



Sonya Kelliher-Combs installs her work, “Idiot Strings, The Things We Carry,” at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, where the exhibition “Hearts of Our People: Native American Women Artists” opens soon.

The Hand of Native American Women, Visible at Last

The role of women art-makers in Native communities has gone widely ignored. Now a bold museum show, by and for these women, is shining a light on 1,000 years of their art.

By Tess Thackara, May 31, 2019

In early June, an installation by a Native American artist will hang in the galleries of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, but it won't look like Native art in any traditional sense. "Idiot Strings, The Things We Carry" (2017), by [Sonya Kelliher-Combs](#), an Athabascan and Inupiat artist from Alaska, is a series of goat and sheep hide pouches attached to strings, forming floating pockets. They cast shadows on the ground, creating an ethereal effect. The piece is, in part, the artist's response to the suicides of three of her relatives. The strings invoke "the idea of tethering," she said, "to not forget about these people." (Native Alaskan communities have some of the highest suicide rates in the world.)

If "Idiot Strings" honors the artist's cultural heritage, it also represents its evolution. Ms. Kelliher-Combs grew up in Nome, where experimenting with scraps of material was a communal activity for Native women, a way to spend time with siblings and elders. It was only at college that she began to understand those experiences from a non-Native perspective — as art. "It's such an interesting idea, *to be an artist*," she said recently in a phone interview. "It seems very decadent in a lot of ways."

Although Native women are generally the art-makers in their communities, they have seen themselves as conduits for something higher, "holding sacred space," the Chemehuevi artist [Cara Romero](#) said. [Teri Greeves](#), a beadwork artist in the Kiowa nation of Oklahoma, explained, "In a Native way, when you create something, it doesn't really belong to you."



Jill Ahlberg Yohe (in green), associate curator of Native American art, and Teri Greeves, a beadwork artist in the Kiowa nation of Oklahoma. In a collaboration rare for museums, Native American women artists and academic scholars organized the show with museum staff.

This perspective on art-making is quite distinct from the individualistic concept of the artist that still haunts the American art world — the lone creator and progenitor of a singular vision. It’s a tension that underscores the challenges at the heart of an ambitious exhibition, [“Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists,”](#) opening June 2 at the [Minneapolis Institute of Art](#) (known as MIA), which will shine a light on over a thousand years of art made by Native American women. It rests on the premise that the role of women in Native communities has gone widely ignored in the mainstream American art world, and the United States at large.

From the beginning, “Hearts of Our People” was intended to bring greater visibility to Native women without compromising their Indigenous values. Organized by Ms. Greeves and [Jill Ahlberg Yohe](#) — an associate curator of Native American Art at MIA, and a non-Native — the exhibition has been shepherded along by an all-female advisory panel of 21 Native artists and experts of Indigenous art from across the United States and Canada.

The cohort of women that Ms. Greeves and Ms. Yohe assembled represents nations from the Haida of Alaska to the Mohawk of the eastern United States and the Canadian southeast. They have been involved in virtually every decision, such as determining the exhibition’s thematic structure and signing off on the artwork and texts for the extensive catalog. In doing so, they may have set an example for indigenizing the curatorial process.

“It was a women’s space, and we meant it that way,” Ms. Greeves said of the “knowledge-sharing” session that launched the project. “In the Native community, this is not unusual — to have a group of women speaking together about powerful, important things.”



A Pueblo artist's ceramic olla (rounded pot), circa 1000-1300, at the Minneapolis Institute of Art.



By an anonymous Innu (Naskapi) woman, a hunting coat, circa 1750, from Caribou hide and pigment.

Western museums generally rely on a hierarchical structure of curatorial authority, not a consensus-building approach. Ms. Greeves, who has been advising American curators on Native art shows for years, said the process has often left her feeling used, and like a token.

“A curator, or curators, usually men, come up with an idea, then they get a group of Indians together for a one-day meeting, check off the N.E.A. grant-writing thing that has asked for a diversity of voices, and then they go about curating whatever they were going to curate,” she said. “You asked me to come in and give authority to your show, but I have no authority. It may ruffle feathers, but diversity means there’s a different way of doing things. If you want buy-in from the Native communities, you have to listen to them.”

