

# CAPTURED MEANINGS

BY ERIN JOYCE Fine Arts Curator, Heard Museum



# Espoketis omes kerreskos,

This may be the last time we do not know,

# Mekusapvlke vpeyvnna

The Christians have gone on...

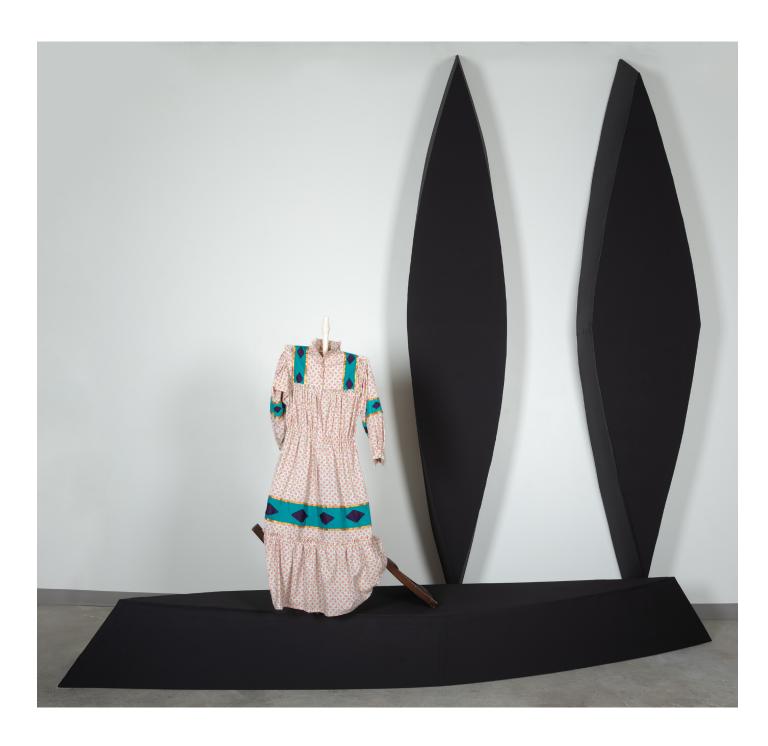
# Pumvpvltake vpeyvnna

Our others have gone on...

## Cvwantake vpeyvnna

My sisters have gone on...

Erin Joyce



Elisa Harkins

Tear, 2018

Dimensions variable

# How do we witness ourselves? How does the way others witness us affect us? How does the way we witness others witnessing us affect us? Representation has long been a topic of discourse in academia, in the media, and in art, all of which are formalized spaces that house and disseminate what is thought of as an official discourse, message, or meaning.

