

# Visual Power: 21st Century Native American Artists/Intellectuals

Phoebe Farris

## Introduction

This essay is an overview of a current traveling exhibit that I curated for the United States Department of State. Since few readers will have an opportunity to view *Visual Power: 21st Century Native American Artists/Intellectuals*, this paper will both discuss the selected artists and their work and attempt to frame the exhibition within larger issues that are pertinent to Native American studies and contemporary visual art.

*Visual Power* is an outgrowth of a 2003 College Art Association panel that I chaired titled *Native American Artists/Intellectuals: Speaking for Ourselves in the 21st Century* and a concurrent art exhibition of the same title that I guest curated for the American Indian Community House Gallery in New York. Several of the artists from the 2003 panel and exhibit are featured in this United States Department of State traveling exhibit, including Nadema Agard (Cherokee/Lakota/Powhatan), Norman Akers (Osage/Pawnee), George Longfish (Seneca/Tuscarora), Gail Tremblay (Onandaga/Micmac), Duane Slick (Meskwaki), and Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne/Arapaho). A few months after the panel took place I received a phone call from Evangeline J. Montgomery, Senior Program Officer of the State Department's Cultural Programs Division, who had been in the audience. Ms. Montgomery asked me to consider expanding the

number of artists and to organize a traveling exhibit with a similar theme. Hence, our current exhibit, *Visual Power: 21st Century Native American Artists/Intellectuals*, adds renowned artists Joe Fedderson (Colville Confederated Tribes), Rose Powhatan (Pamunkey), Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Flathead Salish/Confederated Salish and Kootenai Nation), Kay Walking Stick (Cherokee), and Carm Little Turtle (Apache/Tarahumara).

This particular exhibit is in a poster format with each poster featuring a photo of the individual artist, one example of their work, and an artist statement. Ms. Montgomery had prior experience organizing a traveling Native American exhibit in the 1980s, as well as other cultural exchanges that featured artists with diverse ethnic backgrounds. These exhibits are administered by civil service personnel who serve under a series of changing presidential administrations, so the Cultural Programs Division staff attempts to be non-partisan and non-ideological. That “attempt” may vary at times, depending on the current political climate. Art works are displayed in embassies around the world with accompanying texts translated into the appropriate languages.

With the enthusiasm and support of the participating artists, Evangeline J. Montgomery, and Caesar A. Jackson, Project Designer for the Cultural Programs Division, this endeavor with text translations in Spanish, French, and Arabic materialized to try to enlighten viewers around the world about contemporary Native American art.

The purpose of this exhibit and the accompanying panels is to explore the interconnections of being both a Native American artist and a scholar. It is not unusual for the non-Indian public to be informed about the vast array of American Indian arts and crafts, especially those that fall within traditional, tribal heritages. However, few audiences are aware of our contributions as scholars, professors, museum curators, and writers and the impact that this intellectual history has had on our own development as visual artists.

The participants in this project have diverse perspectives on the connections between visual art, art history, art theory, criticism, aesthetics, feminism, multiculturalism, and various forms of political activism. Focusing on twenty-first century art practices, our interests include: using video and other new technologies to interview indigenous artists and to bridge crucial differences across cultures; resistance, the struggle for sovereignty, and the right to perform traditional cultural practices; analyses of the use of symbols of native heritages in ways that undermine essentialist conceptions of native identity; discussions of contemporary Native American art history and criticism from interdisciplinary approaches that utilize Native American Studies, the humanities, and the social sciences to understand the evolution of indigenous art and culture; and the Trickster’s exploration of globalism, native identity, and art in the so-called “pre-modern, modern, and post-modern worlds.”

It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide an in-depth analysis of Native American art history, aesthetics, visual culture, and current developments in art. For readers seeking more comprehensive information of the various top-

ics briefly discussed here, I have provided an extensive bibliography, a list of videos, and a list of cultural resources. For now, I want to focus on one exhibit and its artists; an exhibit that I feel is representative of some of the current trends in Native American art.

### **Contemporary Native American Art: The 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s**

Contemporary art created by Native Americans, like contemporary art created by most peoples, reaches into the past for some of its influences, is very much a product of its times, and is also visionary, reaching towards the future. In the past, now, and probably in the future, Native American art is usually regarded by its creators as an essential element of life, not just a separate aesthetic expression. In public life and to some extent in the private spheres, many of the arts (dancing, poetry, music, and the plastic and graphic arts) are often united into single or multiple functions of rituals, which represent the Native American concept of the whole life process. As artists and indigenous peoples here in the Americas, we do not usually separate art from healing or spirituality. Art, beauty, and spirituality are often intertwined in our routines of living; we use symbols of the spiritual and physical worlds to enrich our daily lives and ceremonies.

Symbols are protectors and reminders of the living universe. They are used in ritual performances to portray the power of the cosmos. Hence, *Visual Power*, the title of this exhibit, can be interpreted as our way, as Native American artists, of connecting to this rich heritage of visual imagery and symbols and creating art and a discourse that will ensure our continuity in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Five hundred years after the arrival of European explorers and conquerors to the Americas, the cultural influences affecting Native American art remain varied and complex. Many aesthetic changes have taken place in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as native peoples have participated more fully in the dominant culture of globalism and incorporated artistic traditions from Africa, Asia, and Europe into their own indigenous aesthetics. Native American artists are continually developing new definitions of Indian art. Any insistence that Indian art remain "traditional" as a way of preserving culture is a form of cultural discrimination because cultures are dynamic, not static.

Centuries before European colonizers arrived in what is now called America, Native American men and women were producing visual art in the form of basketry, pottery, mask making, quillwork, weaving, hide painting, totem pole sculptures, rock art petroglyphs and pictographs, and earth art such as mounds and stone medicine wheels. Indigenous artists developed a sensitivity to colors and textures found in nature, relating designs to the space and form on which they were placed.

Today many people are familiar with the so-called traditional Indian school of painting associated with the Santa Fe, New Mexico school of Dorothy Dunn and the Kiowa art movement in Oklahoma—a flat shaded treatment of historic native imagery. This style, which was encouraged in the Philbrook Art Center’s early competitions held in Oklahoma beginning in 1946, is often still identified in the public’s mind as “real Indian art.”

