

REPORT: TULSA

Re/Convening: Native Arts of Oklahoma

ahha (Hardesty Arts Center)

RE/CONVENING: NATIVE ARTS OF OKLAHOMA, ran from July 3 to September 20, 2020, at ahha Tulsa (Hardesty Arts Center). The juried exhibition showcased the work of 32 Native artists from or with ties to the state of Oklahoma to illustrate the significant role Oklahoma artists and art institutions have played in the development of Native arts, particularly since the 1930s. *Re/Convening* was curated by heather ahtone (Choctaw/Chickasaw) and funded by grants from Oklahoma Humanities and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

When Adrienne Lalli Hills (Wyandotte) and the team at ahha conceived of the exhibition, they never could have predicted all that would befall the state and the nation by the time of its opening—and it was a lot. During the planning of the exhibition, Lalli Hills was named associate director of Studio School at Oklahoma Contemporary in Oklahoma City, and Amber Litwack, director of education and exhibitions at ahha, took over the project, making sure to maintain its original vision, a vision whose scope and meaning deepened as events unfolded before and during its opening.

The COVID-19 pandemic swept through the world in the spring, impacting arts events of all kinds. Tulsa's shelter-in-place order began April 1. In May, protests and rallies broke out across the nation, including in Tulsa, in response to the killing of George Floyd, a Black man who died in police custody in Minnesota. Amid the protests and the pandemic, US President Donald Trump arrived in Tulsa on June 20, one day after Juneteenth (a day commemorating the end of African-American slavery in the United States), for a controversial rally watched by media around the globe. Two weeks later, on July 3, one day before the United States patriotic holiday, ahha reopened for the first time since the

quarantine began in March with the now strikingly apt name *Re/Convening*.

Entering the light-filled, airy exhibition space, the scholar's and curator's statements were accompanied by a slideshow featuring photos of people and places from Oklahoma Native art history from the 1930s to the current time. Quotes taken from the *Re/Convening* artists' statements were prominently displayed along the walls, most of them having to do with the purpose of art. An example is this quote by Thlopthlocco Muscogee painter Johnny Diacon: "As an artist, I feel a responsibility to accurately depict our people as a record of who we are." Who we are was being challenged in even more ways than usual when *Re/Convening* opened.

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The art in *Re/Convening* reflected the diverse array of the artists' tribal nations and ranged from representational and abstract paintings to digital art, installations, ceramics, weaving and embroidery. Scenes and textures of Indigenous life were depicted with humor, annoyance, joy, pain, and the many contradictory emotions inherent in being Native in Oklahoma.

As most people know, Oklahoma began as Indian Territory, a place where Indigenous people from across the United States were brought to be contained and assimilated throughout the 19th century. Today, 38 sovereign nations are contained in what became the state of Oklahoma,¹ despite the best efforts of statehood, the Dawes Act of 1887, and of course, the federal boarding school system, to dismantle all aspects of tribal governance and culture.

In her curator's statement, ahtone writes, "Critical conversations take place every day in Oklahoma, addressing the well-being, the survivance, and the

cultural continuum of our Indigenous cultures. This conversation is evident within the body of works submitted to this juried exhibition. Themes emerged from within the work that address the complexity of being an Indigenous person in our state. Throughout all the images, the relationships that bind us also hold together the themes of politics, identity, and the cultural conversations."

Artists in the exhibition ranged from self-taught to community- or family-mentored to formally educated in university art programs, or all three. The three winning pieces, voted on by a committee of Oklahoma Native arts professionals, reflect the diversity of the works in *Re/Convening*. In first place, the work of Summer Zah (Jicarilla Apache/Navajo/Choctaw), *Should've Seen it in Color*, is an installation consisting of a tent whose torn and hanging interior is woven from strips of faded, copied documents. Inside is a 1970s-style photo album featuring family photos as well as photo collages built on copies of historical photos of Indigenous people. In second place, Paul King's (Choctaw) gouache, *Okla Humma*, features Choctaw veterans in dance regalia imposed over a page of the Choctaw dictionary that gives the definition of the Choctaw words that form the state's name. Third-place award recipient Brian Waytulá's (Cherokee Nation) *The Warrior* recalls the 1979 cult classic movie, *The Warriors*, as a means of commenting on the 1970s American Indian Movement and other Indigenous activists. In the mixed-media piece, Canadian actor Eugene Brave Rock (Kainai) wears a vest with the Warriors logo on the back. His image is imposed over newspaper stories about the 1970s occupation of Wounded Knee as well as a red US flag upside down to indicate the distress call as it was (and still is) used by US Indigenous activists.

