

The Power of RED

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Choosing a title for any exhibition and book can be a struggle. Most projects begin with a theme or the examination of a particular artist, and title selection soon becomes obvious. The situation is reversed for the *Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship*. Only after the artists are chosen, the work is selected, and the catalogue artists are identified can the title be determined. The title shapes the way visitors view the show, defines the image of the accompanying catalogue, and becomes the verbal identity of the project.

Despite what Shakespeare stated in Juliet's famous musings on a rose, a name, or in this case an exhibition title, is not just a title. It is a large part of a project's identity. The trick is to find a title that projects the power of the exhibition and the artists it represents as a whole.

The title of the eighth round of the Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship is *RED*. When we decided on the name, we discussed what it meant. Words like "resistance," "resilience," "education," "dialogue," and "earth" were tossed around to see if they fit or would add to the overall idea of *RED*. We decided that *RED* by itself embodied the strength, drama, determination, and humor of the art and the artists. It is the color of power. It is symbolic of blood, the essence of life that keeps our bodies functioning. It declares that any person who lives with the idea that Native people are vanishing, weak, or failing to thrive needs simply to look at their art.

It makes sense that choosing the title for the biennial *Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship* exhibition must wait until the artists are selected through a rigorous adjudication process by an independent group of art experts. This group typically includes a previous Fellow, a member of the Native art field, and a notable figure from the larger world of contemporary art. Special thanks go to the 2013 Fellowship selection committee: Bonnie Devine (Ojibwa), Melissa Bob (Lummi), and Lisa Freiman.¹ Their task was to choose the Fellows by viewing images of art made by each artist who had

been nominated or had applied for a fellowship. The works the committee views do not necessarily end up in the exhibition. Once the artists are identified, the curator of contemporary art selects pieces for the show that she views during interviews at the artists' studios and sometimes at other museums and the homes of collectors. Themes and ideas for the show and its title emerge from this process, which is creative and time-consuming. The results are worth the journey.

RED features five Fellows who exemplify the highest standards of artistic excellence in the field of Native contemporary art. These artists represent unique cultural and personal backgrounds, and their artwork reflects the diversity of Native artists in North America. The combination of paintings, drawings, photography, sculpture, and installation art once again proves that there is no such thing as stereotypical Native art. The works show clearly that a range of media and voices demonstrates the true power of *RED*. Many of the works come from tradition layered in contemporary experiences and transformed with new media and unique nontraditional materials, while others express the reinvention of traditional arts.

This year's invited artist, who does not have to apply for the Fellowship and is selected by the museum, is Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun (Coast Salish) of Canada, an obvious choice to join the illustrious group of previous Fellowship exhibition headliners.² Few Native artists are as prolific as Yuxweluptun. His work beautifully, and often sardonically, encompasses the political and social issues that inform Native artists.

I work for art, not to be used by racism. I make art to get rid of racism. I am concerned with the colonial mentality that is directly responsible for the killing of wolves, buffalo, whales, grizzly bears, and migratory birds, to the point that some species are now extinct. It is behind the depletion of fish stocks on the west and east coasts, acid rain, nuclear waste, landfills, smog, the greenhouse effect, the emission of methane gas, mining tailings, endangered animals, pollution of freshwater reservoirs, toxic wastes of all kinds, oil spills, uranium mining, nuclear testing. The next step



(Above) Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Fucking Creeps They're Environmental Terrorists*, 2013. Acrylic on canvas. (Below) Julie Buffalohead, *The Columbus Prophecies*, 2012. Mixed media on paper. Image courtesy the Bockley Gallery.

towards de-colonization of First Nations must be recognition by the provincial governments of our sovereign indigenous government. As sovereign caretakers of the land, our forebears were always the protectors of the biosphere.³

It is easy to get lost in the beauty of his surrealist landscapes or to be amused by the politicians in works such as *Fucking Creeps They're Environmental Terrorists* (2013). His humor does not release the offending parties from Yuxweluptun's demand for land rights and environmental preservation.

Two-dimensional work dominates the 2013 Eiteljorg Fellowship. Our second artist working in this format is Julie Buffalohead (Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma). She is a painter, papermaker, mother of one, and wife. Her quiet demeanor belies the passions of her deeply personal work. The perceptive viewer sees depictions of Buffalohead's myths, fairy tales, humor, hopes, and haunting fears. These are delicate images on fine, hand-crafted paper that evoke subtle but powerful emotions.

My recent series reflects a journey of a more personal nature. The narrative tension my work creates emanates from the Native oral tradition of storytelling, while I blend in my own distinct strands of make-believe.⁴

She has noted further:

My imagery is so personal it's hard to think about the viewer, but I try to be provocative. I use stereotypes because Indians didn't have a hand in creating them. It's my way of saying, "This is not who we are. This is your invention."⁵

The Columbus Prophecies exemplifies the mythical history that society has created and continues to endure. Buffalohead creates this piece to revise that history, and she is punitive in her actions toward the offenders.

Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit/Aleut) is a Sitka, Alaska-based artist and musician who completed his studies in London and New Zealand. His

artwork shifts from music to art, to his musical alter ego, Silver Jackson, and back, to the expressions of a Native artist protesting the past and professing his confidence in defining and depicting his future. Galanin states:

Culture cannot be contained as it unfolds. My art enters this stream at many different points, looking backwards, looking forwards, generating its own sound and motion. I am inspired by generations of Tlingit creativity and contribute to this wealthy conversation through active curiosity. There is no room in this exploration for the tired prescriptions of the "Indian Art World" and its institutions. Through creating, I assert my freedom.⁶

An example of that freedom is found in work such as *The American Dream is a Lie and Well* (2012) that initially appears as a physical representation of the American Dream and of power and strength through its use of the American flag and bullets. However, one simply has to look at the title to realize the artist's meaning. The American dream is not a truth for everyone.

Shan Goshorn (Eastern Band of Cherokee) is from Tulsa, Oklahoma, and originally trained as a painter and photographer. She now embraces the traditional practice of Cherokee basket weaving with decidedly contemporary techniques and messages. Her intricate baskets are inspiring and truly the work of a Native artist taking a traditional form and giving it a contemporary and political twist.

I strive to educate an audience about some of the unique issues that continue to impact Indian people.... Whether it is from the attempts to erase all Native identity by denying Indian children their language and culture through boarding schools assimilation, breaking ties among tribal supports through Indian relocation acts, providing Indian people with commodity foods that have contributed to major illnesses, etc., historical trauma continues to plague us in a big way. It is my goal to enlighten audiences to these ongoing practices and encourage honest dialogue between people.⁷



(Above) Shan Goshorn, *Separating the Chaff*, 2013. Archival watercolor paper splints, first printed with archival inks. (Below) Meryl McMaster, *Winged's Calling (In-Between Worlds series)*, 2012. Digital chromogenic print. Image courtesy the artist.

As an example of this melding of tradition and social conscience, the traditional single-weave basket created in a winnowing or sifter style titled *Separating the Chaff* (2013) was created not from sweetgrass and river cane, but from the deconstructed image of an encyclopedia page from the 1960s and a book on Indians from 1956. The work is about filtering what America thinks it knows about Native people.

Meryl McMaster (Plains Cree/Blackfoot) is a young artist from Ottawa, Ontario, whose work shows a maturity in its beauty and simplicity and its contradictions of Native experiences.

My artistic practice begins with photography evoking a journey that follows a path of self-discovery. It goes beyond straight photography by incorporating manual production, performance, and self-reflection. My work unravels notions of identity and subjectivity as something that is never complete, but always in process and always formed from within.⁸

McMaster's series *In-Between Worlds* truly embodies this ideal of a journey to self-reflection. Her use of handmade props and haunting locales results in visually rich images. McMaster's work will resonate in the memory of its audience.

McMaster's unique exposure to contemporary Native and especially First Nations art lies in the fact that she is the daughter of author and curator Gerald McMaster, who was in the first group of selectors (1999) and helped forge the format for the Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship. In the first Fellowship catalogue, Gerald McMaster stated:

Aboriginal contemporary art, by its very nature, is work being done today, for today, and about today. Artists borrow from everywhere. They look at ancient images, forms, and techniques, with an understanding that what their ancestors had to say continues to have meaning for them, and us all, in the present. None of them wishes us to believe they are located in some mythic past; instead, they understand their realities as energetic practices of today, which offer them an unparalleled range within which to express themselves.⁹

Gerald McMaster made this statement almost fifteen years ago, and its truth still holds. The 2013 Fellows embody the meaning of *RED* in this context. As an exhibition, *RED* is a platform for exploring the work of artists who take pride in their cultures and express strength in the knowledge that has been passed down from their ancestors. It is the idea of self-identity and personal reflection. *RED* demonstrates contemporary expression informed by millennia of knowledge and experience. Art of the 2013 Fellows is, indeed, about power and life and the present.

¹Melissa Bob was formerly with Crow's Shadow Institute of the Arts and currently is the director of community development for Children's Mental Health & Youth Engagement at the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA). Bonnie Devine was a 2011 Eiteljorg Fellow and is a professor at Ontario College of Art & Design, Toronto. Lisa Freiman was the former senior curator of contemporary art at the Indianapolis Museum of Art and currently is the director of the Institute of Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond.

²Previous leading artists for the Fellowship program, from 1999 through 2011, have been George Morrison, Allan Houser, Kay WalkingStick, John Hoover, James Luna, Edward Poitras, and Alan Michelson.

³"Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun: Biography and Discussion," created July 28, 2008, <http://voices.yahoo.com/lawrence-paul-yuxweluptun-biography-discussion-1708377.html>.

⁴Julie Buffalohead, artist's statement for Eiteljorg Museum, 2012.

⁵"Julie Buffalohead," Bockley Gallery, accessed June 5, 2013, http://bockleygallery.com/artist_buffalohead/index.html.

⁶Nicholas Galanin, artist's statement for Eiteljorg Museum, 2012.

⁷Shan Goshorn, artist's statement for Eiteljorg Museum, 2012.

⁸Meryl McMaster, artist's statement for Eiteljorg Museum, 2012.

⁹Quoted in Bruce Bernstein, "Philosophies, Histories, Identities," *Contemporary Masters, The Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art* (Indianapolis: Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, 1999), 6.