Celebrated artists of this style such as Gilbert Atencio, Andrew Tsinhnahjinnie, Archie Blackowl, Harrison Begay, Fred Kabotie, Stephan Mopope, Ma Pe Wi, and Pablita Velarde created a rich legacy. Unfortunately, some scholars and collectors have canonized this heritage as the only legitimate American Indian art.<sup>1</sup>

Artists Oscar Howe (Yanktonai Sioux, 1915-1984), Allan Houser (Chirichua Apache, 1914-1994), R. C. Gorman (Navajo, 1932- ), and others helped bridge the gap between so-called traditional American Indian art and mainstream art.<sup>2</sup> These artists opened new, expressive avenues for Indian artists that went beyond the meticulously, detailed, yet static (non-moving) realism of so-called traditional Indian painting. Howe recast traditional imagery into structured geometric planes and dramatic color combinations centered on heroic, mystical views of Indians. Howe’s 1954 painting *Victory Dance* is a transitional work that retains the mystic nature of Howe’s vision while at the same time imparting an experimental thrust to Indian painting. R. C. Gorman was the first Indian to paint nude figures and the first Indian to own a successful commercial gallery. Sculptor Al Houser’s work spanned six decades, and he used styles ranging from the figurative to the surreal and abstract. No matter what style, most Native American art from this generation emphasized beauty, balance, and harmony.

The 1960s may be considered the turning point when Native American artists began to break away from the so-called White-influenced, (D. Dunn) “traditional” painting style and began to develop and define their own contemporary visual, written, and performing arts.<sup>3</sup> The Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), founded in 1962 during this particular artistic turning point, was a focal point for native arts development. Located in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the IAIA was established during and encouraged by John Kennedy’s administration, and it was promoted by the Rockefeller Foundation’s Southwest Indian Arts Project, the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, former Indian Commissioner John Collier, and former IAIA professor and president, Lloyd Kiva New (Cherokee). This institute continues to nurture many Native American art students and professors, including one of this exhibit’s participating artists, Norman Akers. Other arts luminaries associated with the IAIA primarily in the 60s and 70s as students and/or teachers are Joy Harjo (Muskogee Creek); Roxanne Swentzell (Santa Clara Pueblo); Fritz Scholder (Luiseño); T.C. Cannon (Kiowa); Lloyd Kiva New (Cherokee), the president of IAIA from 1967-1978; Allan Houser (Chirichua Apache); Kevin Red Star (Crow); Karita Coffey (Comanche); and Linda Lomahaftewa (Hopi/Choctaw).

Contemporary Native American visual artists continue to explore pre-contact art traditions, styles developed during early colonialism/reservation confinement, so-called “traditional” painting, and newer, experimental art concepts. Their art often functions as social criticism by using content that expresses alienation from the dominant Western culture. Whether the work is abstract or more representational, it usually has a social context, although it may be subtle or even hidden from the uninitiated.

The 1970s are regarded as the decade when Native American art outside the southwestern geographical region began to receive national recognition. It is also a decade noted for increasing representation from Indian women artists such as Helen Hardin (Santa Clara Pueblo, 1943-1984) and one of our exhibiting artists, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. In the early 1970s Lloyd E. Oxendine (Lumbee) started the American Art Gallery, which was located in the Soho/Village area of downtown Manhattan and was devoted to contemporary American Indian art. In the late 1970s the American Indian Community House Gallery opened, also in the Village, near New York University, and Oxendine was one of its early curators. On the west coast, the Carl N. Gorman Museum at the University of California, Davis was founded in 1973 and was affiliated with their Native American Studies Department. Participating artist George Longfish served as its director until his retirement in 2004. These sites encouraged collaborations among college-educated Native Americans who functioned in multiple roles as artists, curators, critics, and art historians.

For all artists, the 1980s public discourse that centered on theories of postmodernism, poststructuralism, feminism, multiculturalism, and other “isms” had an impact on thinking and studio production. However, many Native American artists, like the ones featured in *Visual Power*, were already expressing concerns about the intersections of art, race/ethnicity, gender, and politics in their art—long before these issues became “trendy” or “politically correct.”

During the 1990s, beginning with the 1992 quincentenary, Indian artists were represented in outstanding exhibits such as the *Submuloc Show/Columbus Woks, We’re Still Here, Visions from Native America: Contemporary Art for the Year of the Indigenous Peoples*, and *Three Decades of Contemporary Indian Art at IAIA*. Due to the pressures of the market place and the necessity of selling art, Indian artists have had to walk a thin line between the co-optation of entering the mainstream art world and the middle and upper classes and simultaneously maintaining their artistic and tribal integrity as well as their political commitments. At the same time, like artists from other racial and ethnic groups, the patronage of teaching positions and curatorships at colleges and museums frees some artists from those dilemmas. Whether working for grassroots arts organizations, directing small tribal museums, creating public murals and site-specific installations, or working within the art establishment as art educators and museum professionals, most Native American artists maintain their specific community ties and in some cases involve themselves in national/international coalitions with other peoples of color.

## Issues for 21st Century Native American Artists/Intellectuals

As twelve artists coming together for this exhibit, we bring our different tribal, generational, gender, and aesthetic differences together, synthesizing them while still allowing space for individual autonomy. As in any exhibit multiple factors are involved in the selection of artists. As much as possible, I've tried to achieve some balance in tribal representation, gender, and generational spans. With the exception of Joe Fedderson, I have interacted with all of the artists in other capacities such as participation on panel discussions, research interviews for publications, group exhibits, mentorship, mutual support, and, perhaps most important, friendship and solidarity. Joe Fedderson was highly recommended by several of the other artists and it has been a pleasure getting to know him and becoming familiar with his art.

All of us are excited about the possibilities for Native American intellectual and creative growth in the twenty-first century but are still cautious about being too optimistic, given that our population is less than 1 percent of the United States and that many of our tribes still have unresolved sovereignty issues as well as devastating poverty and health problems. Regardless of the media we explore or where we work as professors, museum specialists, curators, or writers, we all have a common interest in addressing contemporary Native American art and culture from multiple perspectives.