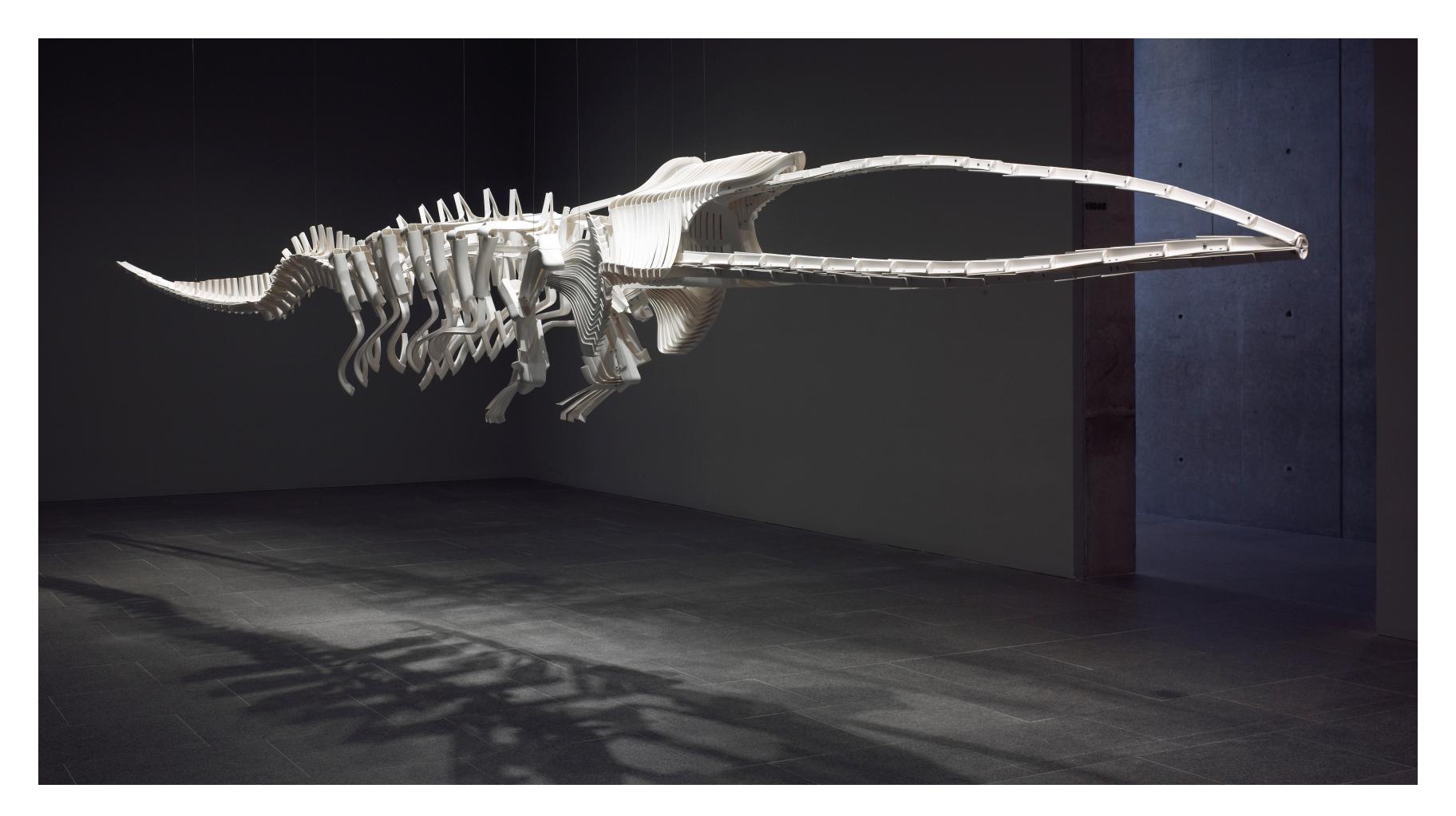
If there is a lack of representation of a particular group in any of the aforementioned spaces, how does it affect that group? If a group is not represented in visual culture, then that group is not recorded as existing, and if people are not recorded as existing, then there is a perception that they historically never have—and *that* is the most assaultive manifestation of violence. This lack of representation can be viewed as a systemic, institutional form of violence, a structural violence.

The concept of structural violence, developed by sociologist Johan Galtung, is defined as an avoidable impairment of humanity's ability to attain fundamental necessities needed for survival and prosperity.¹ Structural violence can manifest as hate crimes, gender/sexual violence, police/state violence, war, and organized and unorganized terrorism. On the surface, art and museums are not fundamental necessities; however, when we view structural violence through the lens of a museum, the exclusion of diverse voices and equitable representation is indivisible from systemic forms of racism and colonial repression. Institutions like museums, the media, and the state all operate as formalized spaces that house and disseminate

what is thought of as an official discourse, message, or meaning.