The result of inviting a broad constituency of voices, Ms. Greeves and Ms. Yohe said, is an exhibition that is wide and diverse in scope, in terms of mediums, geographies, themes and generations — and rich in Indigenous knowledge about the narrative and spiritual significance of each object.

Several art experts said that the show could help overturn patriarchal attitudes that resonate in the mainstream art world.

“The bulk of interest in the U.S. seems geared toward the trope of the male Native warrior,” said [Nancy Mithlo](#), a professor of gender studies and American Indian studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. With early European colonizers and Eurocentric museums rendering makers anonymous and relegating Native objects to ethnographic displays, objects by women have long been consigned to the lesser category of functional craft rather than the product of (largely female) skill and ingenuity.



The potter Jody Folwell at her home in Santa Clara Pueblo, N.M. Her granddaughter, Kaa, has followed in her footsteps.

With 117 objects set to go on view — a vast array including pots and baskets, photography and performance — the exhibition will outline the artistic achievements of Native women, noting, for example, that they were early creators of abstraction. Hundreds, even thousands, of years before Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman began looking at Native work and became heroes of American abstraction, Indigenous women represented the world in patterns, lines and shapes. (Native men have more generally been the history-keepers, creators of figurative art with a narrative thrust, and carvers of wooden masks and totem poles.)

The show also tries to answer *why* Native women have made objects throughout time: to honor their ancestors, to express their cultural values and personal aesthetics, to cultivate relationships with humans and nature, to provide for their communities.

Among the oldest works on view is an ancient Pueblo pot from circa 1000-1300. Its female maker represented her community's symbiotic relationship to the land and corn harvest in a snaking geometric pattern on

the pot's surface, composed of tiny squares to indicate cornfields. A tailored hunting coat from circa 1750, made by an Innu woman in Labrador, is composed of caribou hide and painted with bands of intricate pink pattern intended to dazzle wild caribou into submission.

The exhibition elucidates the innovations that artists brought to tradition. For instance, [Mary Sully](#), an avant-garde Dakota artist from the 20th century, made jewel-like, kaleidoscopic triptychs on paper that fuse Native American designs with a Western modernist aesthetic. Often, they form abstracted portraits of celebrities.

[Cherish Parrish](#), an Anishinaabeg basket-weaver whose work will appear in the exhibition alongside her mother's, harvests black ash bark from the swamps of the Michigan wetlands and turns it into baskets, much like her ancestors. But her approach is contemporary, and her own. "The Next Generation — Carriers of Culture," a black ash and sweetgrass basket that approximates the contour of a pregnant woman's torso, was inspired in part by Greek statuary — appendages broken off, but the essence still intact. It reflects the particular role of women in being fertile purveyors of cultural knowledge.



Mary Sully, a Dakota artist, made jewel-like works on paper that fuse Native American designs with a Western modernist aesthetic.



Cherish Parrish, an Odawa and Pottawatomi artist, created “The Next Generation — Carriers of Culture” (2018), a basket that represents a pregnant woman, in black ash and sweetgrass.

The organizers have taken pains to ensure nothing is included that could create an uncomfortable experience for Native visitors to the museum, who generally understand artworks as living, breathing objects imbued with spirit — which raises a question of whether these objects belong in a Western museum at all.

Among the more troubling encounters, some Native Americans said in interviews, is seeing funerary objects on display, like the ancient pots made

by the Mimbres women of New Mexico. These elegant bowls, typically painted white and black and decorated with figurative or abstract designs, were placed over the faces of the deceased and punctured with a spirit hole, commonly believed to be a conduit through which the soul of the dead could escape. They were never meant to have been removed from the body, yet hundreds of them populate collections across the country, including at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University.

“There is no trust for museums in Native communities, because they came and stole out of our graves for this stuff,” Ms. Greeves said. “Or they came to us in our downest, worst times and bought our family heirlooms that we desperately sold.”

Earlier this year, an exhibition of Mimbres pottery planned for the Art Institute of Chicago [was put on hold indefinitely](#) amid concerns that the organizers had failed to seek out Native voices and perspectives in the creation of the show.

Ms. Yohe tapped a network of archaeologists and scholars to determine whether there were Mimbres pots that were used in a non-funerary context. Those inquiries unearthed a pot used in a domestic setting in Utah circa 1000; painted with a fine abstract pattern, it will appear in the show.

