We hope you find this exhibition as exciting and engaging as we have throughout its development.
My grandfather always told me to begin with being thankful.

The women in this exhibition have honored me by allowing their work to be included, and I am greatly indebted to each of them for their enthusiasm and generosity. I am incredibly grateful to the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art and Shawn Yac, former curator, who invited me to do something special in their galleries. I deeply appreciate the guiding hand of Victoria Berry, whose unwavering faith in the project grounded my continued efforts to make it reality. To the staff at OSUMA, who built all the supporting blocks through educational programming, promotion, publication, and grant writing—thank you!

This project received generous support from the Institute of American Indian Arts Museum and Bockley Gallery, for which I will remain grateful, and I encourage you to explore their galleries. In addition Jeanene and Ron Hulsey enthusiastically donated to the project and, through their support, ensured that we could move the project along very early in the development of this exhibition. From the Belly of Our Being would not be possible, in its present form, without the support of the National Endowment for the Arts; and as this is my first curatorial project to receive this level of national support, I am humbled. I also want to thank the Chickasaw Nation for recognizing the value of publications on Native art and supporting publication of the exhibition catalogue—Chokmash’ik!

With deep regard, I want to also acknowledge my University of Oklahoma and Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art family, who allowed me the freedom to work away from home. And to my Ahtone, Begaye, and Wika families, and, especially, Marwin, Talullah, and Miko—for whom I am driven every day to make the world a place worthy of your spirits—bless you.

My grandfather always told me to begin with being thankful.
Sainday’s Sunglasses illustrates the Kiowa story of how the sun rotates around the Earth. In the story, Sainday, Fox, Deer, and Hawk steal the sun from the people on the other side of the world who were using it to play a ball game. In a relay race they bring the sun to this side of the earth, burning their backs slightly while they carried it, which is why they all have black tips on their fur and feathers. When they get it to this side of the earth, Sainday throws it high into the sky so we can share half the time with the people on the other side of the earth. I love the whimsy of this story and that our origin story clearly relates that the earth is round and there are people living on the other side. I made sunglasses because I thought it must have been really bright when they were carrying the sun on their backs. The box serves as illustrations to tell the story, as you are opening the layers and removing the glasses. I used wood from India because it is a material that comes from the other side of the earth. The glasses are constructed of 22 karat gold, rutilated quartz, 18 karat gold, deer antler, sterling silver, buffalo horn, opal, and polarized lenses.

Story of the Big Dipper illustrates the Kiowa story of the big dipper and what is commonly referred to as the Devil’s Tower. I think it is interesting that so many of our landmarks were named devil this or devil that. Perhaps it’s a reflection of the fear the European people had when they were moving west. This piece is an early example of a relatively small group of work that I started when I first began to make art. The series relates our Kiowa origin stories through the common objects of jewelry and accessories. A means to bring the larger, the mythic, the stories and experiences that form our culture into a current and accessible format. This purse is constructed of sterling silver, 14 karat gold, diamonds, brain tanned buckskin. There are compartments for money, a credit card, lipstick, a comb, and a condom.
Regarding my painting, there are narrative inels that engender a few tropes that reflect the creatures that play a heroic role within these creation stories. For example, there is an Iroquois narrative about a woman that falls from the sky. It goes something like . . .

There is no land, it is all water. There are animals: beaver, otter, loon. The animals go diving deep down to the bottom. They gather mud to create the earth. Muskrat is the weakest, and doesn’t make it back up to the surface alive. But he brings mud in his paws. The Sky Woman takes the mud and spreads it across the turtle’s shell and creates the land. Then she reaches into the sky for a bundle of seeds which are sown to grow into the grass and the plants.

My work draws from the substance of traditional narrative while contextualizing it within my personal sphere of experience. Like muskrat, I am attracted to such characters and cultural heroes that are unlikely to succeed. In pictorial terms, coyote and the others tend to transcend the materiality of their cosmos. In this situation, tragic or comedic, as the case might have it, my animal characters ask questions about our human world—or make worldly criticisms.
Artist Statements

**The Trail**, 2015.
Acrylic, ink, and pencil on Lokta paper, 31” x 60”
Loan courtesy of artist and Bockley Gallery

**Sky Woman**, 2016.
Acrylic, ink, and pencil on Lokta paper, 31” x 41”
Loan courtesy of artist and Bockley Gallery
Manifestations of a Changing Woman
Changing Woman is a central deity to our creation stories. She is the personification of all change and cycles. It is she that we honor with the changing season, changing times of day, and stages of life. It is said that Changing Woman is sometimes a young girl, an adolescent woman, a mature woman, or an old lady depending on the direction that she is headed. She is honored throughout time and by all women. We sing songs to her when we give birth, begin menstruation, get married, and have a home. We honor her knowledge of all cycles in life.

Storm
The storm pattern is said to signify the home, and its connection to the elements and the four sacred mountains. The pattern is a symbol of our existence on earth. The center symbol is always the home. In this painting the “home” is placed where the subject’s heart is located. Diné women are central to the home; we carry the lineage of our family, the history of our grandmothers and where they have been, we must know why we are connected to the mountains.

