

shá bik'ehgo (in the path of the sun)

by
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certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

shá bik'ehgo (in the path of the sun)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Norman Akers", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Chairperson Norman Akers

Date approved: 05/01/2023

Abstract

shá bik'ehgo (in the path of the sun) is an exhibition presenting an all-encompassing landscape navigating time, place, and story that encapsulates Diné notions of hózhó and continual life. This paper will address foundational thoughts, reflections on the creative process, the work itself, and the gallery installation.

Acknowledgement

I want to thank my mother, my sister, my nieces, all my family, my home community, and all my relatives, friends, and mentors for helping shape me into who I am today. May the love, hope, balance, and beauty I put into this work radiate into the lives all around me.

Dedicated to my Makah brother, Joshua Monette; may your body rest, your spirit swim, and your heart sing forever.

This is for the future we envisioned.

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“The Holy People ordained,
Through songs and prayers,
That
Earth and universe embody thinking,
Water and the sacred mountains embody planning,
Air and variegated vegetation embody life,
Fire, light, and offering sites of variegated sacred stones embody wisdom.
These are the fundamental tenets established.
Thinking is the foundation of planning.
Life is the foundation of wisdom.

Upon our creation, these were instituted within us and we embody them. Accordingly, we are
identified by:

Our Diné name,

Our clan,

Our language,

Our life way,

Our shadow,

Our footprints.

Therefore, we were called the Holy Earth-Surface-People.

From here growth began and the journey proceeds.

Different thinking, planning, life ways, languages, beliefs, and laws appear among us,

But the fundamental laws placed by the Holy People remain unchanged.

Hence, as we were created with living soul, we remain Diné forever.”¹

¹ Navajo Nation Courts. Navajo nation code: transcript of the fundamental laws of the Diné: Diné Bi Beehaz’ánii Bitse Siléí CN-69-02 C.F.R. § 201-206.

I. Nitsáhákees; Thinking

All my work begins with and expands upon my foundational Diné worldview and the teachings my mother, family, and community have instilled in me. I am Ta'neezahnii (Tangle Clan), my father is of anglo descent, and my maternal grandfather is Kin Lichí'nii (Red House Clan). I was born at the old Indian Health Service hospital in the area now known as Fort Defiance on the Navajo Nation. I lived near Tsoodzil, the Turquoise Mountain, out near what is now called Grants, New Mexico until I was almost five years old. Then my mother took my sister and I to live back near Rock Point, where she and our grandmother grew up. My family resides northwest of Rock Point, near the landmark Tsé Bitsii' (Rock Has Hair). I am very grateful to have been raised in the place we have always called home and with a way of relating to place that guides us in life.

My Diné upbringing instilled in me a deep love and respect for life, the land, the elements, and the powers of creation. I have learned to live with a deep reverence for the preciousness of balance and harmony in life. Guided by these principles, I am drawn to the beauty and life force in our stories, songs, customs, and language. As connections to our universe and extensions of our bodies, I recognize how these expressions shape a Diné understanding of wholeness in life.

The songs and stories I come from speak of and build upon the original love, hope, and harmony that was instilled into the landscape during creation. To tell the stories of our emergence is to speak of the original notions of hózhó; a Diné way of being wherein inherent values of balance, harmony, well-being, and beauty in life guide thought, action, speech, and relationality. In her article, "Living in Health, Harmony, and Beauty: The Diné (Navajo) Hózhó Wellness Philosophy," Dr. Michelle Kahn-John (Diné) describes hózhó as offering "key

elements of the moral and behavioral conduct necessary for a long healthy life..."² Because hózhó can be understood as both a way of living and a state of being, Dr. Kahn-John expresses that hózhó "...reflects the process, the path, or journey by which an individual strives toward and attains this state of wellness."³ To embody this way of being is to manifest love, hope, balance, and sincerity into the world - this is my underlying intent for the exhibition.

Guided by a clear and hopeful mind, I reconfigured my making process to focus on aligning my understanding of hózhó with its inherent foundation in the landscape. I decided my work needs to begin and come from the same foundation, and this would require me to make the journey to the four sacred mountains that shape the Diné homelands; Sis Naajiní (White Shell Mountain / a.k.a. 'Blanca Peak'), Tsoodzil (Turquoise Mountain / a.k.a. 'Mount Taylor'), Dook'o'ooslíid (Abalone Shell Mountain, a.k.a. 'San Francisco Peaks'), and Dibé Nitsaa (Big Sheep Mountain, a.k.a. 'Mount Hesperus'). For the rest of the project, I would trust myself, the motion of the sun, and the wind at my ear to guide me.

² Kahn-John, Michelle, and Mary Koithan. "Living in health, harmony, and beauty: The Diné (Navajo) Hózhó wellness philosophy." 24.

³ Ibid. 25.

II. Nahat'á; Planning

In the same way my ancestors navigated the landscape of our homelands and journeyed to and from our four sacred mountains, I set out to do the same and have that live at the foundation of my work. Over the last two years, I made the journey to each mountain. I prayed, made my offerings, and documented my presence and movement. Primarily through photography, I documented my journeys to the mountains across the landscape of my homelands. I considered this process and the resulting images my foundation and initial source material. Alongside documenting my navigation through the landscape, I began collecting natural earth pigments to incorporate into my paintings. Gathering earth pigments to use as paints became a crucial aspect to my work. This process affirms my connection to place as it allows me to (re)present the landscape I come from with the very same earth materials.

Just as our emergence stories begin with an understanding of time and place, just as our personal introductions begin with where we come from, my work would begin from the very same source. For this reason, I knew from the beginning that I would (re)create our four sacred mountains: *sis naajini*, *tsoodzil*, *dook'o'oosliid*, and *dibé nitsaa* as the first four paintings of the exhibition.