But when she wanted to include a quill-decorated shirt made by a Cheyenne woman in the 1800s, “one of the most beautiful works I have ever seen in my life,” she said, “Teri told me: you shouldn’t be showing that shirt because it was a warrior shirt,” covered in potent medicine. That sent the curator to the Cheyenne homelands in Oklahoma to seek their opinion. They ultimately declined to let her exhibit the shirt but offered her a beaded pipe bag made by the Cheyenne/Kiowa artist Heather Levi for the MIA.

Minneapolis has been at the center of a recent controversy surrounding the representation of Native histories and cultural heritage in museums. In 2017, the artist Sam Durant’s [“Scaffold”](#) went on view in the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden of the Walker Art Center, [approximating the form of a gallows](#) where 38 Dakota people were massacred on the order of President Lincoln in 1862. (Durant is non-Native.) The work was ultimately removed; its intellectual property was transferred to the Dakota, and it was buried in a secret location.



Julie Buffalohead, shown with her work on paper, “The Garden,” at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, which lays a painful event — the controversy over Sam Durant’s “Scaffold” at the Walker Art Center — to rest.

The organizers of “Hearts of Our People” say their exhibition was in production years before this event occurred. But to the case of “Scaffold,” they have let an artist offer a response. [Julie Buffalohead](#), from the Ponca nation, presents “The Garden” (2017), a painted and collaged image on paper that suggests the superficial temptations of the contemporary art world and lays a painful event to rest. It transports several works from the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden to a spirit world populated by rabbits and a coyote, animals that often play trickster figures in Native stories. A rabbit perched on “Scaffold” offers a young woman a cherry on a spoon — a reference to [Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen’s](#) giant sculpture “Spoonbridge and Cherry” (1985-88), the centerpiece of the Sculpture Garden. Lured by the plump fruit, her attentions are distracted from the rabbit that lies in front of her, a noose around its neck.

Last March, at the [Indian Art Fair at the Heard Museum](#) in Phoenix, Ariz. — where, six years ago, Ms. Greeves and Ms. Yohe first began to plan an exhibition by and for Native women artists — several board members and

artists featured in the show gathered to sell their work or catch up with colleagues. Over plates of Navajo tacos, while Apache “gaan” dancers shook legs decorated with bells, [Christina Burke](#), one of the exhibition’s advisers and curator of Native American and non-Western art at the Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa, Okla. (where “Hearts of Our People” will travel in 2020), reflected on how the exhibition has established a model for museum development.

“The process was totally different than any other exhibition I’ve worked on in 30 years,” Ms. Burke said. “I’m an anthropologist, and there’s a long history of an imbalance of power — anthropologists are sometimes known as culture vultures who come into communities and collect objects and stories and songs and leave and never go back.”

With Oklahoma home to dozens of tribal nations, she hopes to make the Philbrook collection more accessible to Native artists and communities, and open up the institution to more Indigenous knowledge.



Cara Romero, a Chemehuevi photographer, in her California studio.



Cara Romero's photograph of Kaa Folwell depicts the potter from Santa Clara Pueblo as Clay Woman, the Tewa mother spirit of clay.

For the younger generation of Native women artists in the show, it represents an opportunity not only to reclaim their past, but to proclaim their presence in the modern world. At her booth at the Indian Art Fair, Ms. Romero was selling her richly colored photographs of [Chemehuevi](#) boys

roaming through their homelands of the Southern California desert in feather headdresses and Ray-Bans, or running alongside the giant wind turbines of the San Geronio Pass.

When Ms. Romero was studying cultural anthropology at college, she said, her class barely knew that Native peoples still existed. “Everything was in the past,” she said. “I wanted to tell the modern story of Native identity.”

At the MIA, Ms. Romero will show a portrait of the [Santa Clara Pueblo potter Kaa Folwell](#), whom she depicts as Clay Woman, the Tewa mother spirit of clay. Ms. Romero shows Ms. Folwell naked, her body painted in white clay from a sacred source, in the “geometric lightning design” of a Mesa Verde vessel.

Captured in motion, her hair fiercely fanning out around her head, she represents the “spirit that has been passed on to her through thousands of years,” Ms. Romero said. It is an image that is thoroughly contemporary, a reclamation of the Native female body, and a fusion of Native values with mainstream Western fashion photography.

“Native women are powerful,” Ms. Romero said. “We are also modern, and we want to be represented against all the other cultures of the world. We are here.”