The exhibition's forward energy and sense of hope for continued survival would already have been particularly empowering amid the pandemic, the protests, and the exhibition's setting in downtown Tulsa, but one more historic event would transpire to impact *Re/Convening* before it ended in September.

1. Thirty-eight federally recognized tribes are located within the boundaries of Oklahoma. Other tribes, some with their own internal governments such as the Yuchi and Natchez, are enrolled within larger tribes.—Ed.

On July 9, 2020, six days after the opening of *Re/Convening*, the US Supreme Court reached a decision in the *McGirt v. Oklahoma* case, which ruled that much of the eastern portion of the state of Oklahoma (including Tulsa) had never been disestablished as a reservation of what were formerly called the Five Civilized Tribes: Muscogee (Creek), Seminole, Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Choctaw. Immediately, headlines around the country proclaimed, “Half of Oklahoma is now Indian Territory” (as if it hadn’t been before). Native social media lit up with a million triumphant jokes as well as serious meditations on what the ruling would mean for the tribes as well as the state of Oklahoma.

Oklahoma Native artists know all about being unwillingly separated. It is in our DNA and our historical memory. And we know about coming back together, whether physically or spiritually. As conversation about the court ruling swirled, protests continued, and the pandemic changed communities through illness, death, and new rules for moving about the world. Amid all of that, the vigorously insistent works of *Re/Convening* in downtown Tulsa, Indian Territory, reflected the continued existence of people who held their nations together through wars, forced removals, boarding schools, the urbanization program, centuries of attempted assimilation, and the trauma resulting from all of this and more.

Visitors to the exhibition were invited to leave signed or anonymous notes next to pieces that moved them. While adult comments focused mainly on techniques and aesthetics, several youth comments were tributes to the power of art: “I really love the beautiful Native American paintings/pictures,” wrote one visitor, next to John Owen’s (Cherokee Nation) large acrylic painting, *I will climb the rise at daybreak, I will kiss the sky at noon*. “They give me lots of inspiration [sic] and i can’t wait to see what may unfold as i wonder [sic] more in this museum. (some of the words may not be spelled right. i am a kid.)” Next to Jessica Harjo’s (Otoe-Missouria/Osage/Pawnee/Sac & Fox) *Sunbeam Dance*, a visitor wrote, “that’s so awesome seeing someone from the same tribe [as me], Sac & Fox, to be pursuing art & randomly



ABOVE Jessica Rosemary Harjo (Otoe-Missouria/Osage/Pawnee/Sac & Fox), *Bird Song*, 2019, digital media, 42 × 36 in.

seeing it.” The comments ranged from formal to intimately casual, as if the writer were addressing a community member, which is a good representation of the many roles Oklahoma Native art plays: from object of admiration and study to personal inspiration to ceremonial object to the tangible result of creative processes, a kind of re/convening with ancestral movements, knowledge, and experience.

The art in this powerful exhibition—and the fact that the exhibition happened at all—suggests that we will continue to meet again, physically and spiritually, whether in this generation or another. Indigenous people have been torn apart before, but as I wrote at the beginning and end of my scholar statement for the exhibition, not realizing how deeply I would want it to be true by the time it hung on the wall, “Re/Convening is to meet again like we’ve met before.... Oklahoma Native art is always Re/Convening.”

—Stacy Pratt, PhD (*Mvskoke*)

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