Edgar Heap of Birds is concerned about art critics and art historians interpreting Native American art or art in general without interviewing, meeting, or sharing some aspect of the artists' lives, thus leading to misrepresentation. Heap of Birds advocates videotaped interviews when possible and residencies that involve collaborations with artists from diverse cultures so that an intellectual exchange can occur between and among artists, scholars, and communities, blurring those distinctions when possible. He has collaborated with indigenous artists from Australia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe and experienced welcome and respect resulting from some of their shared perspectives of being colonized. In his series *Eagle Speaks* and *Diary of Trees*, Heap of Birds states, "I hope to articulate these experiences [of colonization] to the public. Artists are some of the best people to put forward these issues and to demonstrate that we have this alliance."<sup>24</sup> The artworks of Heap of Birds include multi-disciplinary forms of public art messages, large scale drawings, acrylic paintings, and monumental porcelain enamel on steel outdoor sculpture. At the University of Oklahoma, where he teaches Native American Studies and Fine Arts, Heap of Birds explores issues of the contemporary artist on a local, national, and international basis.

Thinking along similar lines, Gail Tremblay encourages indigenous and non-native art historians to do the necessary research to be able to talk about both the formal elements and the cultural contexts of Native American Art, en-

sure its inclusion in mainstream books and articles about contemporary art. Tremblay contributes to Native American arts and cultural life through her multimedia visual works, art installations, critical writing, and poetry. Her writing and art has been published in more than 50 books, journals, and periodicals, and she is in great demand as a lecturer and workshop presenter. She has worked for thirty years to assure that issues of diversity and gender equity are addressed in the teaching of art, in the writing of art criticism and art history, in the curating of exhibits, and in the granting of public and private funding to artists and art institutions. Her own visual art is an exploration of materials; arranging a variety of materials together to create imagery and meaning, thinking about the way that matter can be manipulated. The works represented in this exhibit are from Tremblay's *Iroquois Fancy Stitch Film Blanket* series. She uses traditional stitches like bird mouth stitch, porcupine stitch, and strawberry stitch to make comments with her baskets, relishing the irony of making film take on the traditional fancy stitch patterns of Iroquois ash splint and sweet grass baskets. Tremblay states, "I love the control over this material (16 mm film and film leader), which has been a medium for stereotyping Indians. I enjoy creating titles to contextualize these baskets and often choose materials for ironic purpose."<sup>55</sup> Currently Gail Tremblay is a professor at The Evergreen State College in Washington, teaching visual arts, creative writing, cultural studies, and Native American studies.

As a professor at the Institute for American Indian Arts, dealing almost exclusively with Indian art students, Norman Akers tries to achieve a balance of exposing his students to contemporary art while still advocating the expressions of traditional aesthetic values in order to maintain cultural integrity—a fluid cultural integrity that is very much a part of the twenty-first century. He is in the unique position of interacting with students with a variety of tribal backgrounds from both urban and reservation environments. This unusual academic setting provides a stimulus for a Native American intellectual discourse that covers contemporary art, identity, community, native traditions and their ongoing evolution, and globalization. Akers's own creativity is also enhanced by his interactions in this aesthetically rich environment. His large canvases are a combination of expressionism and naturalism with a narrative, dreamlike quality. Imagery and symbolism is personal, reflecting his twenty-first century scholarly research and his contemporary tribal experiences. Akers states, "Working within the framework of an academic painting tradition, I begin to formulate paintings that express the traditions of my culture in a contemporary artistic context. My art is about breaking down the old definitions that describe Native American art, definitions that marginalize many tribal artists from the mainstream art world."<sup>56</sup>

Through years of directing the C. N. Gorman Museum, which is affiliated with the Native American Studies Department at the University of California, Davis, George Longfish made a huge contribution to the interdisciplinary field

of Native American Studies. He used humor, art, and spirituality to convey political messages to a wide audience in academia. Before his recent retirement, Longfish had expanded the scope of the C. N. Gorman Museum to include exhibits reflecting such diverse cultures as *African American Quilts*, *Ester Hernandez: The Art of Provocation*, and *Co-Madres Artistas: Voces de la Mujer*, while still maintaining a strong Native American presence. His own work uses pop culture, texts, Native American historical references, abstractions, traditional symbols, and bold colors to address issues such as dislocation, post-modernism in a native context, the contemporary Native American warrior, native representation and subjectivity, male/female dynamics, and politics, all with the ultimate goal of communicating the contemporary Native American presence in the art world and the world at large. Longfish states, “My art is about knowing the truth from a lie. I paint about injustice. The more we are able to own our religious, spiritual, and survival information, and even language, the less we can be controlled.”<sup>7</sup>

Duane Slick also puts humor into play, using the Trickster/Coyote in his paintings and his lectures/writings to offer alternative methods for critiquing serious issues such as market and global pressures faced by indigenous artists, many of whom still believe in a more traditional “spiritual economy” with responsibilities that function outside the lifestyle of mainstream American culture. He has had numerous solo and group exhibitions, conducted storytelling performances, and lectured across the country. Slick previously taught painting at the IAIA and now teaches painting and printmaking at the Rhode Island School of Design. Recently he was elected to serve on the board of the College Art Association. In his poem/artist statement, Slick states,

But the laughter of Coyote saturated and filled our daily lives.  
It echoed through the lecture halls of histories and it was so  
powerful and it was so distracting that I forgot my place in  
linear time, and now I work from an untraceable present.<sup>8</sup>

Nadema Agard’s concerns also reference the spiritual; notably in her perspective of the interconnections between “woman,” “mother,” “indigenous person,” “spiritual being,” and “warrior.” Inspired by imagery and cosmology from native cultures throughout the Americas, the subject matter of Agard’s work is feminine iconography and the necessity for female creativity and healing to achieve balance between masculine and feminine powers. As a syncretist with a Pan-Indian view of native art, religion, and culture, she incorporates symbolism from a variety of native cosmologies—the Southwest, the Plains, the Southeast, the Northeast, the Great Lakes Woodlands, and Mesoamerica. Her paintings, transformational boxes, and installations honor the belief systems of Mesoamerica—that is, the syncretism of the Aztec and Catholic religions now practiced by Mexican Indians, Mexican mestizos, and U. S. Chicanos. Agard

describes her work as demonstrating the power of tribal art as a “vehicle for cultural and political resistance and a spiritual grounding for a world that has become unbalanced.”<sup>9</sup> Currently Nadema Agard is the Director of Red Earth Studio Consulting/Productions in New York City, where she has been a consultant to the International Indigenous Community at the United Nations, lectured widely, and guest-curated for New York’s American Indian Community House Gallery.

