

Inherent Innovation

By

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Abstract

Native American people have relied on their inherent skills of innovation as a means of survival. As makers, they acquired new skills and traded for the most modern fabrics, beads, and metals to adorn themselves. As an artist, my motivation for acquiring new skills and applying them to my making is no different than what was done in the past. My goal is still the same; continued survival. As a means of facilitating the survival of regionally specific designs of the Upper Midwest, also referred to as Woodlands, I opt to use technology to reinterpret my designs. Rather than sewing and doing beadwork I resort to 3D CAD software and 3D printing to make my designs come to life. The use of technology serves to contradict the stereotypes of what is ascribed to be Native American. The works within *Inherent Innovations* are meant to challenge the assumptions and expectations inside as well as outside of a Native American perspective, as to what is considered to be Native American art.

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A Note about this Document

There is not a single phrase/word to accurately encompass all of the distinct 573 federally recognized tribal nations that exist within the United States. Therefore, the words within this writing to describe those that are Indigenous to America will interchange from “Native American,” “Indigenous,” to plainly stated as “Native.”

Representation and Why It Matters

Cultural representation via a varied perspective is important. It challenges the manner in which American history has exclusively and historically been dictated from the Anglo perspective. The limited dictation of American history has resulted in the narrow perspective in which we are allowed to see, be exposed to and interpret art that is produced outside of the Anglo viewpoint. It is time that those with a differing point of view be given the opportunity to share their thoughts, ideas, and unique history.

On that note, having the history of America written exclusively through the lens of the victorious advancements of the Anglo colonizer has made it possible to posit that Native American people have been eradicated, if not are near extinction. With American history highlighting the victories of its “Founding Fathers” there is little information given as to the misdeeds committed in attaining the lands to establish America. The history of America tends to gloss over the mass genocides in the name of the New World, forced removals, swindling of lands and acts of forced assimilation put forth on Native people. This slighted history has left a lasting mark on America.

As proof of this, ask anyone where they are from, then ask, “What Native American nations are Indigenous to the lands you grew up on?”; not many are able to answer this question

or even care enough to know the answer to this question. This is partly due to who is writing history and how the subject of Native American people is introduced to young children. The ability to properly educate on the topic of the history and current climate of Native American communities can become difficult when a narrow understanding of Native people is deposited on young minds or is perpetuated to and by adults. The miseducation of the Indigenous peoples of the United States garners momentum with the stereotypes circulated by team mascots, the marketing of products such as butter, beer, and a moving company seen daily on the highway. If that is not enough, there is also the ability to dress up as an Indian on Halloween or at sporting events. This is further promoted via professional sports teams alongside being promoted on the high school level with locals cheering on the Redskins, Indians, Chieftains, and Red Raiders. The costumes portrayed at these events always embodies the archaic stereotypes presumed to be Native American.

Sports team are not the lone contributor of misinformed knowledge regarding Native people. There are plenty of prestigious museums in the United States that help to further spread the unsubstantiated assumptions of what Native people are and what they look like. As a child and teenager, I would venture out to museums and galleries in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and in Chicago, Illinois with our local youth group consisting of all Native Americans. I recall the trips as being special. We would be amazed at the site of what we were being exposed to. Yet when our group would come across any depictions of historic Native Americans we would be puzzled as to why the Native people were depicted in such an archaic manner. The dioramas encasing the shiny plastic mannequins with unrealistic reddish dark-brown skin tone, resembled more to be a likeness of a caveman. They were always portrayed with unruly, unkept hair, wearing some kind of fur or basic leather animal skin garb. This is what museums would relay to its visitors as