Emergence
It is said that our place of emergence was where the streams came together and flowed in four directions. One to the east, one to the west, one to the north, and one to the south. Along these streams were the first dwelling places. It is said that First Man sought out First Woman when he saw a turquoise fire burning, he looked between a black cloud and white cloud and he found her.

Center of the Web
Spider Woman is a key figure in our creation stories. It is said that in the third world the Holy Ones told Spider Woman that she had the ability to weave geometric patterns as a map of the universe. At first she did not know what they meant, and was not instructed how it should be done, but curiosity became her energy and driving force to weave her creations. In the fourth world it is Spider Woman who taught us to weave, she is central in teaching us the philosophies to live in this world. Here she is gazing at a spider, contemplating how a circle is created with a straight line.
Storm, 2013.
Acrylic on birch,
33 1/2" x 45 1/2"
Loan courtesy of artist

Center of the Web, 2016.
Oil on birch, 36" x 24"
Loan courtesy of artist

Artist Statements
The Osage creation story describes how we came to be a people of the earth. It relates the journey from the heavens of the earth and sky people, who were the children of the sun and the moon. They are described as stars hitting the earth like meteorites. The earth was covered with water with only rocks to stand on. In an effort to find earth, several animals were sent into the depths of the water to find land. It is said that the mighty elk blew into the four directions creating great winds that caused the waters to recede, and the earth was revealed. The elk wallowed in the moist earth and wherever his hair clung to the earth, grasses, trees, and foods grew to nourish the people. The earth and sky people joined together with the underground and water beings to become the people.

The two pieces that I am exhibiting are linked to the creation story through symbolism and metaphor. As in most creation stories, the Osage creation story is complex with many layers addressing the various aspects of being human. Our story informs our worldview, one that is based on the division of the earth and sky. It represents the order, balance, and duality found in life, nature, and the universe. Both pieces will include imagery, symbols, and patterns associated with concepts found within our beliefs and philosophies. The larger focus will be from the female side found within the duality of life.

**Anita Fields**

The Osage creation story describes how we came to be a people of the earth. It relates the journey from the heavens of the earth and sky people, who were the children of the sun and the moon. They are described as stars hitting the earth like meteorites. The earth was covered with water with only rocks to stand on. In an effort to find earth, several animals were sent into the depths of the water to find land. It is said that the mighty elk blew into the four directions creating great winds that caused the waters to recede, and the earth was revealed. The elk wallowed in the moist earth and wherever his hair clung to the earth, grasses, trees, and foods grew to nourish the people. The earth and sky people joined together with the underground and water beings to become the people.

The two pieces that I am exhibiting are linked to the creation story through symbolism and metaphor. As in most creation stories, the Osage creation story is complex with many layers addressing the various aspects of being human. Our story informs our worldview, one that is based on the division of the earth and sky. It represents the order, balance, and duality found in life, nature, and the universe. Both pieces will include imagery, symbols, and patterns associated with concepts found within our beliefs and philosophies. The larger focus will be from the female side found within the duality of life.
I grew up in Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico, in the 1970s and ’80s. There are still five generations of women on my mom’s side that also grew up in Santa Clara, all of us dancing and making pottery. In the dances, stories were told through song, traditional ceremonial clothes, and movement. On pottery, stories were told through shape and design. Dances are performed in all seasons. Much thought and many details go into the preparations and experience of the dance. It may be an aunt with the right jewelry, or your mom who helps with the moccasins and wrapping the belt. Now I am reminded of grandma’s delicious red chili stew. That day the dance is performed there is also a great feast. I learned to make the traditional coil built pottery from my mother when I was sixteen years old. I later started sculpting pieces to be cast in bronze. This young native girl depicted in the sculpture is my daughter, Leah.
The digital composite, Viable, uses Luther Standing Bear’s wise words as the backdrop for a photo portrait series featuring a young Indian woman, carrying our most precious cultural legacy. This triptych of images sends a literal message—one about her gestation of a cherished gift—but also metaphorically, that as Indigenous people, we have a responsibility to nurture and keep our culture alive.

On the exterior of the Cherokee-style column basket, Feminine Sacred, the aforementioned quote is combined with the language of the Violence Against Women Act of 2013. This legislation grants tribes the authority to protect Native women from sexual violence at the hands of non-Natives, thus defending the life-givers who are our original connections to the Mother Earth since time immemorial. Woven on the interior of this piece are words written by a Native woman in the last stages of her pregnancy, thanking the Creator for the gift of sharing her body with this new life and for the blessing of being chosen to be part of this child’s journey.

It is the mothers, not the warriors, who create a people and guide their destiny.