Carm Little Turtle also approaches the theme of male/female balance, using humor in her photographs to comment on male-female dynamics in personal relationships. In staged scenes that represent both the female and male gaze, Little Turtle expresses her view that how people relate to the opposite sex on a personal level carries over into politics. Models are often posed against a background of nature in the rugged terrain of Northern Arizona or the mountains and clouds of New Mexico—nature serving as a backdrop to the politics played out symbolically between men and women. “Models’ faces are not seen in several of the staged images in order to suggest movement or solitary journeys that are dreamy visual poems. The frothy veil of sex, food, and money is the symbolic coverlet rent by men that women continually amend.”<sup>10</sup> As well as her dramatically staged photos, Little Turtle also shoots street photography – images that she encounters and captures. Usually using natural light, she works with a Minolta 55mm lens, fast film, and infrared. Paint is used to make the images come forward or recede by employing warm or cool colors. Residing in New Mexico, Carm Little Turtle also works as a registered nurse. As an operating room nurse, she has “seen the spirit shrunken, depleted, almost devoid of life, then reborn through support, compassion, and love.”<sup>11</sup>

Kay Walking Stick’s work takes a broad view of what constitutes Native American art. “My wish has been to express our Native and non-Native shared identity. We humans of all races are more alike than different, and it is this shared heritage, as well as my personal heritage, that I wish to express. My goal has always been to paint about who I am as a 20th/21st century artist, and also as a Native American. My thoughts on our native history filled my work for many years. Today, I deal with feelings and thoughts common to all.”<sup>12</sup> Walking Stick initially painted landscapes in the mid-1980s. Her questions then were: What does the landscape visually imply? What does the Earth convey metaphorically, and how can one use this visual trope to express personal feelings on the late twentieth century experience? She continued to explore these questions but their meanings seemed to change as she has changed. About seven years ago Walking Stick realized that the landscapes depicted in her paintings had become a stand-in for her body: “Although all painting is a portrait of the artist to some extent, once I had come to this understanding of body, I felt justified to include figures in my work.”<sup>13</sup> According to Walking Stick, the move to figures seemed inevitable although she had not depicted humans in her work for many years. In fact, their absence had seemed crucial to the significance of her work;

it had been the uninhabited landscape Walking Stick had sought in relation to the eternal. In her present work, it is the golden skies that refer to the eternal. Walking Stick spent extended periods in Rome in 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2003. While in Italy she sketched the Italian Alps, as well as classic sculpture and paintings, and she had the opportunity to examine an Aztec Codex in the Vatican Library. Her paintings now incorporate the Kokopelli figure from petroglyphs in the United States, images from Renaissance paintings, forms influenced by bronze sculptures in Pompeii, and figures from her imagination. Recently retired as a professor of painting at Cornell University, Walking Stick continues to achieve national and international success through her art, thought-provoking writings, and lectures on contemporary Native American art.

Joe Fedderson likes to investigate the relationship between abstraction and figurative representation that has always existed in Native American art, from pre-European contact to its present place in mainstream contemporary art. Fedderson has worked in painting, three-dimensional constructions, photography, and computer-generated imagery, but he is best known as a virtuoso printmaker. Interested in exploring the complexities of a wide range of printmaking processes, Fedderson's recent works involve multiple media, including aquatint, stencil relief, silagraphy (a silicon-based process), drypoint, blind embossing, and the blended roll, in which several colored inks are used in a single pass of the roller over the print matrix.

Recently Fedderson has explored the art of basketry, weaving Plateau-style baskets that are influenced by indigenous designs, the Northwest landscape, and contemporary urban symbols. In both his baskets and his prints, he explores the intersections between abstraction and representational iconography. The "Urban Indian Suite" basket series and two printmaking series, "Plateau Geometric" and "Tamas," work in conjunction with each other to acknowledge Fedderson's various sources of inspiration such as Plateau artistry, weaving techniques taught to him by Warm Springs poet and artist Elizabeth Woody, and the traditional imagery associated with his maternal grandmother's heritage. His work investigates signs and merges them with print processes, capitalizing on personal memory connections interwoven in nature design patterns made by his ancestors from the Inland Plateau region of the Columbia Basin. Fedderson states that his "interest lies in the zone where the signs tenuously dissolve into a modernist aesthetic while still maintaining direct ties to the Plateau designs."<sup>14</sup> His work is in the permanent collection of numerous institutions such as the Eiteljorg Museum, the Heard Museum, the Smithsonian, and the U. S. Department of the Interior. Currently Joe Fedderson teaches at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington.

The fusion of indigenous abstraction and realism is eloquently expressed in Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's mixed media canvases, which incorporate sign language, glyphs, pictograms, human figures, and collages from print media as symbols representative of her concerns about Native American sovereignty, racism, sexism, and perhaps most important, the environment and earth's potential

destruction. As part of Smith's commitment to preserving the Earth, she tries not to use materials that pollute the environment, take excessive storage space, or are costly to ship. As an artist, curator, lecturer, and political activist, Quick-To-See Smith is a role model for many Native American and other politically engaged artists. She challenges misconceptions about indigenous culture and uses her art, public art, lectures, workshops, curating, and writing to enlighten the mainstream. Smith has been a visiting artist at universities across the United States, Europe, and China for over thirty years. She also is a featured speaker at art education conferences for her lectures on "systems thinking" and for developing curricula that are inclusive of all peoples. She has continued for thirty years to organize and curate touring exhibits of Native American art throughout the United States and Europe. Additionally, Smith strives for new levels of non-toxic printmaking and teaches workshops at universities across the country. Her paintings sometimes incorporate glyphs or collage in the background of large iconic figures such as traditional Flathead women's dresses, canoes, horses, items of imagery important to her tribe, as well as pop icons (such as U.S. maps and flags). Her narrative paintings always convey humor with a prominent political message that consistently addresses issues of respect for nature, animals, and humankind. Observations on current political events, as well as myths about Native Americans are present in her work. Often large icons that are significant to Smith's tribe appear in layers of paint and collage from newspapers and other text sources. "As an artist who loves the physical process of painting, working in layers of paint and collage makes the incremental layers feel like sequences in time. I also like the dripping paint, as it creates an uncertain risk when I can't control the whole process, which is like life itself."<sup>15</sup>

