

# Tweaking the Traditional

Native artists' depictions of U.S. injustices date back to Wounded Knee, but Cahuilla Gerald Clarke's clever twists prove worthy of a museum exhibition.

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## Gerald Clarke prepares a Monument Series sculpture for his museum exhibition.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NATE ABBOTT

The dirt road leading to the home and art studio of Gerald Clarke begins at State Route 371 in Anza, a mountain community 40 miles southwest of Palm Springs. Flanked by the Cahuilla Casino and the Cahuilla Band of Indians' modest tribal offices, the narrow path is the inconspicuous gateway to a 19,000-acre reservation steeped in centuries of history but populated with only about 50 houses; two-thirds of the tribe's 300 members live off the reservation. Clarke knows every sliver of this land, every critter and every plant — the stinging nettles (“They sting like hell, but we eat those”), tobacco (“We have songs about it”), elderberry trees (“The berries are edible, you can make flutes out of the wood, but the leaves, they’ll kill you”).

“T.E.K., they call it: traditional ecological knowledge,” he says.

Clarke also knows every lingering remnant of the tribe's history here — the Catholic church (originally a schoolhouse) where a Bureau of Indian Affairs officer was fatally shot in 1909, the hot springs where his family bathed until they got running water in 1986 (“My dad would say, ‘People in Palm Springs pay hundreds of dollars to do what you’re doing.’”), the old *ramada* where tribal members once sang bird songs, and the cemetery where he and the men of the tribe still dig graves by hand. “Burial came with the Catholics,” he says, adding that traditional cremation is returning to favor.

● See related story: *Palm Springs Art Museum honors work of graphic and landscape designer Barbara Stauffacher Solomon* (<https://www.palmspringslife.com/barbara-stauffacher-solomon/>).



PHOTOGRAPH BY IAN BYERS-GAMBER/COURTESY PALM SPRINGS ART MUSEUM

***Continuum Basket: Pivot***, created with crushed aluminum beer and soda cans, addresses alcoholism and diabetes in Native communities.



**Branded: Native and United States of Amnesia: Ian Byers-Gamber/Palm Springs Art Museum**

Although he and his sister grew up in Hemet and Orange County, his father, Gerald Clarke Sr., picked them up on weekends and hosted them for summers on the reservation. “I grew up doing the cowboy stuff,” the younger Clarke says. “I learned early on that stereotypes are bullshit. My grandpa and my dad were hardcore Indian cowboys.”

For his part, Clarke was passionate about learning. He went to college and earned master’s degrees in painting and sculpture from Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. He became an educator, knowing all along that his heritage would eventually lead him back to the reservation. “From the time I was very young, I knew it was my role to take over the ranch after my dad died,” he says. That day came in 2003, when Clarke was teaching studio art at East Central University in Ada, Oklahoma. He gave up his position, returned to the ranch, and began teaching part time at Idyllwild Arts, where he later became chairman of the visual arts department.

“The house I live in is 100 years old; my grandpa built it and ran things. He passed away, and my dad ran things. And now I’m ... shopping for a bull,” he says, driving by a pasture and pointing out one of two steers he and his brother-in-law will butcher, providing his family with meat for a year.

Clarke has emerged as a tribal leader, and he’s back on the tenure track as an assistant professor of ethnic studies at the University of California, Riverside. But neither he nor his tribe is stuck in a time warp; the reservation has plenty of modern amenities: a bright-white internet repeater towering on a hillside, a softball field situated across from a new *ramada*, solar panels on several rooftops, and Clarke’s art studio, a Quonset structure he built two years ago.



**Native represents an evolving series of brands on paper and old books. Above: United States of Amnesia, created with rubber stamp ink, shows immigrant populations around the United States.**

FOR THE PAST 25 years, Clarke has been creating poignant, conceptual, and often humorous art addressing Native American identity and its intersection with mainstream U.S. culture and politics while defying the trappings and stereotypes of Native art.

On Jan. 18, 2020, Palm Springs Art Museum opens *Gerald Clarke: Falling Rock*, the artist's first solo museum exhibition — a survey of about 80 works in a staggering variety of media. Christine Giles, the museum's curator of Western and Native American art and organizer of the exhibition, included "Falling Rock" in the title to highlight a story of the artist as a child, riding home to the reservation with his father:

*As we drove through the mountains, we would pass several "falling rock" warning signs. Not knowing what they meant, I asked my dad about them. He told me that Falling Rock was the name of the last "free" Indian that never surrendered to the white man. Wherever you see a falling rock sign marks a place where Falling Rock was seen attacking passing cars. As a kid, I would always look to see if I could see him, angry and free.*