Luther Standing Bear (Lakota)
Sunboy’s mother was an earth woman and his father was the Sun. His father was a jealous man and didn’t want his wife to return to her people. She lived alone with him and her son in the sky world. She was lonely and missed her family. When she finally plotted her escape through the clouds and back to earth, she failed. The rope she tied around herself and her child was too short and they were left dangling from the sky, only to be discovered by her husband upon his return. He was very angry and enraged; he threw a rawhide wheel at her and killed her. She fell to the earth, dead. Her baby was alive but now he was an orphan—his mother was dead and his father had abandoned him. Sunboy was left in this new world to nurse on his dead mother’s breast. Eventually he found Spider Woman’s camp next to a river. She was an old lady and she knew who he was, the son of the Sun and an earth woman—half from this world and half from that world.

Eventually, he trusted her and she became his Taah, his grandma. She raised him like only a grandma can. She loved him like only a grandma can. He became strong and powerful and eventually became the Sun Boys, two men, two halves of the same self.

The Sun Boys’ story is as old as the beginning of our time, yet it is a story I have heard many times among my own family and friends. How many people do I know who were raised by their grandmas? How many people do I know whose father could not be a good father? Whose mother was not able to be there for them? Who were abandoned, orphaned, and raised by the elders? The Sun Boys are us.

Teri Greeves
KIOWA b. 1970

Sunboy’s Women, 2011.
Glass beads, wooden beads, and Swarovski crystals on raw silk,
72" x 72" x 2"
(each panel: 32" x 72" x 2")
Loan courtesy of artist.

Sunboy's mother was an earth woman and his father was the Sun. His father was a jealous man and didn't want his wife to return to her people. She lived alone with him and her son in the sky world. She was lonely and missed her family. When she finally plotted her escape through the clouds and back to earth, she failed. The rope she tied around herself and her child was too short and they were left dangling from the sky, only to be discovered by her husband upon his return. He was very angry and enraged; he threw a rawhide wheel at her and killed her. She fell to the earth, dead. Her baby was alive but now he was an orphan—his mother was dead and his father had abandoned him. Sunboy was left in this new world to nurse on his dead mother’s breast. Eventually he found Spider Woman’s camp next to a river. She was an old lady and she knew who he was, the son of the Sun and an earth woman—half from this world and half from that world.

Eventually, he trusted her and she became his Taah, his grandma. She raised him like only a grandma can. She loved him like only a grandma can. He became strong and powerful and eventually became the Sun Boys, two men, two halves of the same self.

The Sun Boys’ story is as old as the beginning of our time, yet it is a story I have heard many times among my own family and friends. How many people do I know who were raised by their grandmas? How many people do I know whose father could not be a good father? Whose mother was not able to be there for them? Who were abandoned, orphaned, and raised by the elders? The Sun Boys are us.

Teri Greeves
KIOWA b. 1970

Sunboy’s Women, 2011.
Glass beads, wooden beads, and Swarovski crystals on raw silk,
72" x 72" x 2"
(each panel: 32" x 72" x 2")
Loan courtesy of artist.
Remembering Choctaw Ancestors

The center of this tripartite mixed-media painting is Nanih Waiya, the Mother Mound of the Choctaw people. Choctaw people emerged from the nearby Nanih Waiya cave. Both mound and cave are in Winston County, Mississippi, and once again belong to Choctaw people. Moon gave corn to the Choctaw people through the two Twin Warriors, shown here in red and based on petroglyph designs. The sun circle is based on the Claflin shell gorget design from Stalling’s Island, Georgia. The sun circle symbolizes the connection from our sacred fires in the center of our ceremonial grounds that communicate our prayers and intentions to Creator. The photographic transfers are of departed Choctaw ancestors. The Celestial Eye image is represented here in white, hatachi, the color of peace; it is found on Choctaw beaded baldric sashes such as the two that the Choctaw man and woman are depicted wearing. The colors come from dawn, when we greet Creator and the day ahead.
**Artist Statements**

**LEFT**
Ancestral Gulf Bird #6, 2010. Monotype, chine colle with ledger paper, 21½" x 28½". Loan courtesy of artist.

**RIGHT**
This hand-carved Inuit-style kayak paddle takes its conceptual and metaphorical strength from the genesis story of Sedna,* Goddess of all Sea Life. There are many versions of the story, yet themes of love, betrayal, and resilience are common among them.

A paddle is a symbol of movement. Its intent is to stir the waters and to journey forward with diligent resolve. Within the context of contemporary environmental concerns, this forward motion is a testament to our moral courage to stand against the influences of Big Oil and to reduce the human causes of climate change. If we love the place where we live, how do we express that love? Are we choosing to hear nature’s global warnings—water pollution, ocean acidification, degradation of sea habitats, and melting polar ice—or are we betraying our home?

Otoliths—the ear bones of fish—are housed in a small glass bottle with a cork stopper that is tied to the kayak paddle. The position of the bottle is key; it is placed in the center of the paddle loom to act as a kind of compass that is always in the paddler’s view. It is a reminder that we have choices. If we heed nature’s warnings and work to correct our course, we will not have forsaken our integrity as a species. We will have come to our highest senses. We will have sought brave and creative solutions in determining our future relationship—and our children’s future—with the planet.