I am borrowing from my understanding of fundamental rhythmic structure of “four” within the stories and songs in my culture. This ‘four’ comes from understandings of the landscape over time. Most notable and apparent are the four worlds described in our emergence stories, the four mountains, the four cardinal directions, the four elements, the four stages in life, and so on. Just like in the landscape, this structure is present, fundamental, and inherent in Diné song and storytelling.

Consistent within our emergence stories is a recurring theme of actions and dialogue needing to be repeated four times as they are only successful and understood in a fourth iteration. A simple yet foundational example would be how at various points in our stories, the characters need to journey out in each direction to search for information in the landscape. Scouts are sent east, south, west, and north but often only come back with knowledge until after a fourth journey. Even more often is the repetition of significant events taking place within a timeframe of four or sixteen days. In dialogue, this is reflected in instances where a character persists in asking something of another – it may only be until a fourth time that the story progresses, one way or another. Similarly, in song, this same structure is implemented as a repetition of a line or what might be considered a stanza that may change and/or come to fruition until the fourth iteration.

This rhythmic structure echoes the same balance and full circle cycle of completion in the landscape - most obvious being the cycle of the day. These concepts and actions are where the title of the exhibition comes from; *shá bik'ehgo*, a Diné term referring to the cyclical motion of the sun (throughout the day and the year). Diné people my age may be most familiar with this phrase as it guides how one is to move within a hogan - the Anglo word stemming from *hooghan*, the Diné word for our traditional dwelling place with a single eastern doorway and a place for a fire in the center. Our dwelling structures are models of our universe; in a hogan, like in life, you must follow the sun's 'clockwise' motion. Replicating this motion in daily life is crucial as it is this cyclical emphasis on repetition, balance, and completion begins in the landscape. This manifests into a harmonious and balanced foundational worldview. To build upon this foundation in the landscape, like the songs and stories I know, I introduce this structure into my work and insert a second grouping of four paintings to serve as the next sequential

iteration. A third and final fourth set would follow this. With the second set, I wanted a focus still visually grounded in the landscape while extending into our cultural expressions and motifs.

With the second set of four paintings, I returned to some original Diné motifs while remaining true to my own perspective and experiences. To begin with, I wanted to incorporate our four sacred plants as they are foundational to our way of life. This became the painting, *naadaá'*, *naa'ohí*, *naayízi*, *dził nat'oh* (corn, beans, squash, tobacco). While serving as a reiteration of a most common motif, this work serves as an expression and gesture towards the future I envision, where our most sacred lifeway, that of planting persists indefinitely. This work speaks to the continuation of our lifeways; from creation and emergence to today and into the future. The works to follow in this set are further inspired by common motifs in Diné culture that express relationality within the landscape; *nahasdzáán shimá*, *yadilhil shítáa'* (mother earth, father sky), *jóhónaa'éei*, *tl'ééhónaa'éei* (sun, moon), and *átsé asdzáán*, *átsé hastiin* (first woman, first man).

Both weaving and sand painting have special significance and protocols surrounding their making and viewing in Diné culture. I borrowed conceptual underpinnings from each that I could use to (re)configure my work and process. I recognized a theme in these Diné visual practices, creating what might be called diptychs of Mother Earth and Father Sky. These beliefs returned me to previous paintings where I was working in a very similar line of thought - focused on movement, rhythm, structure, and the grounded physical nature between earth and sky. I took this pairing notion, and the two paintings that became *nahasdzáán shimá*, *yadilhil shítáa'* (mother earth, father sky), and knew immediately that I needed another pair to mirror them - for balance and symmetry. For this second pair, I drew inspiration from another pairing in the landscape and in sand paintings; the sun and moon. Akin to their inspiration, the paintings

jóhonaa'éei, tl'ée'honaa'éei (sun, moon) followed a process inspired by sand painting. Last in the set is *áłtsé asdzáán, áłtsé hastiin (first woman, first man)*. This painting speaks directly to the Diné creation story surrounding the first woman and first man while providing more foundation to the relevance of corn, movement, and story in Diné worldview.

For the third set of works, I wanted to acknowledge my relatives with whom I share this landscape by including animal relatives as guardians/protectors within the exhibition. This is commonly done in sand paintings - there are often at least two animal protectors placed at the entrance of a sand painting to safekeep the space; allow only good in and keep any bad/negative energy from entering. There are a multitude of reasons animals are depicted in sand paintings, as protective figures are just one example. What animals serve as protectors depends on many factors. For this exhibition, I included relatives whom I felt fit most appropriately in the surrounding landscape. Using this framework brought about the paintings; *jaa' abaní (bat)*, *na'asho'ii dich'izhí (horned toad)*, *bijh (deer)*, and *nashdóí (mountain lion)*.

Lastly, I wanted a final set of paintings to function more in line with aspects of today while looking into the future. It was essential to include work with a more intentional focus on my point of view, which inherently grounds me within this landscape and universe. This set became the works; *statement (dragonfly painting)*, *burning trash*, *pit stop (between when and where)*, and *at the end of the day*.

With four sets of four paintings, I felt sure of the functionality of the work I was making, conceptually and physically. The next step was considering how the work would operate within the space of the gallery. With the gallery having a much larger north wall than the rest, I knew I had room to bring in another painting into the space. Returning to my source material, I decided to make another painting that would serve as a heart fire core - much like the fire at the core of

our world, at the center of every Diné home, and within our very body. This resulted in the piece; *untitled (fire and water painting)*. Initially only serving as the heart fire core of the space, I also inserted a notion towards water to balance out the painting.

Altogether, the works form a surrounding structure that echoes the land and culture I come from. This work is my song and my story - my nod to the past, place in the present, and notion towards the future.