Museums are colonial spaces whose history stems from the kunstkammer, or "cabinet of curiosities" first seen in sixteenthcentury Europe, where noblemen amassed collections of objects for display in private rooms. These quasi-encyclopedic collections included organic specimens, art, maps, scientific inventions, texts, and religious objects—as well as many objects originating from non-European cultures.<sup>2</sup> During the eighteenth century, these private rooms evolved into publicly accessible collections. It was during the eighteenth century that some of the first major public museums, as we define the term today, were founded, including the British Museum (established in 1759), Prado Museum (1785), and the Louvre (1793). This practice of private individuals wanting to appear culturally erudite evolved into a phenomenon of collecting, exhibiting, and interpreting cultures globally. In a western context, the presentation of objects was often done only through a dominant-cultural lens and was not inclusive of the cultures whose material culture was collected. Historically, although few mainstream museums have included artwork made by contemporary Indigenous artists, these institutions have been less hesitant about exhibiting historic works from Indigenous communities.

The lack of representation of contemporary Indigenous artists and scholars in museums, art magazines, and the media creates the idea that Indigenous peoples are no longer here *or* that they exist only in forms such as offensive mascots, like the



Racial microaggressions against individuals and communities have been explored by Claudia Rankine, who examines the whitewashing of Black existence in American society while also recognizing generational trauma: "[T]he past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow." Rankine argues that the dominant culture in the United States creates a forced amnesia, insisting African Americans "get over it" regarding the history of slavery and violence that has been inflicted upon them. The same can be said for Indigenous communities. When institutions ignore contemporary Indigenous existence and prioritize historic material, the Indigenous past is weaponized against its future.

In recent years, more artists of Indigenous heritage have been included in art exhibitions and biennials across the United States and Canada. However, this continuing lack of prioritization of artists from Native communities can be viewed as a form of latent or structural violence. A conversation about institutional violence cannot take place without first recognizing the

abundant amount of false representation of Indigenous peoples. When looking at the impact the media—and here I define "media" as any formalized rhetoric or space that (re)presents a society or culture—has on structural violence, Stuart Hall's theories of representation come to mind. Hall theorized that the captured or fixed meaning of a subject or object is constitutive and not a postscript by-product of an event or moment in time, asserting that the media is a creator of meaning and can influence to a great extent the way in which we view another group or groups of people. "Culture is the way we make sense of [and] give meaning to the world,"5 says Hall, and if culture is constructed by the media, then there is a real danger of misrepresentation. The media's depictions tend to produce a homogeneous representation of groups, which perpetuates fixed ideas of identity. Again, if we take the perspective that institutions promote an official discourse or truth, then removing or ignoring contemporary Indigenous voices results in violence. This does not automatically manifest in somatic violence; it first manifests in more structural ways, such as racism, sexism, and xenophobia. Left unchecked and untreated, structural violence can lead to manifestations of somatic violence in the aforementioned forms. This systemic violence persists in part due to lack of visibility and representation. Homi Bhabha states that, "discourse on policy never manages to capture this moment, which is the moment of the life of the everyday citizen under duress, under pressure."6 Without visibility, discourse is hampered, and if discourse is hampered, visibility remains an issue.