*Sedna was a young Inuit woman with a strong heart and mind. After rejecting several marriage proposals from men in her village sent forth by her father, she agreed to marry an unknown hunter who convinced Sedna’s father that he could provide for her. The hunter takes her to a nest high on a floating island cliff where he reveals his true nature, that of a dark spirit bird. Sedna’s father attempts to rescue her in a kayak. As they flee, the spirit bird creates a great storm with his wings. Fearing for his life, Sedna’s father throws her overboard in hopes this will stabilize the boat and calm the spirit bird. It does not. She clings to the side of the kayak until her fingers freeze and break off. Each broken digit then transformed into the first seals, walruses, and whales of the sea. Though Sedna sinks to the bottom of the sea, she does not die. She becomes the mother and guardian of all sea life.

Cedar Marie
STANDING ROCK SIOUX b 1963

Journey (Detail), 2016
Western red cedar, otolith bones, glass, cork, wax
First, paint wax,
81" x 3 1/2" x 1 1/2"
Loan courtesy of artist.
RIGHT
Journey, 2016.
Western red cedar, ox:
- carved horse, glass, cork, wax thread, paste wax,
8" x 3 1/2" x 1 1/2"
Loan courtesy of artist
My history is my origin. My work might reveal who I am, the foundation of my being, or it might sometimes reflect an ancient truth. While one work might suggest long ago or express a relation to the world around, everything is an extension of who I am. Finding an object or seeing an animal might remind me of an ancient story I’ve heard or one that might have been told to me. Other times an object might reflect my own complex heritage from both sides of my family, which become an origin story of its own. My history is born also in the land and I am an embodiment of all that is around. I speak of the land; it speaks through me. It is charted not by instrument alone but by ancient stories that guide us. My origin, my history tells me where I’m going.

Meryl McMaster
Plains Cree/Blackfoot b. 1988
**ARTIST STATEMENTS**

**LEFT**

*Harbinger of Sudden Departures*, 2013
C-print, 37" x 51"
Loan courtesy of artist and Bockley Gallery

**RIGHT**

*Tilsam*, 2010
C-print, 25" x 25"
Loan courtesy of artist and Katzman Contemporary
The Columbian Exchange between the Americas, Australia, and Afro-Eurasia is considered one of the greatest cataclysmic shifts in human history. The exchange of humans, plants, animals, and microbes marked the creation of a new world—both positive and negative. St. Kateri Tekakwitha (Mohawk/Algonquin, 1656–1680) was at the center of the maelstrom of change, and my painting Extremis Malis Extrema Remedia reflects the ambivalence of this new world being created around her.

This very real historical woman was stricken by smallpox, one of the many epidemic diseases that killed an estimated 90 percent of the Indigenous population of the Americas, yet she survived and was about to tell her tale. Disfigured with pockmarks, Kateri lived in a time of epidemics, warfare, and social turmoil and converted to Christianity at the age of twenty. At that time and now, many in her tribe see her not as a hero, but as a cultural traitor, turning away from her tribe and religious beliefs. The title, Latin for “extreme ills, extreme remedies,” evolved into our phrase “desperate times call for desperate measures.” While I personally don’t agree with Kateri’s choices, who am I to judge how she found comfort, since I cannot possibly imagine the suffering she endured?

The arch she is praying under represents the institution of the Roman Catholic Church, which includes symbols of suffering and sorrow, including the whip that Kateri used for self-flagellation. Surrounding her is Nature—scenery from the Northeastern Woodlands where she lives. She is depicted in contemporary Iroquois or Haudenosaunee clothing. The beadwork motif at the bottom of her skirt is the Sky Arch, symbolizing the Upper World, flanked by symbols of the Celestial Tree, which echoes the scenery and shows that the Sacred is all around us.
Iktomi Dreaming

In Lakota mythology, Anog Ite, also called Double-Faced Woman, is a daughter of Wazi and Kanka, and wife of Tate (the Wind). She was a talented and beautiful woman tricked by Iktomi (Spider) and her mother into attempting to seduce Wi (the Sun). Wi is publicly stated that he has forgotten his wife, Hanwi (the Moon). For scheming to displace a wife and neglecting her own children, Anog Ite was punished with a second face that is hideous. Anog Ite was the mother of the Four Winds and Yum (the whirlwind) but as further punishment was banished from her children.

After her banishment, Anog Ite brought the skills of hide tanning, clothing, and quillwork to the first peoples as they emerged onto the earth. Despite her mistakes and loneliness, she still had much to offer, including the means to redemption. She is a character of duality and complexity, a person of terrible beauty and revulsion. She possesses and shares her incredible talents and knowledge, but is also a figure of fear and pain for pregnant women and babies. Anog Ite is credited with the admirable skills and patterns associated with quillwork and beadwork. It is said that she brings her skills to women in dreams, but there is danger in becoming too enamored with the artistry of beadwork and quilling; it can become obsessive to the point of imbalance.

Anog Ite teaches lessons that relate to the social norms regarding sexuality, motherhood, and human frailty. It is a story of the complexity of the feminine condition, of manipulation, forgiveness, grief, and redemption.