being Native American. I recall this incorrect depiction as being surprising to the group. There would be chuckles within our group, yet I felt the chuckles to be more like nervous laughter to help disguise the slow buildup of disappointment and anger at the inaccurate portrayal. Looking back on this, it was ironic to be a large group of Native Americans walking through the museum as not extinct and representing our people in a modern fashion yet coming face to face with the primitive presentations in the dioramas. We would shortly discuss the miseducation represented but bypass the experience with humor and attribute it to the typical incorrect portrayal through an Anglo lens merely propagated as knowledge. Having knowledgeable adults to compassionately explain the ignorance of the Anglo museum curators while simultaneously retelling us the stories of our own people on these trips aided in acknowledging our ever-present struggles to delineate the Anglo world from our world own Native American world. These experiences of combined knowledge, compassion and comradery encouraged us to further hold onto our own identity as Native people, evolving as we choose despite what is propagated around us.

Since the imagery is constant without correction, the perpetuated stereotypes also extend to the arts. Within museums there is a need to categorize the items within. This categorization leaves art that is of ethnic influence to be placed within the designated category of “collected material culture” which marginalizes our art. This leaves ethnic art or art conceived from an ethnic source out of the conversation when speaking on or about the history of art and current trends in art. The lack of representation in the museum field is a contributing factor. For if there are no ethnic bodies to help acknowledge problems within the museums then consequently museums continue to be run through an Anglo perspective (Bates). The unattended problems in the museum field only trickles down further into the arts. As an artist, I could not help but feel

the pull to decide on whether it is harmful or helpful in distinguishing my work as being Native American. It was suggested that I categorize my work as just being art. I could not ignore the fact that the remark “just art” feels like a cover-up for saying the art is “American” or to be more bluntly stated, not of ethnic influence. This experience felt similar to the biased redneck that vehemently decrees to any immigrant, “This is America!” “You are now in America and you need to speak English!” I cannot help but feel the request or pressure to speak English like an American within my art.

And yet being Indigenous, I question where my art belongs? My work represents and pulls inspiration from the designs and ideology passed down to me from the previous generations. The generations that endured the genocide, forced removals, forced assimilations (whether through the boarding school era or societal pressures) and the coerced surrendering of their lands. I am inspired by my own experiences of having gone to two boarding schools and growing up within my traditional religion; which by the way, did not become legal until 1978. As a lineal member of the first inhabitants of the lands this nation was built upon, my work and ideas are of the authentic first America.

Growing up I was bestowed a dueling education as to the history of America. The previous Native generations opted for the long-established method of orally handing down our historic events and knowledge. My family’s historic accounts often contrasted the history told within the predominantly Anglo public school I attended. While in school, I had to tolerate the history of America through the vantage point of the colonizer that ignored the misdeeds committed on individuals like my grandmother. For I would end my day at home conversing the day’s lesson/lies with my family only to get a secondary lesson. One memorable lesson involved my grandmother recounting her brutal physically abusive experience of the boarding school era,

not mentioned in any of my history books. The generations before me were not recognized as scholars by white America, but their accounts of the past have been absorbed and have contributed to the person I am today.

With a variance in American history learned, I see the proposition of what is or is not Native as being stifling for my preferred method of making. I find myself promoting an evolution of what Native is and should be allowed to be. The body of work created for this thesis serves to educate and open the viewer to a perspective of what it means to be Native American currently. My goal is to expand upon the stereotyping and narrow understanding of Native American people. My art is both Native American art and American art, worthy of being displayed outside of the constraints of the colonial categorization of collected material culture.

Utilizing Stereotypes

Since stereotypes are so prominently disseminated, I wanted my art to contradict what is presumed to be Native. The defying of stereotypes within my work takes aim inside and outside of my own ethnic identity. By making culturally relevant art that defies stereotypes my hope is to begin the breakdown of misconceptions. Whether I am speaking against the patriarchal Native community I was raised within or the assumptions revealed in school or museums trips; I am wanting to expand the conversation of what it means to be Native. I am wanting this conversation to happen within Native communities as well as outside within Non-Native communities with open-minded individuals willing to learn.