**Gerald Clarke at his ranch "on the rez," he calls it.**

**“For me, success is being respected in my community.”**

**— Gerald Clarke**

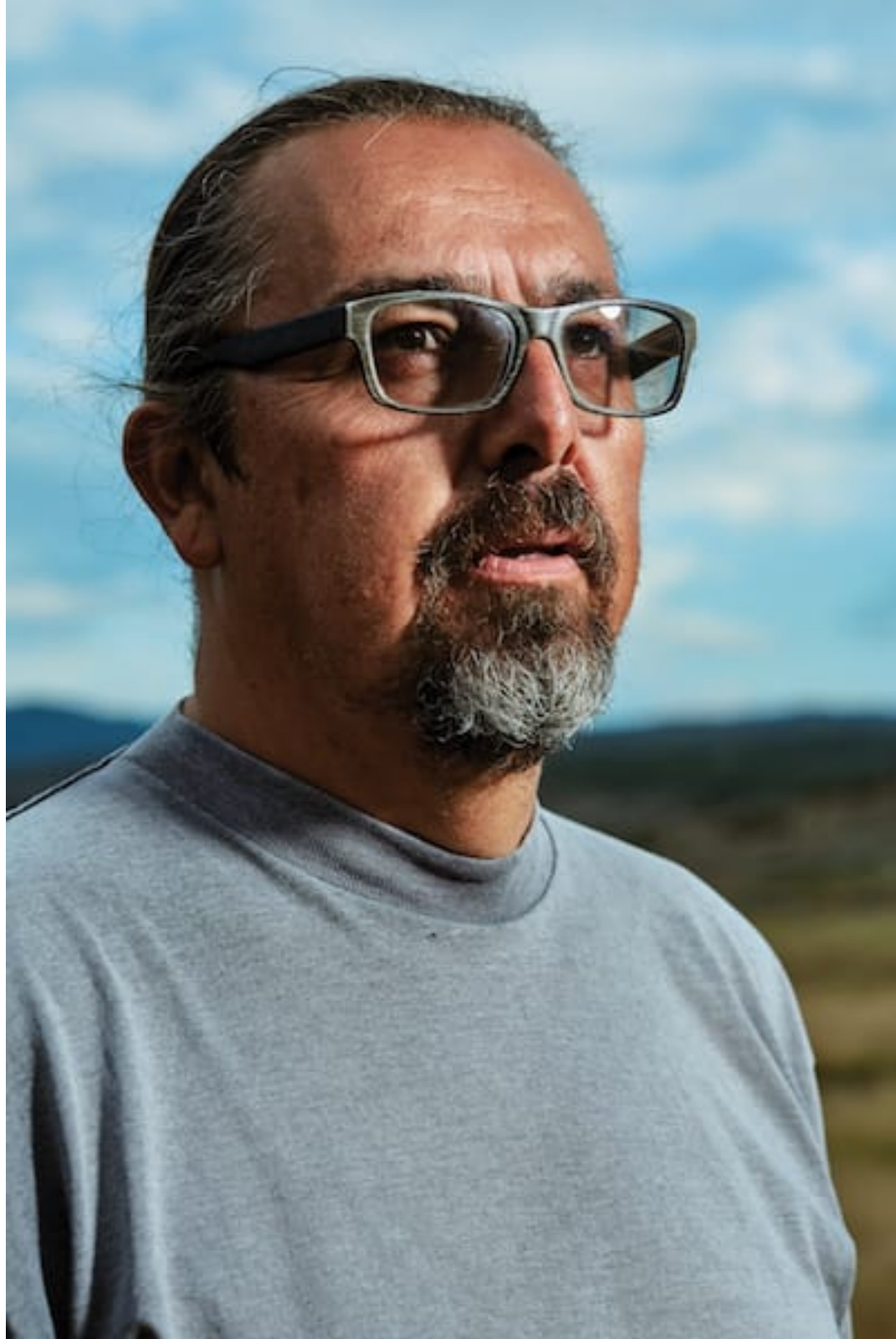
Clarke, now 52, cherishes the opportunity to exhibit his art where Cahuilla tribal members can see it. “For me, success is being respected in my community,” he says. “I can have a big show somewhere, and no one in my community will see it.

I want the Indians to take over the museum for the months that I’m there.”

What they see will hit home. While Native artists have depicted U.S. injustices since Wounded Knee, Clarke offers a distinctive and memorable style, using found objects to assert his pointed commentaries. For instance, *Manifest Destiny*, a classical plinth topped with a gumball machine, promises that each of its prize capsules contains a \$1 bill; thus inserting a quarter would yield a 300 percent profit. But the capsules contain no money; instead, there is a slip of paper citing the definition of Manifest Destiny: “a 19th-century doctrine that justified the taking of Indian land by white settlers.”

The exhibition (through May 31, 2020) features *Continuum Basket: Pivot*, a sculpture created with crushed aluminum beer and soda cans mounted on a satellite dish, 8 feet in diameter, with graphic motifs gleaned from a pair of early 1900s Cahuilla baskets in the museum’s permanent collection. It comments on the high rates of alcoholism and diabetes in Native communities, as well as the neglect of native habitat.

