

# A Guide To The Exhibition, *An Evening Redness in the West*

*The ground was trampled with the tracks of predators come in from the plains for the carrion and the wind carrying through the breaks bore with it a sour reek like the stink of a rancid dishclout and there was no sound except the wind anywhere at all.*  
Cormac McCarthy – Blood Meridian

This summer the Animas River turned a yellow-gold—the plume caused by a breach in an adjacent tailings pond. Three million gallons of heavy metals, toxins from a long defunct gold mine, spewed forth. A week following the spill, as the plume started to dissipate, a Navajo family said that the polluted river water flowing near their home had changed from the color of “orange juice to Mountain Dew,” still wholly unnatural and it will be for a long time to come. Meanwhile, those in power point fingers of blame, while life in and near the river begins to wither away.

A jug of this toxic mix from the Animas is a part of an installation by New Mexico-based experimental music ensemble, Death Convention Singers, one of the artifacts on display originally created for a sonic procession that on August 20<sup>th</sup>, took the group from the grounds of MoCNA, to the Palace of the Governors, Loretto Chapel, St. Francis Cathedral, and back. For the Singers, “The desert has long been a stand-in for the post-apocalyptic landscape.” In the performance, through radiating noise, they “hallucinate a version of this future with approximations of nature.”

Hallucinations of the future also inform four drawings by Cape Dorset, Nunavut-based artist Shuvina Ashoona. Ashoona’s early drawings were highly detailed renderings of the Arctic landscape. With the shift in her medium from black pen to colored pencil, her subject matter changed as well. Characters drawn from imagination—some, like the sea-goddess Sedna are central in Inuit worldviews—started to emerge. Many of which embody the binary of good and evil (“Satan the Polar Bear,” is one such example). Her drawings are the visual and textual residue of the symbols and ideologies of Western religion imposed on Inuit beginning in the 1940s.

The Red Chief and the White Shaman are the two central characters in Joseph Tisiga’s watercolors. Like Ashoona, Tisiga’s world is also rich with myth and imaginings. His characters move through the world as though it is a stage, with magic and illusion as its central features. Tisiga sees identity politics as something of a trick, for Native artists “it’s something we believe in,” he says, but “we can’t really see the strings.” Treading lightly over dangerous ground, Tisiga’s drawings instead present an alternate universe—neither past nor future—where the Red Chief and the White Shaman are each in the midst of performing ritualistic actions. In one work, a Northwest Coast mask is about to be burned in a fire pit, in another, the Red Chief sits under a tree facing the White Shaman at an impasse; hot air balloons float in the background, while smoke billows from a distant fire, lending the scene its sense of unease.

The Apocalypse implies the end of the world, as well as the promise of a new one. In Christopher Columbus’s journals detailing his “discovery” of the Americas, the explorer, already suffering from mental illness, described himself as the “Messiah” of the new world. (This was not a man with a small ego.) He also described this place as a utopia. For Indigenous peoples, to put it mildly, after Columbus and his crew arrived, it was anything but. In Andrea Carlson’s monumental drawing, *Ink Babel*, a black and white figure gasps in horror as he sees the arrival of Columbus’s three ships reflected in his obsidian mirror, the image an omen of impending death and destruction on a scale never before witnessed.

New materials, adaptation and a certain amount of cunning are needed to survive after an Apocalypse. So is resistance. While traditional woven robes, including Chilkaat blankets, inspire Jeffrey Gibson’s works, their words come from the voices of counterculture movements—figures such as Sister Corita Kent, James Baldwin, Nina Simone, Simone de Beauvoir and rap and hip-hop artists — who helped bring racial and gender injustices to mainstream attention and instrument social change. Gibson’s works are emblazoned with slogans from songs of resistance including “What we want what we need” from Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power” and “Burn.Baby, Burn” from the rap song, “The Roof Is On Fire” by Rockmaster Scott and the Dynamic Three. This phrase was also chanted during LA’s Watts riots of August 1965. Adaptation and survivance—to borrow the term from Gerald Vizenor—carries forward in

