

Introduction

The Making of the “Best Collection of Native Contemporary Art in the World”

By Jennifer Complo McNutt and Ashley Holland (Cherokee Nation)

In 2014, the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. Such a time calls for reflection and introspection. One of the museum’s greatest accomplishments is the Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship. The story of the Fellowship is circular, renewable. It is continually changing by virtue of the art and artists’ experiences it honors

The genesis of the Fellowship program is simple. With the support of the Lilly Foundation and a myriad of forward-thinking sponsors over the years, a program has been developed that has changed the field of Native contemporary art while propelling the Eiteljorg Museum onto a national platform. This visibility has created competition among museums to collect Native contemporary works, all vying for and often claiming the most, the best, and the biggest such collections.

Since its creation, the Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship has awarded fifty artists a total of over one million dollars in direct support, produced nine exhibitions with accompanying scholarly catalogues, added by purchase more than 200 works of art to the permanent collection, and promoted contemporary Native art and artists to a national audience. As a proponent of advocacy and recognition of Native contemporary art as an important form of expression, the Eiteljorg Museum packs quite a punch.

The Fellowship underscores that this young institution has made and continues to make critical contributions to the field of Native contemporary art through exhibitions and publications. Furthermore, the museum has earned the reputation of sustaining the most meticulously cultivated collection of Native contemporary art in the world. It is a collection that has raised the bar, challenged the status quo of other institutions, and succeeded. This success furthers the important contributions Native artists continue to make, that educate and celebrate indigenous ingenuity, adaptation, and resilience.

Opposite: Allan Houser (Warm Springs Chiricahua Apache, 1914-1994)
Morning Prayer (detail), 1987, cast in 1997

Museum purchase with funds provided by Joan and Mel Perelman, 1998.178 © Chiinde LLC



With a spirit of enthusiasm and anticipation, the Eiteljorg presents the 2015 Fellowship, *Conversations*, marking the ninth round of the program and the continuing tradition of Native expression. This year's fellows are Luzene Hill (Eastern Band of Cherokee), Brenda Mallory (Cherokee Nation), Da-ka-xeen Mehner (Tlingit/Nisga'a), Holly Wilson (Delaware Tribe of Western Oklahoma/Cherokee), and invited artist Mario Martinez (Pascua Yaqui).

Luzene Hill is a conceptual artist specializing in installation, sculpture, and drawing. She has exhibited throughout the southeast United States and contributed to the exhibition *Changing Hands: Art Without Reservations 3*, produced by the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, NY. Her work has evolved over the years from a two dimensional medium to performance and installation that is conceptual in nature. The theme of silence plays a part in all of her expression.

Brenda Mallory is a Portland, OR based sculptor whose work can often take the form of large-scale installations. She is the recipient of numerous awards and grants such as the Oregon Arts Commission's Career Opportunity Grant and a project grant from the Regional Arts and Culture Council in Portland. Mallory's sculptures incorporate natural materials such as cotton and wax with more industrial implements such as nuts and bolts.

Da-ka-xeen Mehner is a multimedia artist who uses mediums such as sculpture, installation, photography, and film. Mehner's work demonstrates his direct relationship with his culture and his work is often conceptual in nature and engaging to the audience. Mehner was a 2014 Native Arts and Cultures Foundation Fellow in Visual Arts and he currently works as an assistant professor of Native Arts and Alaska Native Art History at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

Holly Wilson is a sculptor and photographer who has shown throughout the United States and extensively in Oklahoma and Texas. From 2009 to 2014, she was a member of the *Urban Indian 5*. Storytelling plays an important part in the work of Wilson and her delicately small pieces create imaginative narratives much larger than their size.

Invited artist Mario Martinez is a Brooklyn, NY-based painter who has exhibited throughout the United States. His work is found in collections such as the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, Tucson Museum of Art, and The Heard Museum. Martinez's work incorporates ideas of place and culture into his abstract, large-scale paintings.

This round's independent selection committee consisted of 2013 Fellow Julie Buffalohead (Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma), former contemporary art curator for the National Museum of the American Indian and 1999 Fellow Truman Lowe (Ho-Chunk), and independent art curator and consultant Mindy Taylor Ross, owner of Art Strategies, LLC and founding director of the Indianapolis Art's Council's Public Art Indianapolis. The Fellowship continues to be unique and responsive to the ever-changing Native contemporary art field because of the dedication and expertise of these selectors.

During every round, artists pose different questions through every possible medium to surprise, captivate, scare, sadden, and enlighten audiences. It is their great history and deep insights that make this exhibition and catalogue so vital in documenting Native contemporary art. This profound collection serves to introduce, document, and acknowledge the important contributions of our first Americans of the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries.

The museum has purchased the following works of art.

Mario Martinez (Pascua Yaqui)
The Conversation, 2004
Acrylic and charcoal on canvas

Luzene Hill (Eastern Band of Cherokee)
Retracing the Trace, 2015
Cord, ink, pastel

Brenda Mallory (Cherokee Nation)
Undulations (Red), 2012
Waxed cloth, nuts, bolts, welded steel

Da-ka-xeen Mehner (Tlingit/Nisga'a)
Call and Respond 1 & 2, 2014
Wood, rawhide

Holly Wilson (Delaware Tribe of Western Oklahoma/Cherokee)
Belonging, 2014
Bronze, geodes

Holly Wilson (Delaware Tribe of Western Oklahoma/Cherokee)
Masked, 2014
Bronze, African mahogany

The title of this Fellowship derives from Mario Martinez's purchased work *The Conversation*. In looking at the Fellows' work, as studio visits took place and the checklist was completed, we began to realize that all the artists were having a conversation of sorts, either with themselves, their culture, the past, or in hope of the future. These conversations are an integral part of what makes contemporary Native art so important. They force the viewer to look past misconceptions and stereotypes. They ask for a new reality, a different story, a better world. The work demands to be heard and seen without apology. This is what the Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship strives to do: to give a platform to Native artists so that their voices, their important conversations, can be heard by everyone.

Opposite: Brenda Mallory (Cherokee Nation)
Undulations (Red) (detail), 2012
Waxed cloth, nuts, bolts, welded steel