Sewing Box, for Anog Ite

The sewing box is decorated with two styles of beadwork, both floral and geometric styles and designs used by the Lakotas. These designs are supplemented with the beaded QR codes that tell Anog Ite's story in text form.
LEFT
**Sewing Box, For Anog Ite**, 2016.  
Sculptural beaded sewing box, 8" x 10" x 10"  
Loan courtesy of artist

RIGHT
**Iktomi Dreaming**, 2016.  
Beadwork and mixed media on paper, mounted on birch panel, 12" x 15" x 3"  
Loan courtesy of artist
Being from a community that is maternal, the forces of women and creation are woven throughout our shared history and build our future. I see the works I create as an extension of these forces because as a figurative artist my work is an intersection of autobiography and community. Representation of Native peoples from a Native perspective is important to me. I depict my Native culture and the relationship between perception and experience through genre scenes and portraits of people from my home reservation in New York.

For the Frame Series I explore new content but especially aesthetic possibilities in weaving together personal narratives, family relationships, and historical trauma. Bad or good, my relationships to the women in my family have helped shape who I am today. For these works I chose to look closer at those relationships and themes of domestic violence, abuse, mental illness, but also good things like caring, providing, protecting, and teaching. The resulting paintings and Seneca beaded picture frames have an intensely personal and emotional component, making the project very revealing. The creation of these works felt necessary after the birth of my first child because it forced me to think about what survival means by adding a new generation to the family in the face of the continued effects of Colonialism.

Frame Series (Pam): When the Kinzua Dam Happened/“Now Who’s Going to Protect You?”, 2016.
Frame: Fabric, seed beads, porcupine quills, thread; Study: Gel photo transfer, gouache, and acrylic on watercolor paper, 19 1/2" x 11 1/4" x 1 1/4".
Loan courtesy of artist.

Frame: Fabric from grandmother’s nightgown, seed beads, thread; Study: Gel photo transfer, gouache, and acrylic on watercolor paper, 19 1/2" x 11 1/4" x 1/8".
Loan courtesy of artist.

Frame: Recycled screenprint on paper, fabric, seed beads, thread; Study: Gel photo transfer, gouache, and acrylic on watercolor paper, 19 1/2" x 11 1/4" x 1".
Loan courtesy of artist.
In Chemehuevi (pronounced cheh-meh-WAY-vee), our Creator is a female deity. Her name is Great Ocean Woman (Hutsipamamau’u) and she created all the land and people from her body with the help (and sometimes mischief) of Wolf, Coyote, and the Mountain Lion. There are several other female familiars during our early dawn stories. All of the females have great strength and diversity; they range from old to young, sometimes they are desirable, provocative, and dangerous—sometimes they are nurturers and healers with the most powerful medicine.

From a very young age, Chemehuevi women are taught that their innate strength as a woman and life giver is all-powerful, maybe sometimes even supernatural, and we are respected as equals in Chemehuevi society. We hold power in government and historically in battle. This unique perspective shows up throughout my art. It is always my intention to visualize this inherent Chemehuevi belief in the all-powerful, supernatural strength of women. It is a gentle but powerful shift to see Native women portrayed in this way from an indigenous female perspective.

I am deeply committed to making work that addresses Native American social issues and changes the way people perceive Native Americans, especially Native women, in contemporary society. If we want respect, love, and beauty among us and others, we must actively promote it through our art.

Cara Romero
CHEMEHUEVI 1977
Eufaula, 2015.
Archival pigment print,
44” x 44”
Loan courtesy of Cara Romero Photography
Artist Statements

Left
Water Memory, 2015. Archival pigment print, 44” x 44”
Loan courtesy of Cara Romero Photography

Right
Jenna, 2016. Archival pigment print, 29” x 28”
Loan courtesy of Cara Romero Photography

Far Right
Wakeah, 2016. Archival pigment print, 48” x 36”
Loan courtesy of Cara Romero Photography
My work as an artist rests in this simple assertion: We are collectors of stories and the stories we collect shape the people we are.

As I collect and work with stories, I am reminded time and time again that stories are fluid. They must bend and move in order to continue to serve us. I sometimes see myself going into ancient times, gathering up stories and bringing them into my current context. Our ancient stories are vital to us today. I believe in order to keep them vital, we must actively participate with them. Within my work, my aim is not merely a retelling, but a current engagement. I allow these stories to evolve, even as I do. This element of my work is vital, as I investigate and explore how my cultural heritage has shaped me and how it will continue to shape future generations.

Erin Shaw
CHICKASAW/CHOCTAW 1975

Beneath the Shallow Sea, 2016
Acrylic canvas mounted on board. 7 round canvas circles: 2 – 30", 2 – 24", 1 – 20", 1 – 16", 1 – 12”
Loan courtesy of artist
Although I grew up in Wichita, Kansas, my parents always kept us close to our heritage and traditions that they grew up with in Wewoka, Oklahoma. In all Native nations oral traditions were so important and the storyteller held an important place in the community and family. My dad and my Aunt Nelly were our family storytellers, and we as kids spent many times sitting at the kitchen table or traveling in a car listening to both of them.