Some of the pieces are a direct challenge to presumed roles within my own community such as the traditional roles of Native women. From the Indigenous crafts of sewing, basketry and beadwork I use my metal work to contradict what is considered to be traditional arts made

by a Native female. A reoccurring assumption within the works is that Native people wear leather. This may be historically true but within my work I am resolving the use of leather for my own use as a Native female of 2019.

Another means of countering stereotypes in the work, is my use of technology. A majority of the silver work is executed utilizing 3D CAD (Computer Aided Design) rendering software and a 3D printer. There is an assumption in and out of the Native art world regarding jewelry making that strongly believes that Native jewelry is and should be exclusively done by hand with a hammer and stamps or repoussé. I see this as the dictation of an exclusively employed Anglo population of historians, gallerist and curators that continue to categorize and uphold what they believe Native American art and or jewelry to embody. Categorization of Native work in this fashion is still the outdated museum practice as treating our works as material culture. By continuing to do so, curators, gallerist and historians in museums, will continue to promote the stereotypical image of an archaic Native American (caveman) unable to use modern tools. Whereas some Native people have subsumed the stereotypes and continue to further perpetuate them they unfortunately end up impeding on the prospective advancements of their own people. I then must ask, as a people that are alive and well as representing sovereign nations, are we going to continue to allow a colonizing voice to dictate who we are, and how we should be representing ourselves?

It has been said the use of technology is not traditional. There are Native people that deem working with technology to be unfair. Unfair to the artisans that choose to create using old methods. Yet if I were to confute that statement, I would ask these traditionalists to not take pictures of their work or post about it on social media because that is not traditional. Or ask these traditional jewelers to not use electricity for their grinding and polishing needs. File, sand and

polish exclusively by hand, in the light of the day. Suffice to say, there is a natural evolution to our means of making in some fashion. We as Native people must acknowledge that our use of the word “traditional” should not be used to hold us to restrictive methods of making and means of artistic expression. We need to be open to new ideas and methods of making to encourage our own evolution that should also include the cultivating of all methods of making. Suffice to say I am not saying that former methods of jewelry be tossed aside but rather I am positing the option to freely create outside of the norm.

I would argue that my use of technology can also be viewed as “traditional”. As Native people of the Great Lakes region, historically we traded with the French to acquire the most technologically advanced trending materials such glass beads, metal and fabrics to employ in our crafts. We also learned more advanced metalsmith techniques from the French during our contact. Just as we “traditionally” utilized advancements in technology years ago, my work continues this tradition by using what is available today such as 3D CAD and 3D printers.

Vanity

The manner in which one prides themselves on their visual presence plays a part in the works created. It was customary for my ancestors to adorn themselves with numerous rings, necklaces, trending fabrics and colors of the era to boast of their abilities in the realms of fur trading alongside the extent of their talents and craftsmanship. The items they donned were a representation of their stature. Since vanity has yet to fade and is alive and well today; I thought that if I were to make traditional designs in a modern fashion that I would not only be updating and perpetuating their existence but also extending their appeal to a broader audience. The goal was to take dismissed or never acknowledged tribal motifs of the Upper Midwest and make them

desirable to anyone. My audience is not merely Native people. I thought the appeal created by the beauty of the designs would garner the curiosity as to where or why the designs were created and exist. Thus, the possibility to learn about the distinct tribal motifs used by individuals of a specific tribal nation and or region. Even if there is no curiosity, I would we satisfied with the works merely being admired for their design appeal.