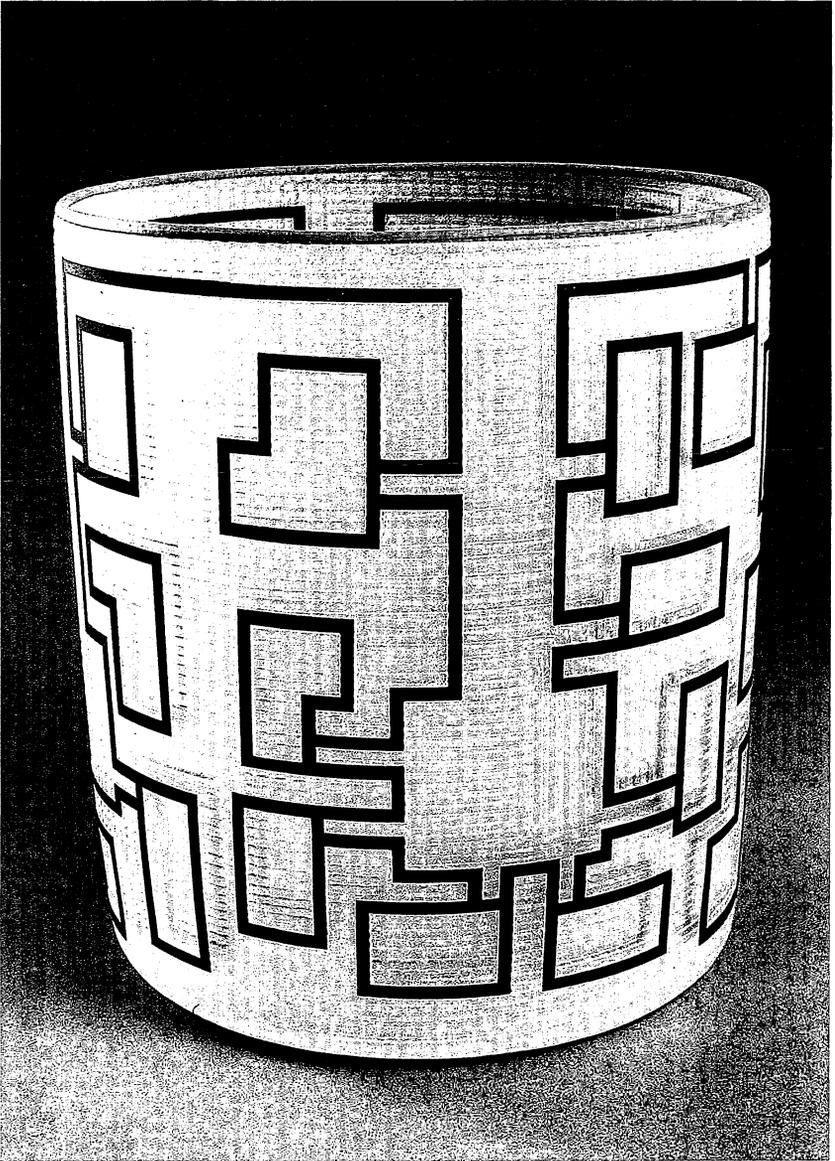
Whether working with paint, silk screen, or totem pole construction, Rose Powhatan's major theme is respect for indigenous cultures and commitment to presenting the Pamunkey Tribe and the entire Powhatan Confederacy in a positive, reverent, uplifting mode of visual arts expression. This was particularly evident in her 1988 Vienna, Virginia METROART commission, *Totems to Powhatan*, a series of wooden totem figures that represented various Powhatan Confederacy chiefs and utilized black and red engraved designs to portray significant symbols such as Powhatan's historic mantle with its circles representing the original tribes. The Powhatan Confederacy originally extended over present-day Virginia, part of West Virginia, part of the northern region of North Carolina, and Washington, DC, especially along the Anacostia and Potomac rivers. The Pamunkey Reservation in King William County, Virginia, is the oldest reservation in the United States. To authenticate her work, Powhatan researches traditional Eastern Woodlands indigenous designs. Her art displays a decided sense of place and proclaims who she is, where she is from, and what she is about. Powhatan uses a narrative approach to her subject matter as a visual artist and storyteller because she feels that Eastern Algonquin tribes have not been given full respect in being included as part of the picture of "Indian Country." However, she also finds cultural expressions that transcend her own

national boundaries and include Australian Aborigines, New Zealand Maori's, and Dominican Caribs. She believes that respect for traditional cultural values binds all indigenous peoples together in their art. "As a world citizen I have learned to appreciate and cultivate the universality of the common good that we all share. No one nation or race of people on earth has the sole authorship of decency. In addition to Pocahontas I call on the energies of my ancestor Keziah Powhatan, the Fire Woman Warrior, while creating art. One of the meanings of our name *Powhatan* is *one who dreams*. It suits me."<sup>16</sup> Recently retired as a high school art teacher and curriculum writer for the Washington, D.C. public school system, Rose Powhatan is presently a board member of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in the nation's capital.

