

The Convocation



The Deep Remembering: A Convocation of Southwestern Indian Painters

I am amazed that all of us at this convocation, young and old, are struggling with the same issues and have a similar goal: to take tradition and mold it into modern concepts and a universal language. We're not that far apart, we just have different approaches.

—Emmi Whitehorse, Navajo

Creativity as a cornerstone of the human condition has long been a central theme of research and studies carried on under the auspices of the School of American Research (SAR) and its Indian Arts Research Center (IARC). The IARC's mission is to study and foster the creativity of Indian people of the American Southwest by making its collections available to scholars and Native American artists and by sponsoring gatherings of contemporary Indian artists working in the same media.

The convocation called “The Deep Remembering: The Art and Aesthetics of Southwestern Indian Painting,” held at SAR on November 2–5, 1998, brought together ten artists broadly representative of both the diversity of Southwestern cultural roots and the issues facing Native painters today. The group met daily in the IARC vaults, where they were surrounded by vast collections of Southwestern cultural materials. They were visibly moved by this tangible testimony to their heritage. With abundant evidence of rich traditions on every side, how could a gathering of artists reflecting on their cultural legacy be anything but stimulating?

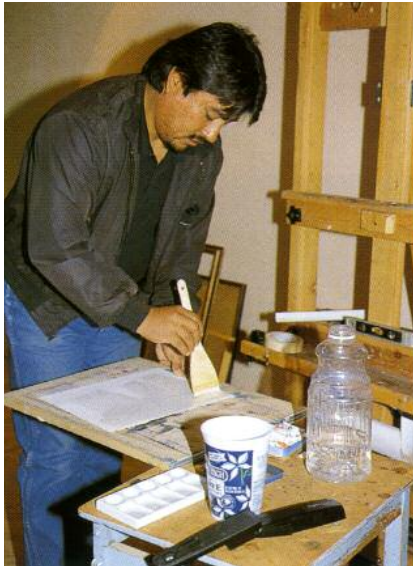
The discussions began with the artists examining their collective, though diverse, artistic heritage and its evolution through a review of Native American paintings in the IARC collection. For all practical purposes, the Southwestern Indian easel art tradition is an innovation of the twentieth century, barely one hundred years old. The so-called “traditional painters,” the young Indians introduced to the easel format in the first decades of the twentieth century, were pioneers forging a new art form from the wellsprings of their own traditions. Implicitly acknowledging that the last one hundred years have wrought

“Before this week we knew of one
another; now we know one another.
We have shared feeling,
remembering,
laughing.”
—Alex Scotewa

dramatic changes in the lives of Native Americans on every front, the participants compared and contrasted the lifestyles and expectations of the earlier artists with their own experiences. They were interested, too, in the stylistic developments of the Indian easel art tradition, including the technical aspects of composition, color, and design, as well as subject matter.

The three days of meetings were highlighted by profoundly thoughtful and honest conversations that deeply plumbed each artist’s sense of place, self, and the role of Native American traditions in their work. Participants thought seriously about their heritage, asking, “Where have I come from?” They defined themselves for one another by addressing the question, “Who am I?” And they looked into the future, thinking aloud, as Emmi Whitehorse said, about molding tradition to fit their contemporary lives. What emerged were provocative insights and incisive commentary about a dynamic aspect of art in twentieth-century America: Native American creativity and, specifically, its manifestation in the paintings of Southwestern Indians.

The convocation’s participants are all respected working artists. Organizers of the forum invited painters who would broadly represent the spectrum of contemporary Native American creativity in the Southwest, from the realistic and representational to the abstract. The group was diverse in age, experience, and worldview, as well. The artists ranged from those who produce for the popular ethnic arts market to those who are influenced by global art traditions and trends and exhibit internationally. Additionally, most had other creative outlets: they were poets, printmakers, silversmiths and metalworkers, videographers, or sculptors, as well as painters. The commonalities among the group were striking and, as Whitehorse indicated, unexpected. The painters found they shared a commitment to a life in art and a deep-seated respect for their cultural roots. Daily they face the realities of their dual lives, juggling the expectations of the dominant culture with the traditional mores of their Native communities. The greatest problem, all agreed, is the stereotype of market expectations about an artist with an “Indian” label. Patronage, both past and present, presents problems not easily resolved, and the artists’ reactions and solutions were as various as each individual’s own experiences and creative paths.