Works Created

Indian Relocation Act of 1956-Chicago, Milwaukee, Minneapolis

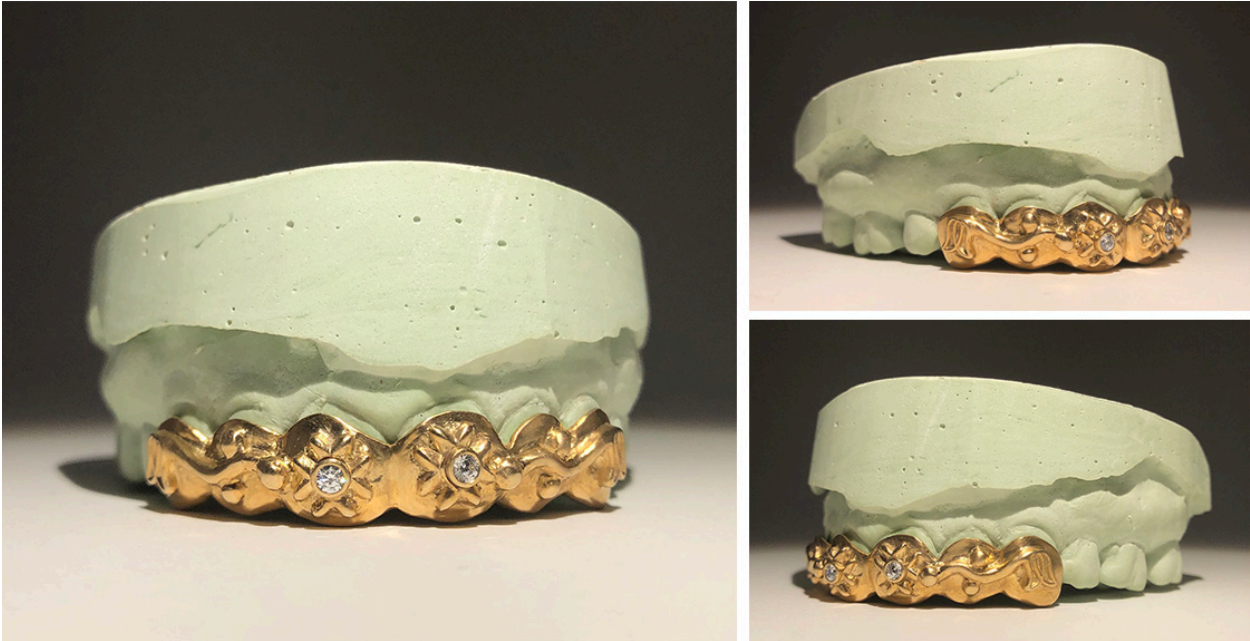


Figure 1: Indian Relocation Act of 1956-Chicago, Milwaukee, Minneapolis

The Indian Relocation Act of 1956 is historically written as being a governmental program that encouraged Native people to relocate to metropolitan cities to assimilate and receive vocational training and seek job opportunities not found on the reservation (Library). The act was portrayed as a means for the impoverished Native peoples to uplift themselves out of the

poverty faced on reservations. Yet, when some of the Native people relocated, they were merely moved into impoverished areas filled with other poor people of color. They made their homes in the local Section Eight Housing programs and housing projects available. For individuals, like relatives in my family, the move was not much different than the impoverished Native lands they had just left. Growing up my relatives described the Indian Relocation act of 1956 as just another ploy to assimilate Native people and encourage miscegenation to dilute Native blood. The experiences they shared regarding these moves did not appear in print or were they ever written into the curriculum of America history. Rather than take the abridged Anglo version of the Act I chose to use my relatives experience to serve as a remembrance of the intended policy. The Act was meant to encourage the absorption of a culture other than Native; nevertheless, it triggered the innate survival instincts and the usage of popular items in combination with tribally specific motifs (Figure 1).