Hearing how the wind is the life giver to all and how it opened the shell to allow the animals to take their place on earth is a great visual story. It also describes the relationship of the clans and their place in the tribe and learning the role of the woman, as being important in the tribe, family, and being the life giver of our traditions. From generation to generation it is through the woman that one receives their clan.

My installation reflects these beliefs and memories of these stories of my family. I made a form resembling a shell and placed visual motion to weave into the space. The piece also has images of both of my grandmothers within the installation, as they are the bloodlines of my family and life.

C. Maxx Stevens
SEMINOLE/MVSKOKE b. 1951

Force of Nature, 2016. Mixed media, site-specific installation, 10’ x 10’ x 10’.

Loan courtesy of artist.
Force of Nature (Detail), 2016
Mixed media, site-specific installation, 10' x 10' x 10'
Loan courtesy of artist
Marie Watt

SENECA • 1967

Trek (Pleiades) reflects on long journeys, as well as our ancient and modern fascination with stars. Stars are the basis for the ancient art of astronomy, calendar systems, navigational wayfinding, teachings, and mythology. The star motif in this piece draws from a design on a Native American basket, the maker is unidentified, but it is of California or Oregon origin and resides in the collection of the Halsey Ford Museum of Art. I have depicted the Pleiades, or Seven Sisters, in honor of my friend Alma Nungarrayi Granites, whom I met during the Landmark artist exchange and printmaking residency organized by the Tamarind Institute (Albuquerque, New Mexico) and the Yirrkala Art Center (Yirrkala, Northern Territory, Australia). The starship Enterprise (from the original series of Star Trek) underscores the intersection of the historical and contemporary, the real and mythical. Trek reflects on man’s ancient and modern preoccupation with the sky.

Blanket Stories: Indian Territory: Growing up Indigenous in the United States, the phrase “Indian Territory” has a lot of resonance. On one hand, this land we share was once entirely an Indian territory, but it is actually a very specific part of U.S. history. During the Indian Removal Act of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many tribes were forcibly relocated to a portion of the south central United States with organic borders, called Indian Territory. The Indian Appropriation Act of 1889 opened the door to white settlement and this space also became known as Oklahoma Territory. In 1897 the two territories officially merged to become the state of Oklahoma. “Oklahoma” comes from the Choctaw word meaning “Red People.” Oklahoma now has 39 federally recognized tribes and a significant urban Indian community, which is a powerful present-day expression of Indigeneity in Oklahoma and the United States.

Round Dance: I didn’t grow up dancing in pow-wows, but the Round Dance is one dance in which I have often participated. Historically a healing dance, in pow-wows and other social gatherings, the Round Dance is considered a friendship dance. I like how this dance is often multigenerational and invites everyone to be part of the circle. There is a blanket in this blanket story column made of satin bindings that reminds me of brightly colored pow-wow regalia.

Grandmother: My tribe, the Seneca Nation of Indians, is a matrilineal society. Our clans, land ownership, and even voting rights have long been the domain of women. I never knew what feminism was until I went to college, and then I realized I was raised by proto-feminists.
My center, my home, in both a physical and spiritual sense comes from the teachings of our people, the Očeti Šakowin Oyaté. From our cultural teachings and practices I have learned how to carry myself in the world. It is from this place that I have been taught the ideals I hold as the utmost important in life: Notions of balance, prayer, compassion, generosity, courage, wisdom, respect, duality, humility, resilience, this list could go on and on. From the stories of our Lakota people, my own life experiences, and relationships within my community, the guiding principles in my life have been cultivated. It is from these stories, teachings, and experiences that I have learned my place in this life, the ways in which I can contribute, love, give, support, fight, and share. Much of this is done through my artistic practice and these ideas can be seen reflected in my work. At times these reflections are very direct. I have made works and will continue to create pieces that speak directly to Lakota spirituality, stories, and teachings. Other times, these teachings and stories are the foundation upon which a longer expansive narrative line is developed. Yet, they are always there somewhere beneath the layers of life and experience, embedded at the beginning.

Anunk Ite, or Double Woman, plays an important role in the Lakota emergence story and the gifting of quillwork to our people. Much good has come from her, but she also has an ugly side and is at times selfish and manipulative. The works in this exhibition speak strongly to ideas conveyed in these stories of balance, reciprocity and duality.
Looking Forward is about Changing Woman, who is part of our creation story. She is our female leader and teacher. I have made work about her and, in that way, it is about me and all women. We need to be strong and see beauty in the world around us. It is something I was taught at an early age but also something that I have to keep teaching myself every day. Wake up early, pray, think in a good way, and be good to yourself and those around you. It seems simple but it is very hard to do with many things that get in the way. Looking Forward is about moving forward into a better place and with a strong mind, body, and soul. Many of my works are an attempt to create a better space and place for my own mind and body to concentrate on. I am attempting to follow the creation story in which we are all moving together through different worlds to a better place. We are recreating ourselves again and again into being fresh and new to stand up to the hardships of life.