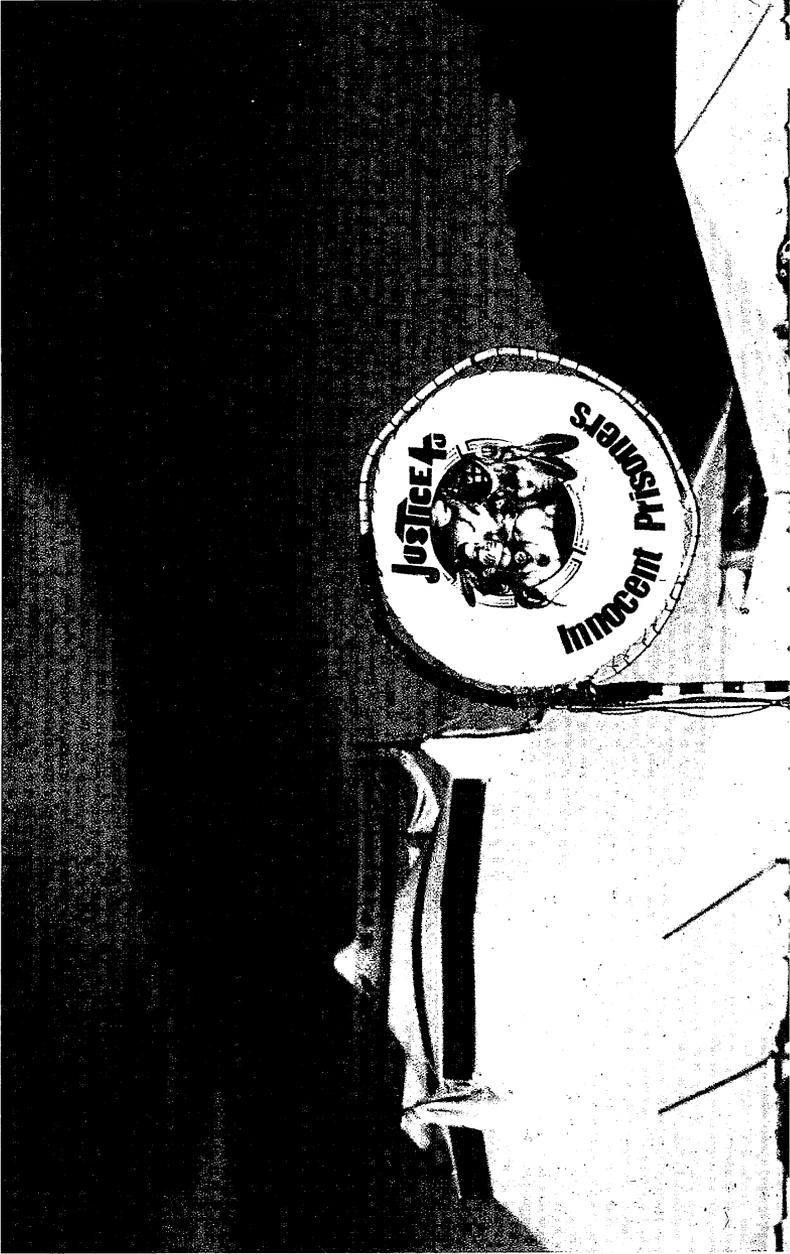
I also share Powhatan's concerns about culturally re-affirming the Powhatan heritage as well as those of other eastern tribes in the United States and indigenous peoples in the Caribbean, many of whom have ancestry from American Indians captured into slavery and transported to the various islands. After 500 years of intermixture, the ancestry and cultural influences of contemporary Native Americans is very complex, and the resulting art and culture is more varied than the usual emphasis on the European/Native American encounter (the white and red). My academic research and my photography attempts to more accurately portray some of the multidimensional aspects of Native American heritage (the red, black, white, and yellow). Since the late 1980s, much of my work has involved documenting various aspects of Native American culture found in the eastern United States and in the Caribbean. I am especially interested in those nations on the Atlantic Coast who had early contact with Europeans, Africans, and free people of color, absorbing aspects of those outside cultures while still maintaining a Native American identity.

Interaction and documentation of culturally diverse communities such as the Powhatan, Lumbee, Shinnecock, Narragansett, Haliwa-Saponi, Piscataway, Pequot, Leni-Lenape, and Taino, which are often ignored in literature on contemporary Native American culture, is the best way I can use my art to reaffirm a native heritage that many anthropologists and historians claim is extinct or just a "remnant" culture.

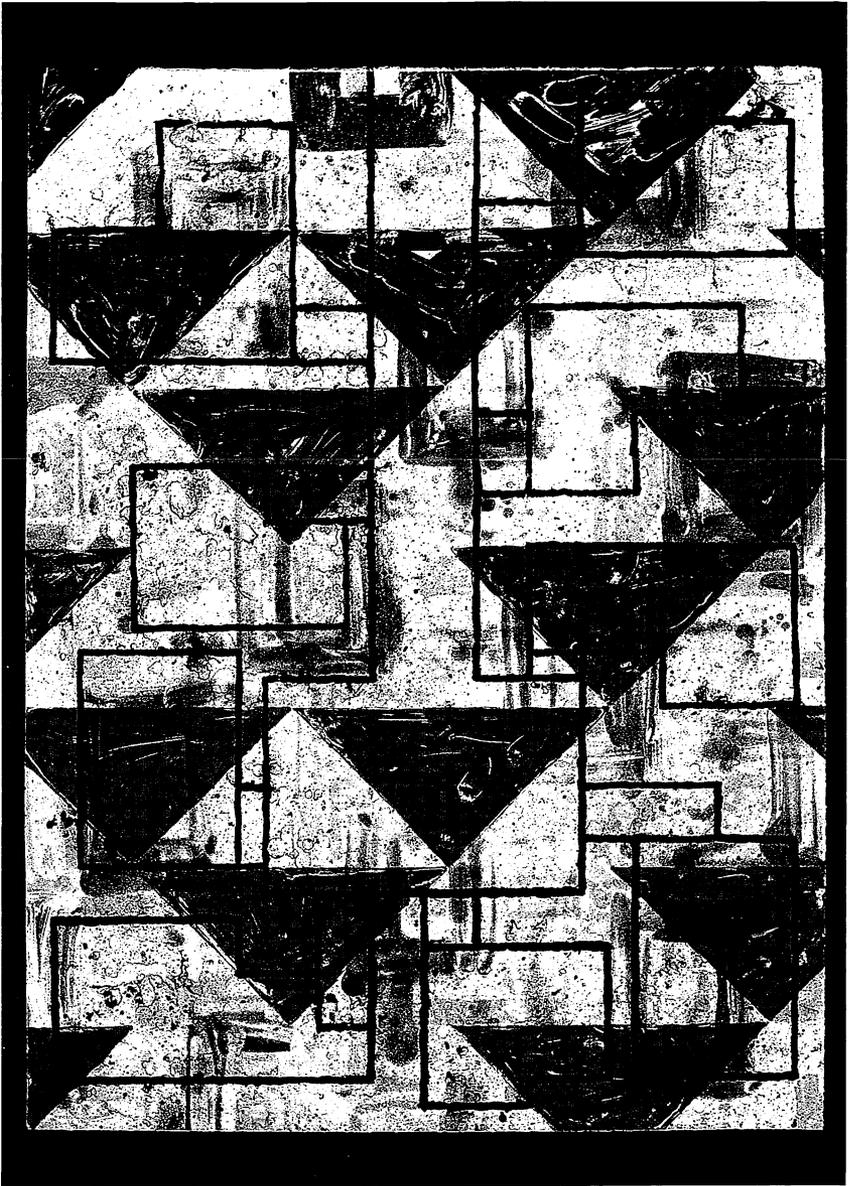
My current projects involve using early-1900s photographs of my relatives from the Smithsonian's Native American Photography Archives and juxtaposing them with personal family photos and images of grave sites on the Pamunkey Reservation. My photo documentation of reconstructed colonial Native American villages on the Pamunkey Reservation in Virginia and the Rankokus Powhatan-Renape Reservation in New Jersey, images of tribal events that celebrate the diversity prevalent among eastern tribes, and photographs of people with native ancestry in the Caribbean and Mexico attest to my belief in a transnational approach to embracing indigenous cultures in the Americas.