Mama's New Mocs



Figure 2: Mama's New Mocs

For this piece I chose to take the assumption that Native people wear leather yet spin this for my own interpretation that also employs a culturally relevant trend brought about by the Rock Your Mocs campaign. The Rock Your Mocs campaign started as a social media event that encourages the incorporation of wearing one's tribally specific moccasins as a way of promoting cultural awareness and pride (Schilling). I have not worn moccasins since I was young so every year when I see family and friends share their photos on social media for the event I wonder, where are my moccasins? What should, or would my moccasins look like if I had a pair? Should I make a pair in the traditional Potawatomi or Ho-Chunk style? Lastly, would it even be comfortable to wear moccasins for a full day? The piece *Mama's New Mocs* answers those questions. Growing up there was always a wonderment to seeing the variety of moccasins at the

various pow wows we attended throughout the year. No matter who I was with, we would marvel at the design concept, colors used, style (tribally significant or not) and overall craftsmanship.

In keeping with my goal to push the limitations of what constitutes as being Native inside and outside of my own culture per Native art and making, I decided that my moccasins would not be the typical of either of the two perspectives. I did not want to comply with the expectations of what moccasins are from either an Anglo or Native American viewpoint. Since I wanted my moccasins to encompass a level of craftsmanship yet counter my own cultural expectation, I was going to make them beyond the standard patterning used for moccasins and opt for a handmade Western style shoe. I felt that by physically making footwear from mere pieces of leather, just as Native people do or did, also constitutes as my making a pair of moccasins (Figure 2). Even though I was making them in a Western style, I was still keeping with the original adulation of craftsmanship demonstrated with moccasins. By categorizing my Western style shoes as moccasins, I am challenging what is considered to be a moccasin by an Anglo designation. The contradictions are a means of questioning who is making the decrees of categorization and what constitutes Native art.

I have always wanted to learn how to make shoes. It took about a year to arrange a one-on-one lesson with Amara Hark-Weber, who attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She has since been making shoes by hand for the last six years. A major draw for seeking the tutelage of Amara was that she boasts of never making the same shoes twice (Hark-Weber). This is similar to the making of moccasins in the way that the designs in beadwork are rarely duplicated. With moccasins there is always a one-of-a-kind aspect that originates from the Native custom of making for a specific individual. The production of the shoes and designation of being

moccasins made this experience and final product worthy of countering stereotypes in and out of my own culture.

Bandolier Bag #1 & #2



Figure 3: Bandolier Bag #1(left) & #2(right)

I have always been attracted to bandolier bags for the same reasons I was attracted to moccasins. Even before reading about them in books it was explained to me by my grandmother and mother that the bags were never used to hold anything. The bags were merely for show. The bags served to show off the fact that someone thought so highly of you as to painstakingly bead an endless number of tiny beads. An entire bag with beautiful one-of-a-kind designs that represent you.

The bandolier bag is yet another item I wish I could wear on a daily basis yet would find it impractical due to the intricate work put into it and its non-utilitarian use. Even if a pocket were to be sewn in, the amount of beadwork put into such a bag would deter me from taking the bag out in public for fear of damage. The leather bags I created are a sleeker modern version of floral applique and beadwork designs intended for the everyday usage. For my bags I wanted to contradict the conventional use of beadwork. The designs on the bags are my own interpretation of Woodland floral designs. Computer design software and the use of a laser cutter allowed for the execution of precision symmetrical design motifs.

As a means of incorporating my jewelry into the bags I implemented metal findings that were previously seen in other pieces for the thesis work. The metal findings can be seen on Bandolier Bag #2. Those findings were created with the use of 3D CAD renderings, 3D printing and investment casting. (Figure 3 bottom right).

Various Jewelry Works



Figure 4: Cuffs (top) Rings (bottom)



Figure 5: Wisconsin Historical Society

The various accessories such cuffs (Figure 4 top), earrings (not pictured) and rings (Figure 4 bottom) serve as modern adaptations of the accessories worn historically by Ho-Chunk and Potawatomi women of the past (Figure 5). With the innovation of 3D CAD software, intricate and symmetrically precise Woodland designs are possible on something as small as a ring. My goal in featuring the design in this manner was from the simple fact that I have never seen Woodland designs from my region of the United States in fine jewelry form. There is the assumption that Native American jewelry has Southwest patterning and involves Turquoise stones. My work dares to contradict the assumption of what Native American jewelry is and what it looks like.