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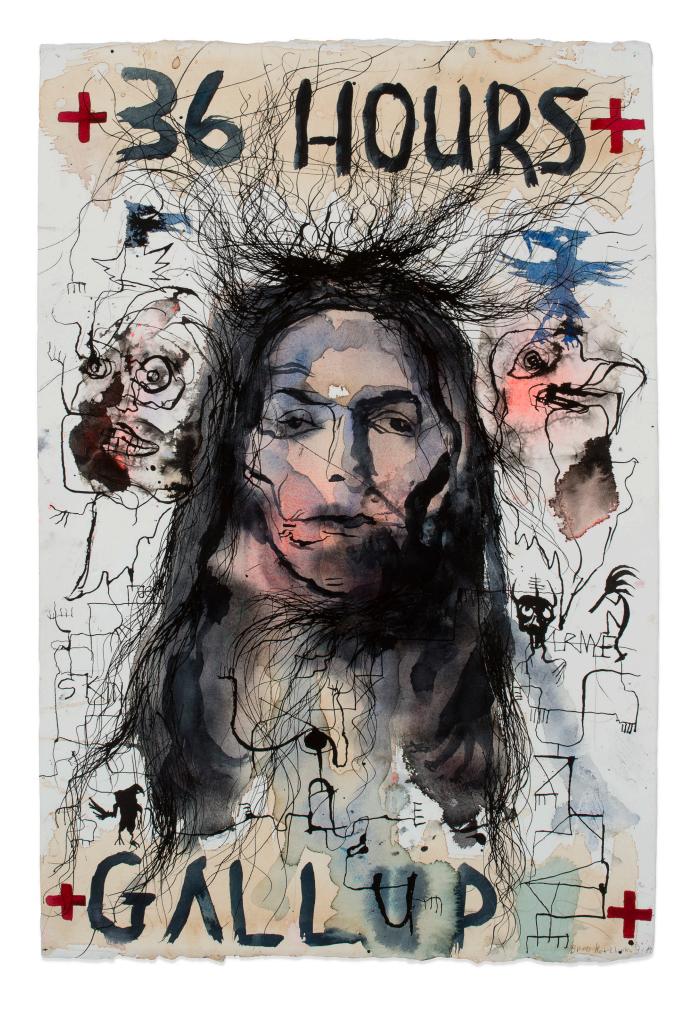
This captured view of Indigeneity has been seen throughout art history in the form of the romantic Indian/noble savage motifs depicted in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American art by the likes of Albert Bierstadt; it has been the speculative work of the west about the "exotic" and "the non-white." Academicians, curators, and museums have continued to disallow opportunities for a first-person voice, treating Indigenous peoples as artifacts, perpetuating a colonial view, which is captured as an inaccurate representation of a fixed identity. As Edward Said wrote regarding western scholarship on Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East, "The Orient and Islam have a kind of extrareal, phenomenologically reduced status that puts them out of reach of everyone except the Western expert." Said goes on to state, "From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself. Evidence of the Orient was credible only after it had passed through and been made firm by the refining fire of the Orientalist's work." Just as they have for so-called Oriental cultures, western artists, thinkers, and writers have constructed inaccurate depictions of Indigenous cultures. The western art world has operated, and still operates, as a selfproclaimed legitimizing body disseminating a dominant-culture narrative excluding or misrepresenting the other.

In Larger Than Memory: Contemporary Art from Indigenous North America, the commissioned works by Eric-Paul Riege, titled jaatłoh4Ye'iitsoh no. 1-6, 2020, brilliantly play with satire, the western art-historical canon, and the multifaceted nature of identity explored through non-referential self-portraiture.

jaatłoh4Ye'iitsoh translates from Diné as "Earrings for Big God." His monumental soft sculptures depict three pairs of earrings, each a different style: a set of dentalium shell, a pair of turquoise jaclas, and a set of hoop earrings hybridized with the najahe design found in the squash-blossom motif, inspired by the artist's cousin and studio assistant, Mecaela Saucedo. The earrings are composed of mass-produced materials purchased at retailers such as Wal-Mart, Sally Beauty Supply, and JoAnn Fabrics. Muslin, polyester fill, faux furs, and synthetic hair are inexpensive and easily obtainable materials. Riege has also incorporated his own body into the works by collecting his shed hair to serve as the black veining in the fabric turquoise beads.

These works are partly autobiographical for Riege, referencing Diné practices of working in textiles and other woven materials, as well as Indigenous jewelry making and trade. Working at a restaurant in his hometown of Gallup, New Mexico, Riege regularly witnesses Indigenous jewelers move from table to table, selling their creations to diners. Riege condemns this aspect of the Indigenous economy and jewelry trade, not because of the artists selling their work in an informal space, but due to the colonial/elitist economy that surrounds it. Riege notes that often these transactions are pervaded by a fetishization of material based on a hierarchy of perceived intrinsic value. "They are further exploiting the romanticization of material and fetishization of an object in Indigenous art and the aura that object serves the buyer," Riege states, in regard to less expensive or more accessible metals or stones being used by Indigenous jewelry