III. Iiná; Living



sis naajiní, oil + natural earth pigments + charcoal on panel, 48 x 96", 2023
(Figure 1.)

sis naajiní

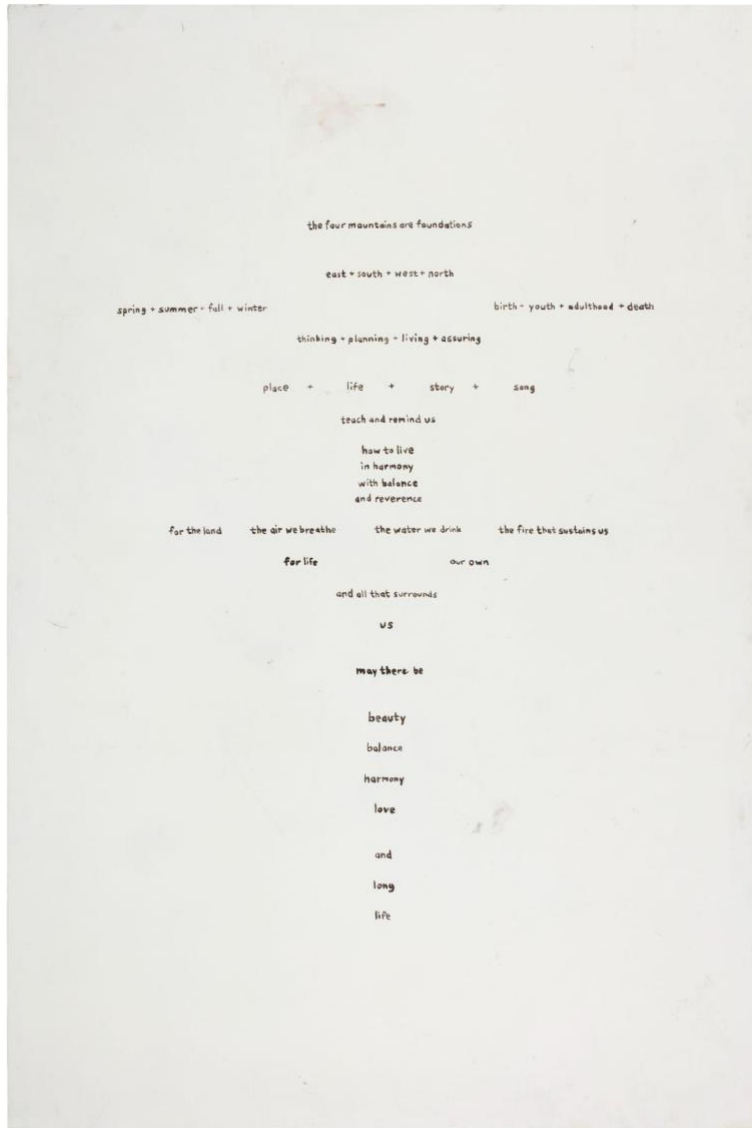
Sis Naajiní (White Shell Mountain), representative of the dawn, springtime, and thinking, persists as the eastern boundary marker for my people and our homelands. Like the rest of the sacred mountains, it is said that the mountain was (re)created in this world with bits of earth from the mountain as it existed in previous worlds. The mountains, and the landscape within, was created with the prosperity of my people and our culture in mind. At the summit of this mountain, a basket of gray dove eggs and their feathers were placed so that they may be found in plenty as they are today. Just visible are the streaks of lightning that connect this mountain to the firmament above, along with four stalks of white corn in the foreground that connect the earth to the viewer. In each of the four large paintings that represent the four sacred mountains, the foregrounds are developed using an accumulation of painted washes made from earth pigments. The iconography depicted these works is embedded with personal meaning.



jaa' abani (bat), charcoal on panel, 12 x 16", 2023
(Figure 2.)

jaa' abani (bat)

Here, on the southern wall near the eastern entrance, I have placed my relative, Jaa' abaní to serve as protector. I spent a lot of time playing outside in my early childhood, and as the darkness would chase me inside in the late evening, I learned how bats would emerge at this time. As I got older, and would wake earlier to chase the sun, I noticed the bats on the other side of the day - just before the early dawn. *jaa' abaní (bat)* is drawn with charcoal on a white surface, grounding it in the east.