“I latch on to simple ideas,” Clarke intones. “That’s part of why I use found objects. They’re more accessible for the everyday person. Most people are afraid of contemporary art, but they’re not afraid of a gumball machine or aluminum cans. That’s the way of bringing people into the work and maybe sparking some kind of conversation.”



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**— Gerald Clarke**

Spanning 25 years, the selection includes the artist’s *Cahuilla Forms*, based on traditional eagle dance wands (“I always felt like they were the dancers’ abstracted wings”); road signs in the Cahuilla language; and an installation of *One Tract Mind*, a series of models of tract houses surrounded by large-scale photographs juxtaposing the geometric patterns of suburban rooftops with traditional Cahuilla design motifs. “When the housing crisis happened and a lot of people were getting foreclosed on,” he explains, “I thought if anyone can relate to what it’s like to lose a home or homeland, it’s an Indian.”



Daniell Cornell, the museum's artistic director, adds, "[Clarke] forces people to think about what cultures were being displaced. The models displace the gallery in the same way the tract homes displaced the Native land."

Clarke, a welder, also created a series of branding irons. The first one he made, now in the collection of the Autry Museum of the American West, says "Indian" and symbolizes how people stereotype and categorize art, particularly Native American art. "I made it as a sculpture, and I had it four years before it occurred to me I should use it to print."

Indeed, it led to a series of brands — "native," "immigrant," "amnesia," and "\$" — on watercolor paper and discarded books, such as *Disinherited and Indian Painters & White Patrons*. "Branding is a violent act," Clarke says. "It captures the emotional and physical violence that's going on in the world right now."

For another series, Clarke made rubber stamps and used them to create works responding to the immigration debate. In *United States of Amnesia*, he stamped the names of countries driving U.S. population growth, while *Self-Portrait* contains the names of antidepressants, addressing, Giles suggests, the "stress and intergenerational trauma of the Native community that was decimated."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN BYERS-GAMBER/ COURTESY PALM SPRINGS ART MUSEUM



The museum exhibition includes Clarke's Cahuilla road signs, such as *Mukat*, and several branded books, including *Branded: Indian Painters & White Patrons*.

From a hilltop near his house, Clarke looks out to the rock formations where he played as a kid, near the cluster of cottonwood trees his grandparents planted. "I don't eat, sleep, and drink art," he says, emphasizing his main priority of enhancing life on and off that dirt road winding through the reservation. "I'm busy living, taking care of elders, taking care of the ranch. The cows help me monitor the world a bit — the rain, wind, seasons."

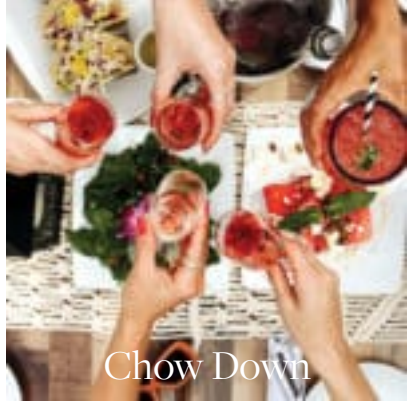
Art is important to Clarke, but more to communicate truths than to capitalize on the commercial art market. "The selfish part of artmaking is I enjoy physical work," he says. "So if it's building a fence, working the cows, welding a sculpture, or cutting wood, it makes me feel good."

Clarke is already working on his next project: an installation for High Desert Test Sites, which opens in April 2020. While touring the Mojave Desert region, he visited a dry lakebed and had the idea of reintroducing fish there. "I want to do something to remind people that the desert hasn't always been a desert, and it's not going to continue to be."

The concept represents yet another truth, another message drawn from the land, and honors the rebellious spirit of Falling Rock.

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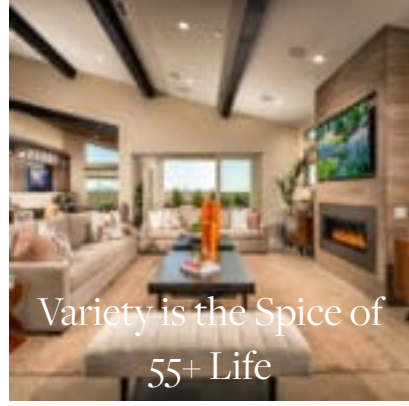




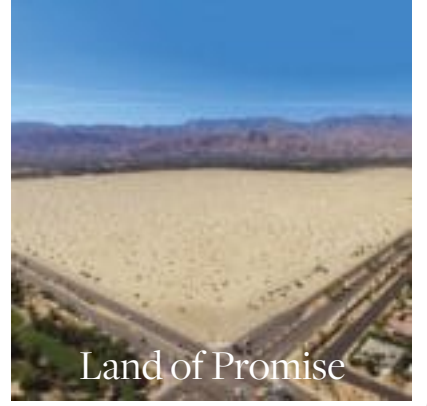
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