sculptures by Naomi Bebo, Virgil Ortiz and Rose B. Simpson.<sup>1</sup> An Iraqi gas mask, ornately beaded by Bebo, underscores how in times when the air might be too poisoned to breathe, there is still beauty, as even the things necessary for survival are adorned. Masks are functional, aesthetic and a form of disguise. Ortiz's and Simpson's collaborative installation, *Wanderlust*, presents a futuristic storefront. Two female merchants flank a display of different masks—each presumably offers protection against different threats.

While masks protect and provide the ability to take on new identities, the opposite may be true of being defenseless and without sight. The central figure in Norman Akers painting, *Sorting Out Blind Sensations*, is a nude, blind man with legs splayed and his hands reaching, teetering in the foreground of a barren landscape of brown mud and dying trees. In the far distance flies a murder of crows. In another painting, a bull elk stands before a stormy, lightning filled background. Aker's paintings displace the centrality and authority of human beings. They underscore how for many indigenous societies, people are indeed not the most powerful beings in the universe, but acted upon by much greater forces. Duane Linklater's neon thunderbird, from his series *Tautology*, is based on a painting by Norval Morrisseau, who founded what is known as the Woodland School of Art. The neon glow of the thunderbird serves, once again, to illuminate and foreground Native beliefs and ideologies.

The final work is the smallest: a silver jewelry box by Scott E. Jones cast in the shape of a fallen meteor. The piece puts another idea of encounter and yet another set of relations into motion. Outer space is commonly described as the "final frontier," the phrase is itself indicative of how colonial ideas are carried forward unquestioned into new territories; an act predicated on the active forgetting of the violence and destruction that was at the heart of the conquest and settling of *this frontier*: the west.

#### Artists:

**Norman Akers** (Osage) was born and raised in Fairfax, Oklahoma. He lives in Lawrence, Kansas where he is Associate Professor and Director of Art Graduate Studies at the University of Kansas.

**Shuvina Ashoona** (Inuit) was born and currently lives in Kinngait/Cape Dorset, Nunavut, Canada. She works out of Kinngait Studios, the longest-running print cooperative in the north.

**Andrea Carlson** (Anishinaabe/European) received her MFA from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design in 2005, and maintains an active artistic practice in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

**Death Convention Singers** are an experimental noise ensemble based in Grito Ruido, New Mexico. Their members are from the Navajo Nation, Laguna Pueblo, Hispano, and New Mexican communities. Their musical releases include the cassette "Brujas" and a self-titled CD.

**Jeffrey Gibson** (Choctaw/Cherokee) is a painter and sculptor born in Colorado. He lives and works in Hudson, NY.

**Scott E. Jones** (Comanche), originally from Oklahoma, is a graduate of the Institute of American Indian Arts and has worked as a practicing artist for more than thirty years. He is based in Ocean Shores, WA.

**Duane Linklater** (Omaskêko Cree), from Moose Cree First Nation in Northern Ontario, is based in North Bay, Ontario, Canada. He received his MFA from Bard College, NY.

**Joseph Tisiga** (Kaska-Dene) lives and works in Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada. He has studied at the Nova Scotia School of Art and Design.

**Virgil Ortiz** (Cochiti Pueblo) is an artist, potter, fashion designer, and photographer. He lives and works in Cochiti Pueblo, NM.

**Rose B. Simpson** (Santa Clara Pueblo) was born in Santa Fe and raised among an extended family of artists in Santa Fe and Santa Clara Pueblo. She lives and works in Santa Clara, NM.

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<sup>1</sup> Survivance, a term coined by Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor, combines the words "survival" with "resistance." For Vizenor, the survival of Indigenous peoples (an ongoing process) differs from majority cultures as it is necessarily based in resistance. To read more, see Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*, Wesleyan University Press, 1993.