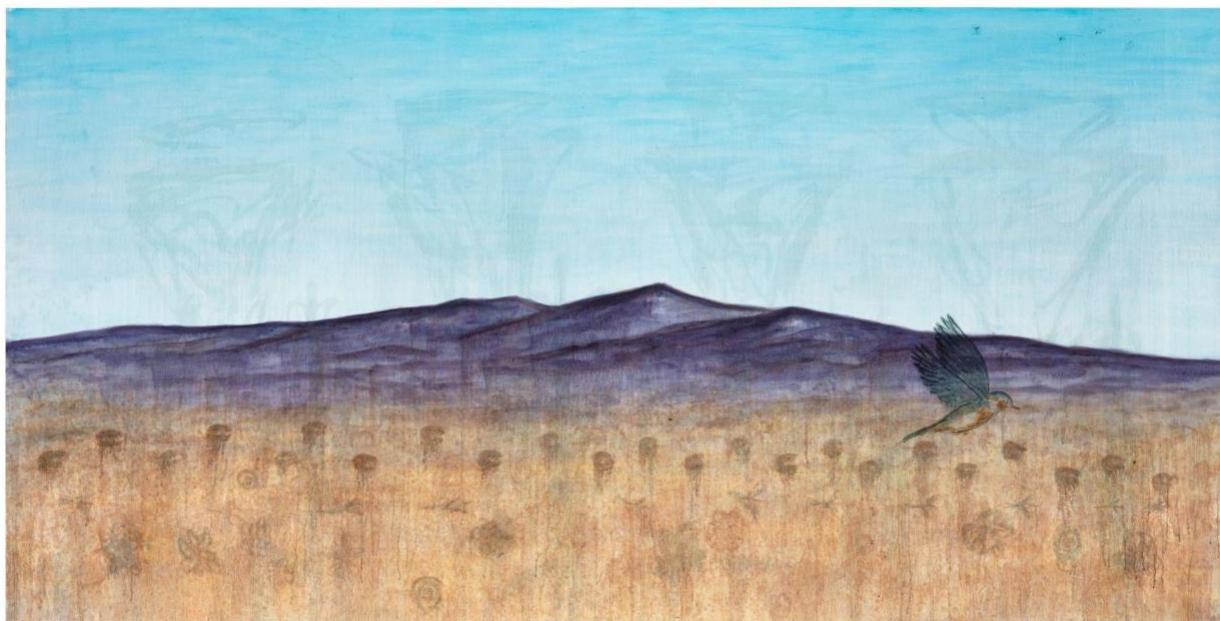


statement (dragonfly painting), oil + natural earth pigments on panel, 72 x 48", 2023
(Figure 3.)

statement (dragonfly painting)

A poetic statement for the show, this work outlines the conceptual underpinnings that interconnect the paintings in the exhibition. I have structured the poem to resemble the shape of a dragonfly - this is the first notion to water within the exhibition. Where I come from, the dragonfly is typically only found where and when there is clean, fresh water - thus, the dragonfly

is representational of pure water. There has been a significant drought over the last several years affecting my family's ability to plant our ancestral foods. In response, I have dispersed notions to water throughout the exhibition to manifest the annual rain and snowfall needed in the landscape to nourish, replenish, and sustain life.



tsoodzil, oil + natural earth pigments on panel, 48 x 96", 2023
(Figure 4.)

tsoodzil

Tsoodzil (Turquoise Mountain), representative of mid-day, summertime, and planning, persists as the southern boundary marker for my people and our homelands. Like the rest of the sacred mountains, it is said that the mountain was (re)created in this world with bits of earth from the mountain as it existed in previous worlds. At the summit of this mountain, a basket of blue bird eggs and their feathers were placed so that they may be found in plenty as they are today. Just visible are the flint knives that connect this mountain to the firmament above along with four stalks of blue corn in the foreground that connect the earth to the viewer.



naadaá', naa'ohí, naayízi, dzil nat'oh (corn, beans, squash, tobacco), oil + natural earth pigments + charcoal on panel, 48 x 72", 2023
(Figure 5.)

***naadaá', naa'ohí, naayízi, dzil nat'oh* (corn, beans, squash, tobacco)**

Depicting the four sacred plants, this work honors the significance of these plants in Diné lifeways while (re)setting into motion the planting process for myself and my family. The plants are depicted as grounded in the earth and protected by a rainbow motif from above. Within the blue of the sky, there is a notion to Altsáh Bi'áád (Female Rain). Altsáh Bi'áád is the rain that falls to the gently to the ground and is not accompanied by thunder. The gentle falling of Altsáh Bi'áád allows the water to be soaked into the earth and nourish the plants.

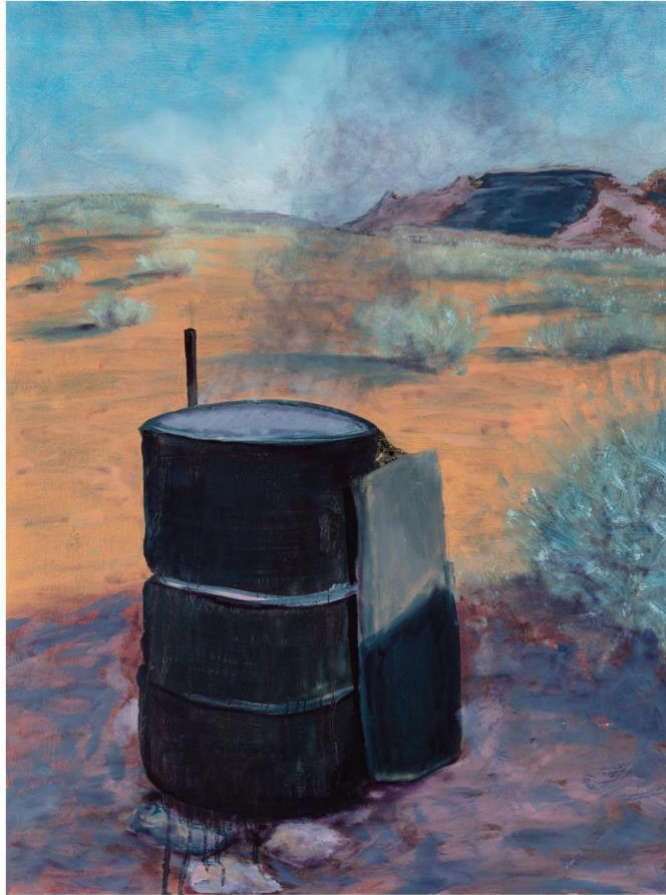


na'asho'ii dich'izhí (horned toad), natural earth pigments + charcoal on panel, 12 x 16", 2023
(Figure 6.)

na'asho'ii dich'izhí (horned toad)

I placed my grandfather, *na'asho'ii dich'izhí*, just adjacent to the southern entrance to the gallery. My family resides just east of the rock formation, Tsé Bitsii', within the broader landscape of the Rock Point area. To the immediate south is a patch of land where I have had frequent encounters with my grandfather, so I deemed it fitting to place him near the southern entrance. It is customary in Diné culture to greet a horned toad as your maternal grandfather and when encountering him in the wild, to gently place him in the palm of your hand, make a gesture towards your heart, and to place an offering of pollen on his back before setting him back down.

na'asho'ii dich'izhí (horned toad) is drawn with charcoal on a blue surface, grounding it in the south.