Marcellus Medina

A look at the lives of two of the artists exemplifies this range. Largely self-taught, Zia Pueblo painter Marcellus Medina speaks eloquently about the traditions of his culture—its symbols, images, and mythology. He paints for a market interested in the traditional viewpoint and maintains that “selling culture can be done in a respectful way.” Felice Lucero of San Felipe Pueblo is equally respectful of her heritage but operates from a diametrically opposed viewpoint. A highly trained artist in the Western tradition, Lucero creates decidedly contemporary work grounded in Euro-American influences. “My work has not gone the Native route,” she acknowledges. Nonetheless, the spirit of Lucero’s art is as resonantly traditional as Medina’s. Because her work is less accessible to the general viewer and she does not depend on it for her livelihood, Lucero explores a personal creative vision that is inextricably intertwined with her cultural grounding and her deep desire to serve as a vehicle for preserving traditions. “Place is important,” she says, and San Felipe Pueblo—as both a physical site and a cultural tradition—is the heart and focus of her creative expression.

The strong resurgence of tribal life and the reassertion of cultural affiliation among contemporary Native Americans is a nationwide phenomenon. Many observers of Indian life say they never would have predicted it. Indeed, they expected precisely the opposite: a continual weakening of tribal ties as a result of years of U.S. government policy and programs designed to “mainstream” Indian people and extinguish all vestiges of cultural affiliation. The vitality of traditional culture was uppermost in the minds of the participants at the IARC convocation. Young and old alike, each expressed commitment to the preservation of culture, albeit with a nod to the spirit of these times.

Tied to this determination to preserve their heritage was a unanimous concern for younger generations. Through their lives and in their art, all the artists hope to perpetuate cultural values and instill a respectful appreciation for them. For Hopi-Choctaw painter Linda Lomahaftewa, this intent is manifested through an unselfish spirit of giving something back, exemplified by a lifelong commitment to arts education. A similar concern has motivated Zuni artist Alex Seotewa’s life for the past thirty years; his legacy to future generations is his work to record in painstaking detail the pantheon of Zuni ceremonial figures on the walls of the pueblo’s church.



Mateo Romero

“Kandinsky talked about the inner necessity of painting and spiritual resonance. If you’re not driven to do it, what is it about?”

—Mateo Romero

The convocation dealt at length with the thorny problem of cultural prohibitions and tribal proscriptions. The fact that there are sacred things that are simply not portrayed outside of the tribe is a critical issue for many Native American artists. The group held diverse opinions about artistic freedom and the Indian artist’s responsibility. For some, tribal prohibitions are anachronistic and untenable in today’s world; others accept an ongoing responsibility to respect them. For still others, this was not an issue of major concern, either because their creative impulses lay outside these bounds or because they have found the means to circumvent it. In abstract art, all agreed, the essence can be expressed without trespassing into sanctioned territory. This is the case for Hopi painter Jeanette Katoney, whose work is infused with a serene spirituality. As an abstract artist, Katoney has found that she can express culturally important ideas but, as she says, “not too much.”

The group explored issues relating to cultural appropriation and mainstream commercialization of tribal imagery and ideas. Emmi Whitehorse asked, “Do we have the right to restrict these people? Once an image is in the mainstream, there’s no control. It’s basically in the public domain, and anyone can use it.” She added ruefully, “There’s no originality in its use. Our own people allow the images to get out there, especially young people.” Michael Kabotie contributed an additional dimension to the dialogue: “I was once asked about New Agers who use Indian rituals. I think if their spiritual life is enhanced, okay. But they can’t become medicine men and save souls. We can’t copyright something that’s universal.”

This issue led to a discussion of the role of the artist as a visionary and seer, endowed with unique sensitivities and insight as well as the freedom to speak out. With wry self-mockery, Alex Seotewa told the group, “A scholar once described me as a holy man.” He explained that many people travel long distances to Zuni Pueblo to see his church murals, which have had widespread exposure in the national press. “Some of these visitors are millionaires, while I can barely afford to live, but they feel I have something they haven’t. Artists are looked up to.” Michael Kabotie responded, “We’re not religious leaders”; then, as the thought sank in, he went on, “But in a way, yes, we are, because we move things into the abstract.” Kabotie concluded, “The best



Emmi Whitehorse and
Linda Lomahaftewa



Emmi Whitehorse and Alex Seotewa

way to preserve things is to let them take their course. We're all involved in this in our own ways, and our responsibility is to enhance what's going on."

The theme of "enhancing what's going on" is key to the role these artists play today. It expresses an adaptation of the traditional Indian integration of art with all of life to the Euro-American paradigm of "art for art's sake." In their work, in different ways, each of the convocation participants is realizing the age-old prerogative of the artist to comment on "what's going on." The cultural grounding of the ten artists was a clear and binding thread throughout the exploration of contemporary Native creativity. Although they all see art as a vital way of keeping their tribal heritage alive, each has a different approach.