Melanie Yazzie
NAVAJO b. 1966

Monotype, 30" x 22"
Loan courtesy of artist, Clark Barker Collection, and Glenn Green Gallery.

Strength from Within, 2004.
Fabricated steel with a powder coat finish, 36" x 20 1/2" x 16"
Loan courtesy of artist and Clark Barker Collection.
By nature, Native peoples are storytellers. I am a Korean and Jemez Pueblo artist who utilizes digital imagery to visually share my story about identity, being mixed race, cultural pride, and home. The central figure in En route and There and Black Again are literal visual portrayals of a young Pueblo girl, my daughter Ji Hae, dressed in a traditional Pueblo manta, who is leading me to ceremony. I interpret this as the next generation connecting us to our Native traditions, helping our cultures to continue thriving, and keeping us tied to our ancestral homelands. I also incorporate the popular images of the “L” train and a Chicago Transit Authority map to represent our urban home in Chicago. I convey the similarities within the spirituality of both my cultures by using symbolic imagery, motifs derived from origami paper such as the butterfly and dragonfly, that have significance in both Asian and Native (Pueblo) cultures.

Debra Yepa-Pappan
JEMEZ PUEBLO/KOREAN b. 1971

En Route (L Series), 2016
Digital print on fine art paper, 30” x 20”
Loan courtesy of artist

There and Back Again, (L Series), 2016
Digital print on fine art paper, 30” x 20”
Loan courtesy of artist
"Walking, I am listening to a deeper way. Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me. Be still, they say. Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands."

Linda Hogan, Dwellings

From the Belly of Our Being: art by and about Native creation presents art made by some of the nation’s finest Native American artists, while providing a glimpse into the complex relationship between contemporary art and feminine cultural identity. Indigenous people pass our cultural ethos to the contemporary generation through our tribal creation narratives, wherein we find stories of the women who made the world.

The names and roles of these feminine forces vary. Aasdzáá nádleehé or Changing Woman in Navajo, Selu or Corn Mother in Cherokee, Sedna or Mother of the Sea in Inuktitut, Ataensic or Sky Woman in Seneca, Nokomis or Grandmother in Ojibwe, Anunk Ite or Double-Face Woman in Lakota. These women had a hand in creation, forming the people and things of the Earth, providing us with gifts that sustain us into the twenty-first century. Through these examples, our tribal communities learn to be respectful of women, guide the men to understand the feminine role within tribal society, and, often, vice-versa.

In this exhibition, each participating artist explores how these feminine forces continue to inform the ideals of feminine behavior and gendered roles—the ability to be both delicate and gentle, while also being a force that is powerful and bold. Their art addresses those creation stories, where feminine forces may wield great intellect, wisdom, skill, and generosity, yet sometimes be crippled by recognizable human frailties. From the Belly of Our Being provides an opportunity for the artists to express, overtly or in a more nuanced way, how these forces live through them and within their art.

That time of the beginning was not so long ago that we have forgotten. So, the idea that these forces are present in the arts of Indigenous people is not a courteous nod to primordial time—the art is evidence that these figures still live in our hearts and minds. It is our collective hope, curator and artists alike, that in sharing the art through which the stories live we will edify others to appreciate these feminine forces and the role of women within our collective social engagements. From the Belly of Our Being is our remembering, our telling of these stories for ourselves and for our children.

IN THE BEGINNING (or the Art of Creation)
The story of this exhibition begins with the artists. Over the last ten years and in personal conversations, the most exciting shared moments of my talks with these artists has often been when they wanted to share a new work and tell me how it represents their culture. At
With the broad representation of eighteen tribal communities within the exhibition proper, it becomes apparent that the very identity these women have formed in relationship to their tribes, their families, and have expressed within their art, shares the common element of story. Our stories begin in the beginning, often before mankind. For Teri Greeves’s Kiowa relatives it begins in the time of the giants, and from that beginning, often before mankind. For Teri Greeves’s Kiowa relatives it begins in the time of the giants, and for the Hopi story of Nawi and the continued sacrifices are often necessary to provide for those needs. Marie Watt’s blanket story rests in Stillwater, as a landing place for Sky Woman and the continued generation of Seneca women. It is not uncommon in our Native communities
that we share stories, within cultural region or through cultural engagement. A common feature that has been apparent to me is that for many of our communities, the Earth is gendered female. Recognizing that the Earth provides for her children, meeting all of our needs, as mothers we strive to do the same. But we also strive to protect our mothers, and this includes the Earth. Julie Buffalohead’s drawings address this relationship and accountability, as we hold our Earth mother in our hands. Cara Romero’s photographs of the great flood, which is so very common in creation stories, reminds us of the power of water and the importance of our relationship to the land. Linda Lomahaftewa’s depiction of the ibis recalls the delicate relationship that many creatures have to spaces we endanger. In concert with our creative role as part of the continued story of Indigeneity, accountability is a common theme of discussion amongst Native women. Accountability resonates across cultures—women across the globe recognize that we are the makers of the future. This is evident in Melanie Yazzie’s images of women, inspired by her travels to different Indigenous communities, where she found accountability to be a shared truth. For Native women, through, I contend that accountability is a two-sided coin. We recognize our own roles as mothers of the next seven generations, but we also acknowledge that we must hold others accountable. We know that as much as we must work to create within our children, families, and communities an ethos of gratitude, kindness, generosity, and stewardship, we must also hold others responsible for helping make sure that the future is a place where our children and communities will be able to act on this ethos. Shahn Goshorn reminds us so deftly weaves, inviting us to lean in to the story. Anita Fields uses the delicate medium of ceramics to speak, through the language of a wedding dress, to the delicate balance of earth and sky and the people between. We have had great leaders at every level who allow us to step into any role that allows us to engage on behalf of our future generations. As a young woman I knew of tribal leaders Mildred Cleghorn and Wilma Mankiller. Terrin Porton continues this legacy for our young women today. We have heard the bold words of women that guided us forward: Zitkala-Sa, who wrote of our humanity; Joy Harjo’s kitchen table, where we could make our families; Linda Hogan, who reminds us that our humanity is tied to all other kinds of animal people, and as much to the water and air that flows through our bodies. America Meredith’s painting of Saint Kateri presents another such story, one that speaks to the suffering and survival of our people. That is what Indigenous art speaks to, as do our songs, poetry, and dance. This is why it has been so important to include dance and storytelling within the programming schedule for the full development of From the Belly of Our Being.