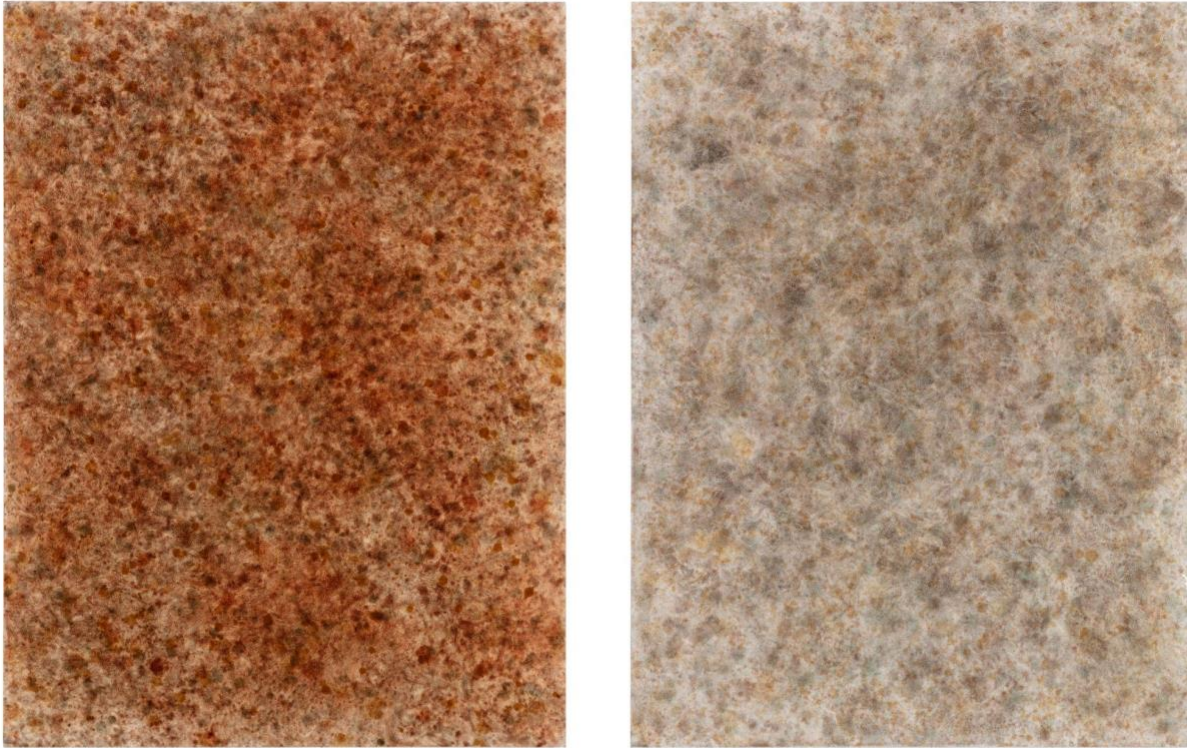


burning trash, oil + charcoal on panel, 24 x 18", 2021
(Figure 7.)

burning trash

The removal of the Diné from our homelands to Fort Sumner in the early 1860s inflicted intergenerational trauma and laid the groundwork for systemic issues that continue today. A notable impact of removal is reflected in the diets across the Navajo Nation as they have drastically changed from primarily based in ancestral foods (that were planted, foraged, and hunted) to diets today that center around highly processed non-Native foods. Colonial food products like flour, sugar, milk, and beef have been imposed on the diets of my people since removal. While this has had drastically detrimental impacts on our bodies and is the cause for many current health issues in the tribe, it also negatively impacts the landscape. In losing access

to our ancestral foods, we lose aspects of our culture that fundamentally connect us to place, story, and our history. With the adoption of non-Native foods and consumer habits, we risk losing the ancestral foods that have nourished our bodies and way of life, and moreover, we risk losing the ways of being that prioritized our connections and care for the land. As foreign as a burning oil drum of trash appears in this landscape, so too is a capitalist and consumer mindset out of place here. This represents an impetus for me to commit myself to recentering ancestral foods in the diets of myself and my family – and in doing so, prioritizing a return to a state of health and balance for my people, our culture, our land, and our future.



nahasdzáán shimá, yadilhil shítáa' (mother earth, father sky), oil + natural earth pigments on panel, diptych; two (48 x 36"), 2022 (Figure 8.)

***nahasdzáán shimá, yadilhil shítáa'* (mother earth, father sky)**

To understand self in a Diné worldview is to understand oneself as the child of our mother earth and our father sky / universe. As stated in Diné Natural Laws,

Mother Earth and Father Sky is part of us as the Diné and the Diné is part of Mother Earth and Father Sky; The Diné must treat this sacred bond with love and respect without exerting dominance for we do not own our mother or father...It is the duty and responsibility of the Diné to protect and preserve the beauty of the natural world for future generations.⁴

This is a fundamental way of relating to place and this work recognizes this relationship as universal and ever present.