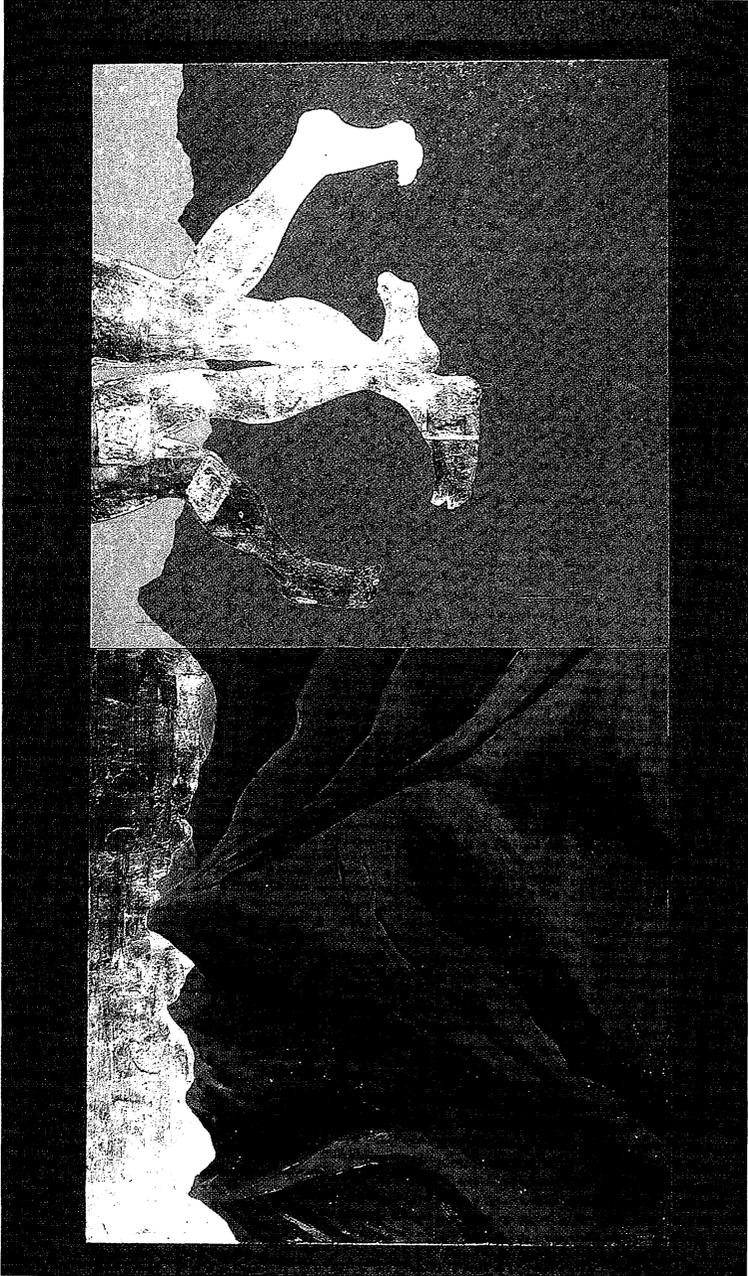
**Figure 1:** Cul-De-Sac, 2003. Artist: Joe Fedderson (Colville Confederated Tribes). 14.5" x 13" x 13" blown/sand blasted glass. Courtesy of Froelick Gallery, Portland, Oregon.



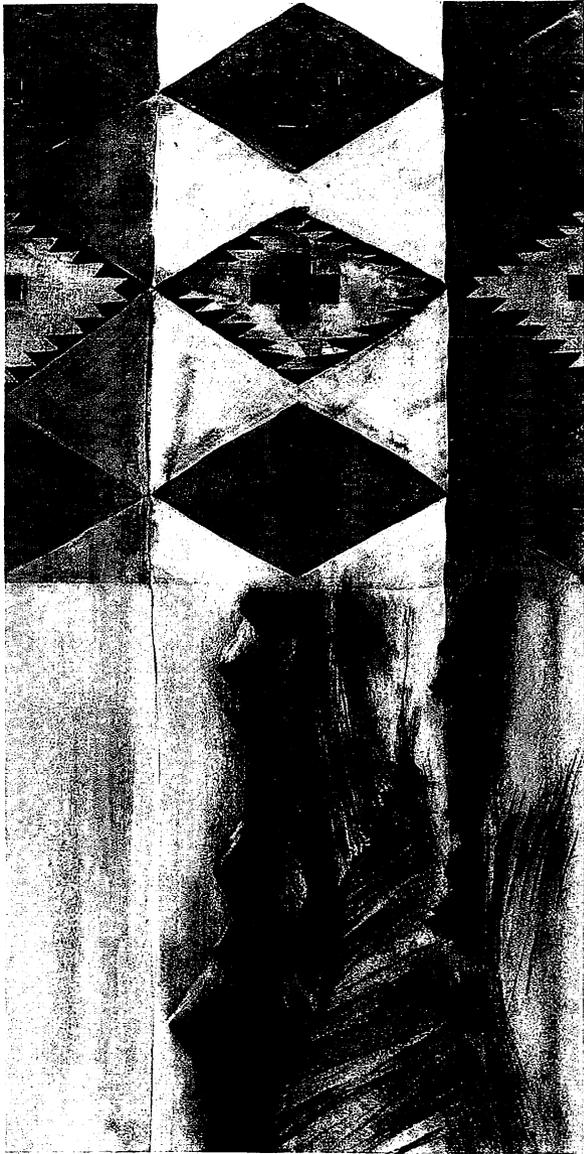
**Figure 2:** National Museum of the American Indian Opening Celebration, 2004. Artist: Phoebe Farris (Powhatan). c-print.



**Figure 3:** Wyt View, 2003. Artist: Joe Fedderson (Colville Confederated Tribes). 40" x 30" lithograph. Courtesy of Froelick Gallery, Portland Oregon.



**Figure 4:** Gioioso, Variation II, 2001. Artist: © Kay Walking Stick (Cherokee). 32" x 64" oil, gold leaf, wood. Courtesy of Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art.



**Figure 5:** Bear Paw Battlefield, 2003. Artist: © Kay Walking Stick (Cherokee). 25" x 50" charcoal, gouache, encaustic/paper. Courtesy of University of Virginia Art Museum.