Brad Kahlhamer 36 Hours in Gallup, 2019 22.5" x 15.375"





Brad Kahlhamer

The Standard, 2019
35.5" x 19.5"

# Erin Joyce

makers. "Why do these objects lose value when made by a poor Native artist?"8 It should be said that this does not represent the entire Indigenous jewelry economy today. Many contemporary jewelers, such as Pat Pruitt, Dylan Poblano, and Maria Samora, eschew traditional forms of silver and turquoise jewelry, like squash blossoms, jaclas, and concho belts, and instead create pieces from stingray leather, steel, diamonds, and gold. When Riege creates jewelry that reads as "Native" out of ordinary materials like muslin and polyester fill, he claims ownership of representation and fights against a colonial commodification and view of Native jewelry, knowledge, and aesthetics. He also enters into conversation with the western art-historical canon of the postwar era by engaging with soft sculptures akin to the practice of Claes Oldenburg, whose large-scale sculptures of hamburgers and safety pins captured banality and elevated the mundane to monument. In so doing, Riege claims space for himself and his Indigeneity within the colonial structure of a history of art that is devoid of contemporary Native voices and visages.

Addressing and redressing structural violence sometimes takes form in more oblique modalities, as is evident in the sonic video work, *I Lost My Shadow*. A collaboration by Laura Ortman, Nanobah Becker, and Jock Soto, this short film is a haunting visual and musical end-of-love poem soaked in heartbreak and the empty feeling that arises when two people separate. The video features two figures, Laura Ortman and Jock Soto, former New York City Ballet principal dancer. Ortman composed and performs the song *I Lost My Shadow* in the film, which originally

appeared on her second album Someday We'll Be Together (2011). Meandering through the streets of Brooklyn, Ortman seems to be heading toward an unknown destination. Soto encounters Ortman entering the subway, follows Ortman up the stairs, then proceeds to dance elegiacally in the train car while the melody of Ortman's violin hangs in the air. The two figures act as each other's shadow, following one other but never aligning. There is a dreamlike quality to the work; it asks questions that it knows will never be answered in a harshly cinematic scene. This work digs into the core of existence: love, attachment, and detachment, triggering primal levels of fear based on separation and vulnerability, and past or generational traumas that affect future relationships. Separation anxiety and trauma also arise when children are removed from their communities, such as occurred during the Indigenous boarding-school era in the US and Canada, or in recent US history, with record-breaking deportations under the last three presidential administrations.9

Nanibah Chacon engages with and upends the captured, constructed meaning of Chicano lowrider culture and reductive concepts of Indigenous identity in *What Dreams Are Made Of*, a lush painting of a 1960s Chevrolet Bel Air. Depicted in profile, the car is a deep black with chrome detailing and rose motifs painted on its body. These roses do not just reside on the metal exterior of the car; they grow off of the vehicle and into the surrounding space, rendering it no longer static but *transmotive*, a state identified by Gerald Vizenor as a sovereignty of Indigenous movement through space not hampered by colonial

OPPOSITE

# CAPTURED MEANINGS

constraints.<sup>10</sup> Chacon refers to this work as representing "the attainable and unattainable in a proposition to create something beautiful that ultimately can never exist." <sup>11</sup> In this work, Chacon engages with a history of resistance, subversion, and rebellion against the dominant society, cultural memory, and celebration, all of which are part of lowrider culture. "The Lowrider is the most iconic car creation within Chicano culture," says Chacon. "For the [Chicano] people, it is a celebrated cultural relic but for mainstream culture it is often associated with gang culture and stigmatized."