⁴ Navajo Nation Courts. Navajo nation code: transcript of the fundamental laws of the Diné: Diné Bi Beehaz'ánii Bitse Siléi CN-69-02 C.F.R. § 201-206.



dook'o'oosliid, oil + natural earth pigments + charcoal on panel, 48 x 96", 2023
(Figure 9.)

dook'o'oosliid

Dook'o'oosliid (Abalone Shell Mountain), representative of dusk, autumn, and life, persists as the western boundary marker for my people and our homelands. Like the rest of the sacred mountains, it is said that the mountain was (re)created in this world with bits of earth from the mountain as it existed in previous worlds. At the summit of this mountain, a basket of yellow warbler eggs and their feathers were placed so that they may be found in plenty as they are today. Just visible are the sun beams that connect this mountain to the firmament above, along with four stalks of yellow corn in the foreground that connect the earth to the viewer.



pit stop (between when and where), natural earth pigments + charcoal on paper, 30 x 40", 2021
(Figure 10.)

pit stop (between when and where)

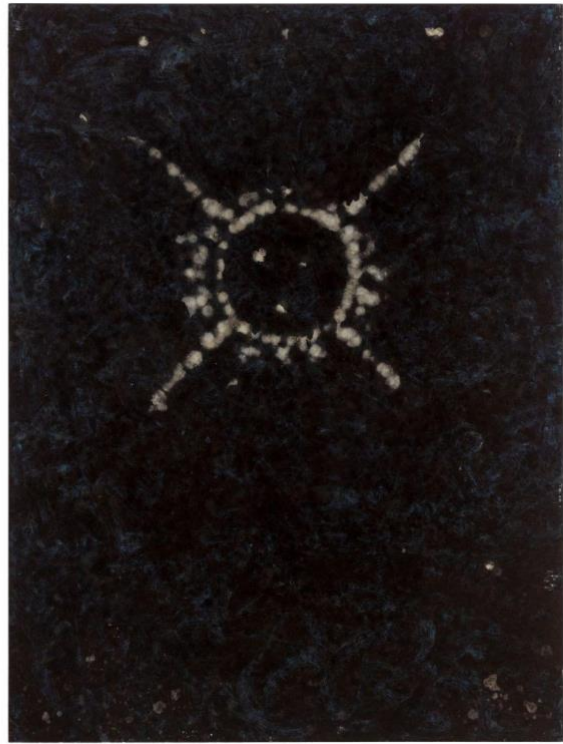
This painting came about in my earliest experiments using natural earth pigments. The work depicts the trading post in Rock Point as directly viewed facing west. To contemplate the future of this place, I wanted to create an image that spoke of presence. The gas station sign, pumps, and store reflect elements of the present, whereas the horse, mesa, and sky speak of the past as well as the future. Instead of depicting a modern-day car parked to refuel at the gas pump, I draw a horse to allude to previous forms of travel. Instead of depicting the present-day laundromat and post office that sit adjacent to the store, I draw the timeless western mesa and horizon. No matter what changes over time, the land and sky are fixed and eternal.



bijh (deer), natural earth pigments + charcoal on panel, 12 x 16", 2023
(Figure 11.)

bijh (deer)

The third animal protector, I place my relative *bijh* along the west wall. I associate the west with the forests neighboring Dook'o'ooslíid and the deer that thrive in that area. *bijh (deer)* is drawn with charcoal on a yellow surface, grounding it in the west.



jóhonaa'éei, tl'ééhonaa'éei (sun, moon), oil + natural earth pigments on panel, diptych; two (48 x 36"), 2023
(Figure 12.)

jóhonaa'éei, tl'ééhonaa'éei (sun, moon)

Inspired by their depiction in sand paintings, the painting process for these works became about implementing a sense of precision and an adept handling of the materials to evoke a more precious and delicate rendering - much like the nature of sand paintings. Sand paintings are ephemeral in nature, so I wanted these works to have a very delicate rendering and a surface that would mimic an ephemeral nature when affected by changes in light and positioning.



untitled (water and fire painting), oil + natural earth pigments + charcoal on panel, 48 x 48", 2023
(Figure 13.)

untitled (water and fire painting)

Fire has always been at the core of Diné households and the universe. In this painting, I chose to (re)create the atmosphere of fire, bringing warmth into the dark stillness of a winter night. Living in Lawrence, I didn't have a place for a fire in my household, the closest thing I had was an ashtray I used for tobacco and cedar. The ashtray with a tiny fire in the center became a

substitute for the traditional home fireplace. Instead of depicting a stove with fire, I drew the ashtray with a tiny fire in the center.



dibé nitsaa, oil + natural earth pigments + charcoal on panel, 48 x 96", 2023
(Figure 14.)

dibé nitsaa

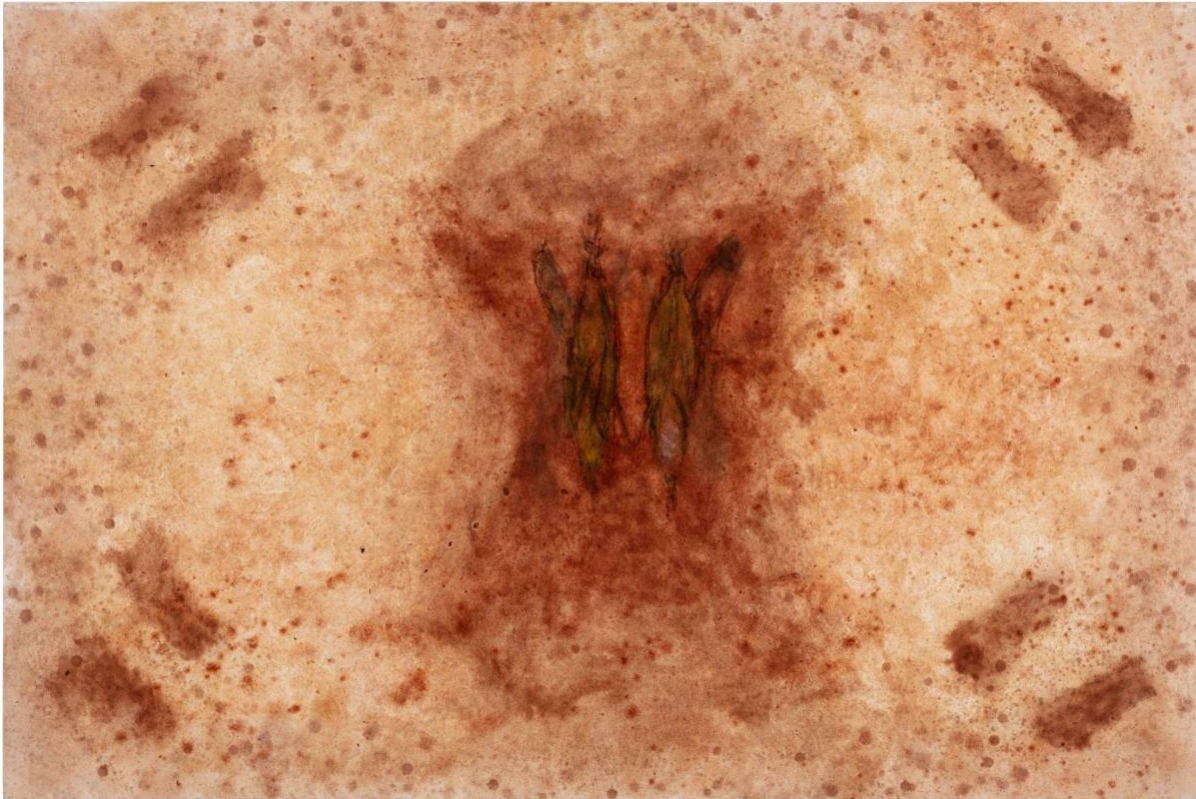
Dibé Nitsaa (Big Sheep Mountain), representative of night, winter, and assurance, persists as the northern boundary marker for my people and our homelands. Like the rest of the sacred mountains, it is said that the mountain was (re)created in this world with bits of earth from the mountain as it existed in previous worlds. At the summit of this mountain, a basket of blackbird eggs and their feathers were placed so that they may be found in plenty as they are today. Just visible is the rainbow that connects this mountain to the firmament above, along with four stalks of black corn in the foreground that connect the earth to the viewer.