**Figure 6:** Phoebe Mills Lyles (Powhatan), 2002. Artist: Phoebe Farris (Powhatan). c-print.

## Conclusion

Where does twenty-first century Native American art's visual power belong in a pluralistic, postmodern, poststructuralist world? The concept of identity is undergoing profound changes, as is the concept of high/fine art versus low/popular art. Native American aesthetics have survived colonialism, servitude, racial discrimination, and rapid technological changes. Native American artists and intellectuals continually develop and revise the multiple meanings of our art and our Native American heritages to suit our own concepts of American Indian/Native American/First Nations/indigenous peoples. But we undertake the evolution of these cultural concepts with the support and guidance of our elders, spiritual advisors, tribal leaders, and community members—not as academic elitists.

*Visual Power: 21st Century Native American Artists/Intellectuals* cannot possibly feature all the artists influencing this century; it only highlights a small percentage. Contemporary Native American artists from what is now the United States including Truman Lowe (Ho Chunk), Malinda Maynor (Lumbee), Lillian Pitt (Warm Springs Yakima Wasco), Mario Martinez (Yaqui), Jimmie Durham (Cherokee), Pena Bonita (Apache/Seminole), and Lorenzo Clayton (Navajo), just to name a few, have varying visions and are dealing with issues such as the environment, genocide, native spirituality, racism, and sexism.

For today's native artists, art traditions involve both community aesthetics and social interaction; tradition is often a source of inspiration, yet native artists note that this is a very different world from that of their ancestors.<sup>17</sup> Native artists realize the necessity of their art to be responsive to today's life circumstances. Many contemporary native artists have multiple cultural identities, a combination of tribal affiliations, mixed racial backgrounds, and ties to urban and rural environments. As artist and author Rick Hill (Tuscarora) notes, "There can certainly not be one standard of thought that applies to all Indians or all Indian artists. There never was, even before the word 'art' was introduced to Indians."<sup>18</sup>

There are no easy answers to the questions posed in the beginning of this conclusion. There are also more questions that could be asked. The participating artists, including the curator, and the staff from the Cultural Programs Division of the United States Department of State, women and men from different tribal, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, came together to honor and celebrate the diversity of twenty-first century Native American art and culture. We all look forward to receiving critical commentary regarding "Visual Power" and suggestions for future exhibits.

## Notes

1. Farris, Phoebe, "Art, Visual (To 1960)," in Frederick Hoxie, ed., *Encyclopedia of North American Indians* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1996).
2. *Ibid.*, page 50.
3. Shown Harjo, Suzan, "Arts, Contemporary (Since 1960)," in Frederick Hoxie, ed., *Encyclopedia of North American Indians*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1996).
4. Interviews with the artist and submitted artist statements, 2003-2004.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. Rick Hill, "Preface," in Roger Matuz, ed., *St. James Guide to Native North American Artists*, (New York and London: St. James Press, 1998).
17. *Ibid.*, page viii.

## Cultural Resources

**American Indian Community House Gallery**, 708 Broadway, New York, NY 10003, (212) 598-0100, fax: (212) 598-4909, <http://www.aich.org>

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**, American Indian Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1548

**American Indian Dance Theater**, 223 East 61st Street, New York, NY 10021

**Atlatl Inc. – National Service Organization for Native American Arts**, 49 E. Thomas Road, Suite #105, Phoenix, AZ 85012, (602) 277-3711, fax: (602) 277-3690, email: [atlatl@atlatl.org](mailto:atlatl@atlatl.org)

**D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian History at the Newberry Library**, 60 West Walton Street, Chicago, IL 60610-3380, (312) 943-9090

**Eiteljorg Museum of American Indian Art**, 500 West Washington Street, Indianapolis, IN 46204-2707, (317) 636-9378, <http://www.eiteljorg.org>

**Heard Museum**, 2301 North Central Avenue, Phoenix, AZ 85004-1323, (602) 251-0261, [members@heard.org](mailto:members@heard.org)

**National Association of Native American Studies**, School of Art, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-1505, <http://www.nativearts.org>

**National Museum of the American Indian**, Cultural Resources Center, 4220 Silver Hill Road, Suitland, MD 20746, (301) 238-6624

**National Museum of the American Indian, NMAI on the National Mall**, 4th Street and Independence Avenue S.W., Washington, DC 20560, (202) 633-1000

**National Museum of the American Indian**, Smithsonian Institute, 470 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 7103, Washington, D.C. 20560-0934, (202) 357-3164, fax: (202) 357-3369, email: [aimember@nmai.si.edu](mailto:aimember@nmai.si.edu)

**National Museum of the American Indian**, The George Gustav Heye Center, Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House, One Bowling Green, New York, NY 10004, (212) 283-2420 or (212) 514-3700, fax: (212) 694-1970

**Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium**, P.O. Box 83111, Lincoln, NB 68501

**Native Americas**, Cornell University, Aweikon Press, 300 Caldwell Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853

**Native Arts Circle**, 1443 East Franklin Avenue, Minneapolis, MN 55404, (612) 870-7173, fax: (612) 870-0327

**News from Native California**, P.O. Box 9145, Berkeley, CA 94709

**North Carolina Indian Cultural Center**, P.O. Box 2410, Pembroke, NC 28372, (919) 521-2433, fax: (919) 521-0394

**Sacred Circle of American Indian Art**, Discovery Park, P.O. Box 99100, Seattle, WA 98199, (206) 285-4425, fax: (206) 282-3640

**School of American Research**, P.O. Box 2188, Santa Fe, NM 87504-2188, (505) 954-7200, info@sarsf.org

**Spiderwoman Theater**, 77 Seventh Avenue, Suite 85, New York, NY 10003

**The Native American Center for the Living Arts**, 25 Rainbow Mall, Niagara Falls, NY 14303 (716) 284-2427, fax: (716) 282-5138

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*Pueblo, The Quapaws, The Sac and Fox, The Santee Sioux, The Seminole, The Shawnee, The Shoshone, The Tarahumara, The Teton Sioux, The Tunica-Biloxi, Urban Indians, The Wapanoag, Women in American Society, Literatures of the American Indian, The Yakima, The Yankton Sioux, The Yuma, The Suni.* (New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, \_\_\_\_).

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*R. C. Gorman, Navajo Painter.* Princeton: Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 2004.