Emergence (or from the Belly)
Chickasaw author and environmentalist Linda Hogan speaks to the “Towel of thousands” that prepared the way for each of us to step into our own being. That love fostered dreams, which fostered new stories and new reality. As much as the stories of creation are embedded in the past and remembering, it is through our new dreams that we create the future. We must imagine our healing. We must imagine our great-grandchildren and beyond. We must imagine prosperity and strength. From the imagining, then, we create a path to move forward. The artists in this exhibition imagine that future as a beautiful and sacred place, where stories continue within the art of Marylynn McKay and Jan Shaw. We recognize that part of the experience of living our cultures is in recognizing that the stories continue to be written—or illustrated, as the case may be. As much as we cherish the stories of the creation times, we are part of the longer story, we are the beginning of a story as it is being written. Please recognize that it takes great courage to honor the story within, especially when it has not yet been told.

Recognizing that we, as women, are the conduit to the continued vitality of our communities is an empowering position. Several of the artists, like LuAnne Reddy, have provided incredibly intimate portraits of their roles as women within their families. Dr. Debra Yupa-Bparagus, whose use of maps and ceremony and references to Chicago’s elevated trains reveal a cartographic system that guides her between homes. Without providing a deeper ontological examination, the artists give viewers the tools to look deeper into the relationship between the stories and the objects. As a curator, I recognize that many of the stories will be unfamiliar for most visitors, but I yearn for the time when our cultures will emerge from the veil of being seen as “Native American,” a homogenizing racial identifier, and will be recognized for the unique tribal diversity that has survived into the twenty-first century.

AND IN THE END
In the 1980s I recall Jesse Jackson describing how he was “pregnant with anticipation.” That phrase has been tucked away in my subconscious and sits with me in preparing for this exhibition. It is important to note that there have only been rare instances of exhibi- tions focused on Native American women. In 1985,
Women of Sweetgrass, Cedar and Sage was mounted at the American Indian Community House by Harmony Hammond and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith and was well-received by both the Native and non-Native communities. Theresa Harlan curated Watchful Eyes: Native American Women Artists at the Heard Museum in 1994. But I am unable to think of another exhibition that included a national approach and focused on women. The scarcity of exhibitions that address art by Native American women may be representative of the nascent field of Native American art history, or it may be a reflection of the minimal attributions given to women within the vast scope of Native American collections, mostly historic and mostly accumulated for museums by men. Regardless, this exhibition, From the Belly of Our Being: art by and about Native creation, is a valuable contribution to the field for many reasons. Most importantly, perhaps, it will place a small paving stone for the work of others to broaden this story.

So often, as contemporary voices, the relationship of our creative work to our tribal histories is drowned out by an art history canon that is built on a Western story of creation, wherein the present eats the past to allow only “newness” to be celebrated. But the antagonisms that are perceived in art and society, especially between traditions and contemporaneity, are less often working against each other within Native culture and more often serve as complementary colors that brighten the palette. It is from this bold rainbow of possibility that these women inspire and dream outside the boundaries of what is collectively termed Native art. They are working in materials or imagery that defy measures of cultural “authenticity,” whatever that may be. Yet, each artist will tell you that those feminine forces of creation guide their work daily.

Working with these gifted women to create a space where they could tell the stories embedded in their art has been especially rewarding. There is a murmur, a vibration that stirs within this project. It is possibly the fifth element, recognized by the Navajos as the energy that stirs the other four primal elements into action. It may be the power of beauty, a gift from creation, as it enlightens the mind to see the potential that we each hold within our center. Enjoy! Ayukpachi!