at the end of the day, oil + natural earth pigments + charcoal on panel, 48 x 48", 2023
(Figure 15.)

at the end of the day

As the exhibition is an act of (re)centering, it made sense to eventually arrive at my own body and at an acknowledgement of my own physical presence as inherently grounded in this landscape. While previous works share my point of view getting closer and more specific to the landscape I know as my home, this work finally arrives at the very core of my present being.



átsé asdzáán, átsé hastiin (first woman, first man), oil + natural earth pigments + charcoal on panel, 48 x 72", 2023
(Figure 16.)

átsé asdzáán, átsé hastiin (first woman, first man)

This painting alludes to the creation of our earliest ancestors. I was intentional with placing it immediately following my self-portrait, *at the end of the day*. Side by side, these works connect my current point of view and presence to that which was first created. Just as First Man comes from a perfect ear of white corn, so do I. My intention was for this painting to be placed as the final work in the exhibition as it ends and restarts the cycle of the show; conceptually arriving back at a vital beginning point in Diné history while physically arriving back at *sis naajini*.



nashdóí (mountain lion), natural earth pigment + charcoal on panel, 12 x 16", 2023
(Figure 17.)

nashdóí (mountain lion)

I placed *nashdóí (mountain lion)*, the final animal protector, at the northern entrance to the space. In our emergence story, it is said that Asdzáá Nádleehé (Changing Woman) designated Nashdóí as the animal protector and symbol of healing for the original Honágháahnii people of the Diné. It is told, the Honágháahnii (One Walks Around You Clan) adopted the Ta'neezahnii (Tangle Clan) as their own, thus Nashdóí serves as our protector and healer just as well. *nashdóí (mountain lion)* is drawn with charcoal on a black surface, grounding it in the north.

VI. Siih Hasin; Assuring



Installation shot *shá bik'ehgo (in the path of the sun)*
(Figure 18.)

I am grateful to have displayed my exhibition at Leedy-Voulkos Art Center in Kansas City. In the installation process, I organized the works to create a balanced feeling within the space. Mostly, this meant accounting for the shortest wall being the east, and the longest being the north. To compensate, I shifted three of the eastern paintings; *jaa' abaní (bat)* and *statement (dragonfly painting)* to the south walls, and *áłtsé asdzáán, áłtsé hastiin (first woman, first man)* to the end of the north wall. I found this to still be fitting as it didn't compromise the order of the works, and it allowed the viewer to still enter the space from the east and finish a walkthrough at

the same beginning point. The exhibition is designed so that the viewer moves through the gallery space echoing the motion of the sun.



Wide angle view of *shá bik'ehgo (in the path of the sun)* [south wall]
(Figure 19.)



