

KAY WALKINGSTICK

Vanessa H. Larson, At the National Gallery, a belated corrective for Native American art, The Washington Post, 26 October 2023



Detail of Kay WalkingStick, *Ute's Homeland*, 2022, Photography by JSP Art Photography.

It wasn't until 2020 that the National Gallery of Art made its first acquisition of a painting by a Native American artist: "Target," a 1992 mixed-media work by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, a citizen of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Nation in Montana. Three years later, Smith is the curator of "The Land Carries Our Ancestors," the museum's first exhibition of Native American artists in 30 years and its first featuring contemporary Native American artists since 1953.

It's a belated catch-up, but times seem to be changing, if slowly.

"In the 1970s when I was doing this work, I probably could count on maybe four hands the Native Americans who were actually showing in museums or in galleries," says Smith, whose own work was the subject of a retrospective at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art earlier this year. "We weren't showing in museums because they weren't interested in our work — unless we made pots, jewelry or blankets."

The works in "Land" are vastly different from those stereotyped notions of Native American art, revealing the huge diversity of Native artists working today. The varied media, formats and methods include paintings,

lithographs, prints, mixed-media sculptures, fiber art, beadwork, blown glass and a video piece.

"Usually, what you see in a museum is antiquities, as though we're all dead and we are not here anymore," Smith says, adding that most Americans know of only the largest two or three of the 574 federally recognized tribes, such as the Navajo, Cherokee and Sioux.

Of the roughly 50 artists in the intergenerational exhibition, all are living, except Jim Denomie (Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe, Ajijaak Clan), who died in 2022 after his darkly humorous painting "Edward Curtis, Papparazzi: Chicken Hawks" had already been selected. Representing dozens of tribal groups, the artists are about evenly divided by gender, with about two-thirds of the pieces made in the past decade.

The show explores the concept of land in ways both literal and abstract. Some landscapes are pleasing and affirmative, including "Ute's Homelands" by Kay WalkingStick (Cherokee Nation/European descent), a warm-colored Southwest setting overlaid with traditional designs. "Indian Canyon" by Cara Romero (Chemehuevi) is a wide-format photo of a child wearing a headdress, seated on a large boulder in rocky terrain. Romero describes the

arresting work as “a time-traveling apparition in a sacred landscape of Southern California.”

Darker works depict barbed wire, earthmovers, decaying bones or factories spewing smoke. In “To Feel Myself Beloved on Earth,” Jeffrey Gibson (Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians/Cherokee Nation) uses an elaborately beaded punching bag to represent how destruction of the land is also damaging to our bodies.

Particularly striking is “Impact vs. Influence” by John Hitchcock (of Comanche, Kiowa and European descent), a site-specific installation that fills parts of two walls and the ceiling with black-and-white cutout images of wild animals, birds, helicopters, a tank and geometric symbols. Hitchcock, who describes the work as drawing on his childhood growing up on Comanche tribal lands next to the Fort Sill military base in Oklahoma, says he found particular importance in bringing it to the National Gallery.

“This is about invasiveness: invasion of military elements, invasive in the sense of moving animals to reserves, and moving humans to them, too — Indigenous people,” Hitchcock says. “So that colonization, if you think about its relationship to this space, it’s coming into the museum and rethinking the museum.”

Twenty-one smaller pieces are arranged on the wall in a checkerboard pattern — a reference to the Dawes Act of 1887, which parceled out communal tribal lands into allotments for individual ownership, with “surplus” land then being offered for sale to non-Native people.

These more intimate works include the housing-themed “The (HUD)” by Wendy Red Star (Apsáalooke) — one of six American artists recently invited to create the first-ever outdoor art installations on the National Mall — and a symbols-based lithograph by Raven Chacon (Diné), a composer and artist who last year became the first Native American to win a Pulitzer Prize in music.

Wall labels center the creators’ many voices rather than a single, authoritative one, offering only basic biographical information and a short quotation from each artist; visitors seeking additional insights may wish to read the catalogue (copies of which can be found in the gallery rooms).

Also featured are several recent National Gallery acquisitions, including “Fog Bank,” a luminous mixed-media work by Emmi Whitehorse (Diné) that conjures a dreamscape with its ethereal abstract symbols and forms floating in a sea of blues.

Although Smith’s two works in the permanent collection are not part of “Land,” they are on view elsewhere in the

museum: “Adios Map” hangs in the foyer area outside the exhibition, while “Target” is just inside the nearby Pop and Figuration gallery.

The show closes with “Orchestrating a Blooming Desert,” a 2003 oil painting by Steven Yazzie (of Diné, Laguna Pueblo and European descent) depicting a man in a wondrous desert landscape filled with cactuses and colorful flowers, holding a bird and a conducting baton. For both the land and its stewards, it projects a powerful image of hope.