Originating in Los Angeles during the post-scarcity era of the 1940s, lowriders became emblematic of hybridized identity in Mexican American culture. Lowrider customizers redesigned cars to sit lower to the ground and customized them to convey Mexican culture. An example of structural violence was committed on January 1, 1958 with the enactment of Section 24008 of the California Vehicle Code, which criminalized car modifications. This was taken to an extreme against lowriders, as it outlawed the operation of any car riding lower than the wheel rims. The following year, lowrider customizer Ron Aguirre worked around Section 24008 by installing hydraulics that allowed a vehicle's height to be adjusted with the flip of a switch, a feature seen in lowriders to this day. Aguirre's creative solution bypassed the law and subverted the roadblock that was halting his work as a customizer.

The painting also has a hybridized identity. Chacon, who is primarily a muralist, created *What Dreams Are Made Of* on a sheet of unstretched canvas. By refusing to stretch the canvas and frame it, Chacon eschews western conventions of art presentation and allows the work to be both a portable entity and a mural, mounted flush against the wall, creating a liminal space. Just as the roses occupy both the façade of the automobile and the space surrounding it, the work itself is not constrained to one medium or format.

lan Kuali'i's site-specific cut-paper installation, Monument/ Pillar, directly confronts notions of hospitality and the colonial violence that took/takes place in the Hawaiian Islands, and concurrently deconstructs and reconstructs the institution of monument making. Monuments, and what they represent, are almost invariably tied to acts of somatic violence, colonization of a people, conquering and corrupting land, and, ultimately, the imposition of a structurally violent system. The work consists of a portrait of King Kamehameha III, the third king of the Kingdom of Hawaii, who reigned from 1825 to 1854, and an upside-down portrait of Captain James Cook, a British explorer who was the first European settler to travel to the Hawaiian Islands. Situating King Kamehameha adjacent to Cook creates narrative tension. By inverting Cook's portrait, Kuali'i forces viewers to consider their perspective on Indigenous cultures and dominant society narratives.















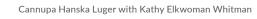


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Monument/Pillar, 2020 Approximately 240" x 120"



This is Not a Snake / The One Who Checks, The One Who Balances, 2017-2018 Dimensions variable / 78" x 12" x 8"

artists working in diverse media, delving into subject matter

OPPOSITE & NEXT

Placing Kuali'i's work in the same gallery as Vienna, a sculpture by Brian Jungen, creates a layered reading surrounding the whaling industry and its devastating impacts on Indigenous communities. Vienna is composed of white plastic lawn chairs, cut up and assembled in the shape of a whale skeleton. This work, part of Jungen's larger series of skeleton constructions, was inspired by an announcement from the Vancouver Aquarium that it was releasing an orca from captivity, an event that Jungen wanted to film. This experience led him to research issues of commercial whaling and its environmental impact, ranging from killing and harvesting whales to capturing whales for display in institutions. It is important to acknowledge that structural violence affects not only humanity, but also animals and the land.

Jungen often uses commonplace items as material for sculptural objects. "I like using things people can recognize—that they see around them every day," Jungen has said of his work. 12 The plastic chairs that make up this artificial skeleton are unrecognizable at first glance, but a closer look reveals their shape.

Showing the works of contemporary Indigenous artists from North America and disrupting the historiographic paradigm of how museums have exhibited Indigenous work is a small step towards decolonizing their work and their cultures. By making space and dismantling harmful representations that have created and perpetuated mental violence against Indigenous peoples, structural violence is removed from its situational place of power and is replaced by voices from the communities themselves—

that is challenging, provocative, and representational of their experience through their lens. The works in this exhibition are larger than the memory of western essentialization of Indigenous identity; we see it.13





# ENDNOTES

#### Foreword

by David M. Roche, *Dickey Family Director and CEO*, Heard Museum

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by Christopher T. Green, *PhD Candidate*, The Graduate Center, CUNY Page 21

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by Erin Joyce, *Fine Arts Curator*, Heard Museum Page 33

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# Arriving Forever into the Present World: Indigenous Time Traditions and the Artistic Imagination

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by Diana Pardue, *Chief Curator*, Heard Museum Page 91

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