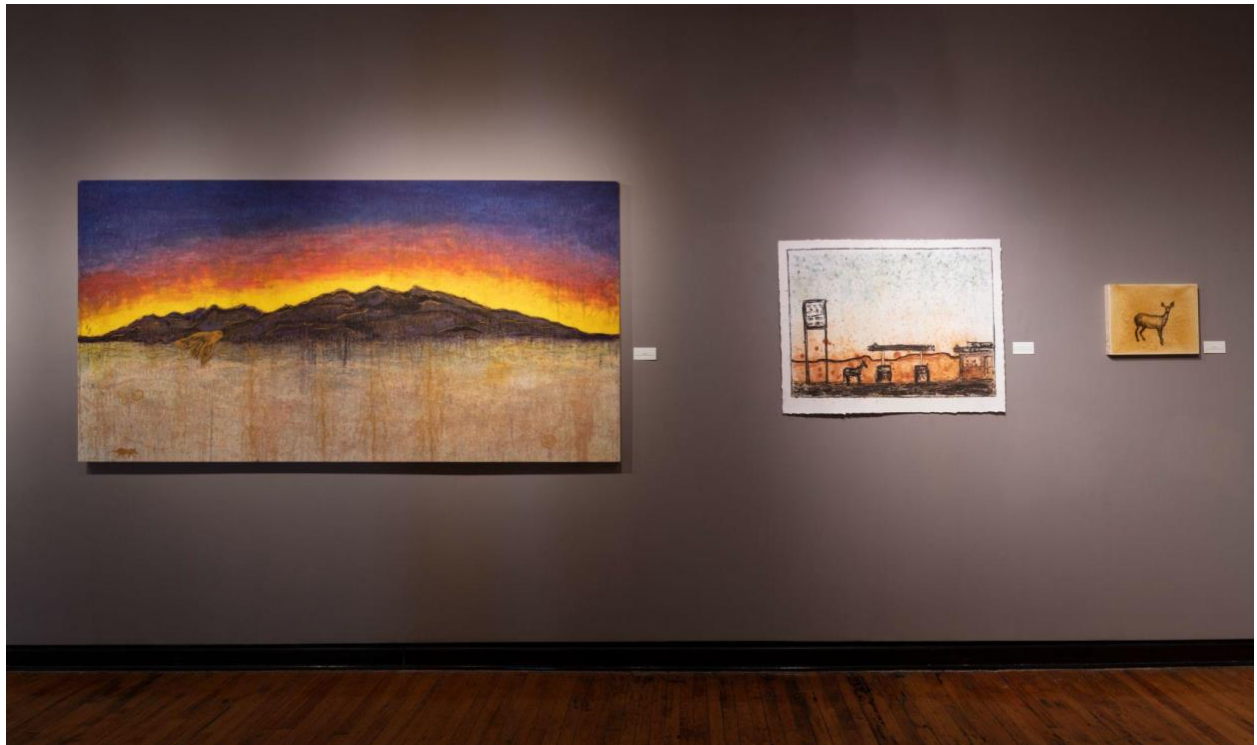
Wide angle view of *shá bik'ehgo (in the path of the sun)* [view from gallery entrance]
(Figure 20.)



shá bik'ehgo (in the path of the sun) [south wall]
(Figure 21.)



shá bik'ehgo (in the path of the sun) [southwest corner]
(Figure 22.)



shá bik'ehgo (in the path of the sun) [west wall]
(Figure 23.)



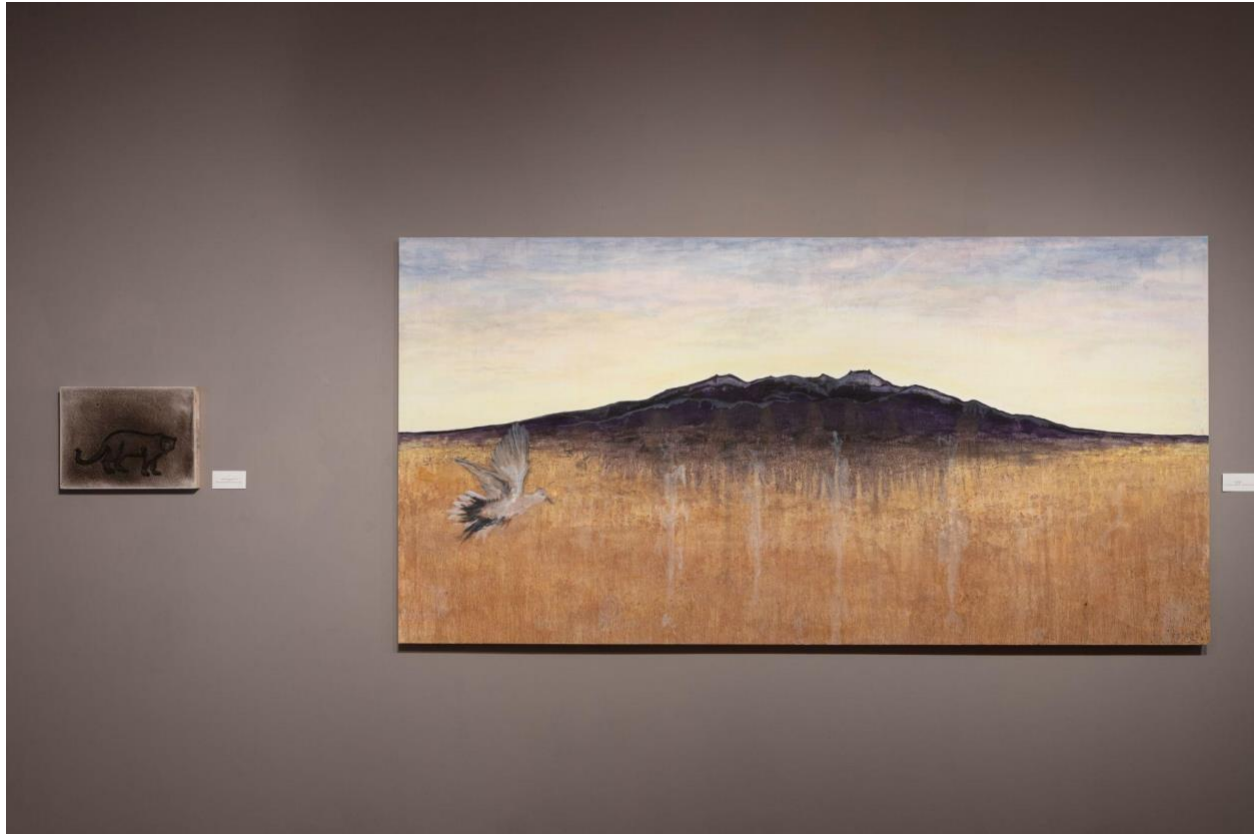
shá bik'ehgo (in the path of the sun) [north wall]
(Figure 24.)



shá bik'ehgo (in the path of the sun) [north wall continued]
(Figure 25.)



shá bik'ehgo (in the path of the sun) [northeast corner]
(Figure 26.)



shá bik'ehgo (in the path of the sun) [east wall]
(Figure 27.)

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