The designs in metal are a means extending the life of our lineal designs. This was important to me due to the numerous times I had seen our traditional items displayed in private collections or museum collections, looking faded, weathered and tattered. The designs in metal will eventually tarnish making the items look old; yet with some polishing the jewelry can be reinvigorated to look as new as the day it was made. This is something that is not possible with fabric or beaded items that will eventually fray and fade with time. As a maker that was inspired

by the designs of former tribal artists/makers, my aim in extending the longevity of the designs was my way of assisting in the encouragement of the continued survival of Woodland designs for the next generations. The jewelry serves to represent and honor the history of those that endured a traumatic past. My hope is that those who wear my designs feel empowered by the everlasting strength the designs represent.

Purple Rain



The dress created for the show is my own interpretation of how I would redesign the satin appliqué dresses worn by Ho-Chunk or Potawatomi women of the past and present. The idea was

to take a traditional item/style and modernize or remix it to suit what I represent outside of the stereotypical. I first began with picturing the wearing of the designs and dress outside of traditional happenings where they would be typically worn. A traditional dress is made up of a satin or cotton top, and a dress made of velvet or cotton. My version employed the contradictory usage of materials as a means to challenge a variety of assumptions of what is considered to be traditional Native American dress. The dress started with the top/shirt revision. I did not want the top to be made from its typical cotton or satin fabric. I opted for it to be made of leather. Leather typically is not worn as a top in our traditional clothing. Leather is only worn on one's feet as moccasins or beaded upon as an accessory that accompanies an outfit. I also wanted to use leather without the standard embellishment of beadwork. I wanted the leather to create dimension and articulate Woodland appliqué designs outside of the constraints of its "traditional" expectation. The goal in rendering outside the expected was to prove these designs have the option to evolve beyond the place they have laid dormant.

Traditionally the appliqué designs are exclusively exhibited on the dress portion of a Ho-Chunk or Potawatomi outfit. Again, thinking about the traditional expectation or arrangement of materials on the body, I opted for the design to be on the top as well as the bottom. The top was to be form fitting and cut precisely to the body. The tailoring of the leather shirt contrasts the spacious cut of a traditional shirt.

The dress was made of a free-flowing polyester Lycra material, opposed to the heavy hot velvet sometimes used to make our dresses. The appliqué designs on a dress are typically of bright contrasting colors yet I opted for a black on black color with the only contrast being the glossy texture. The black on black was meant to add a sophistication of a cocktail dress. The intent in the designs not being of their typically vivid nature was the experimentation of seeing

them as merely highlighted with a differing texture. The goal was to take the designs out of their original source and possibly elicit the attention of a differing audience. By exclusively using black I wanted to see if the designs were still visible when not rendered in their quintessential form. The end result left me in awe for the designs in all black were just as beautiful as the ones in color. In the end the dress may not register as being Native American, yet the work is meant to challenge who is questioning it and why?

Conclusion

The works created for *Inherent Innovation* are deeply influenced by the various educational opportunities I have been afforded. It has not been easy to step in to a predominantly Anglo field or the classrooms necessary to get to this level. Granted it has been difficult to be the only one in the room at times. Whether being inspired by my own experiences or from my ancestors, my work continues to draw from history juxtaposed on modern times and knowing who I am despite outside influences. To sum it up education has been at the root of all that inspires me. Oddly this very writing will be seen as scholarly, yet it is spawned from a long lineage of my own descendants recounting their version of the past, whereas they are not considered scholars. I will be the first in my family to write and submit a thesis paper. My family as well as myself represent individuals that have for centuries been overlooked and misrepresented. I believe it is my job to be genuine in my intent in bringing what I represent to the forefront to no longer be ignored. I draw on my many forms of training and education and hope to encourage the subsequent generation to do the same because representation matters.

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