Both Mateo Romero and Felice Lucero use words in their work both as visual elements and as text to increase the density and multiplicity of their expressions. This use of text in art has been a widespread trend in the latter half of the twentieth century, spawned by the conceptualist movement that arose during the turbulent mid-century civil rights struggles. Its obvious benefit is the additional layers of meaning that can be embedded in a work, thus disseminating the artist's message more widely. In the same vein, though with a more confined impact, other Indian painters make use of abstracted cultural symbols or traditional colors and ceremonial figures to speak on a deep cultural level to the initiated, while still communicating universal concepts to a larger audience.

No matter where they fit along the contemporary artistic spectrum, Native American painters today are sophisticates, culturally aware in many worlds. Still, in common with their forebears—the traditional painters whose delight in a new creative outlet gave life to the genre—they are irrefutably tied to their cultural heritage. And perhaps above all else, the lives of the artists demonstrate that Native culture and religion continue to be inextricably intertwined. Throughout the convocation an overriding sensitivity to the spiritual nature of the creative process was expressed. As Taos Pueblo artist Diane Reyna said, "A creative life is a sacred life."

Before looking more closely at the individual artists, an overview of the tradition informing their "deep remembering" is presented. An understanding of the artistic heritage lends context to these contemporary painters and their place in the continuum of the easel painting tradition among the Indians of the Southwest.

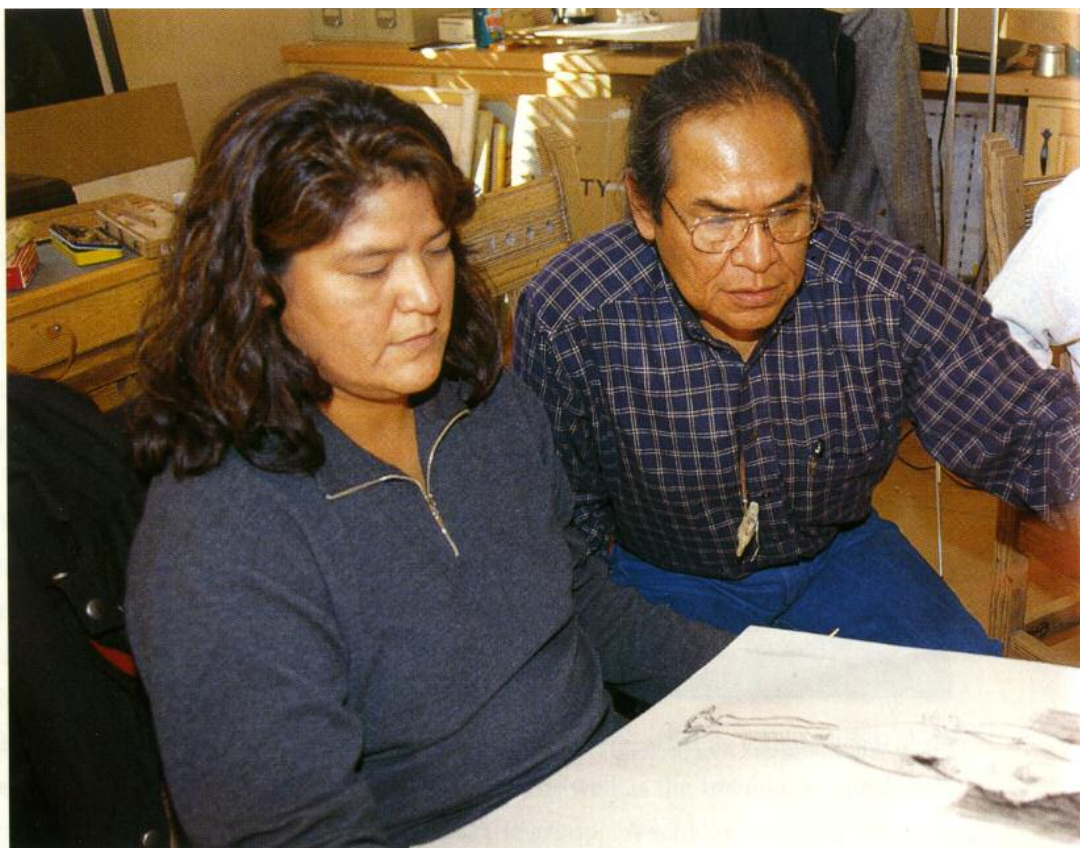
“Are we still Indians if we live outside the community?”

—Gary Yazzie

Felice Lucero and Alex Seotewa



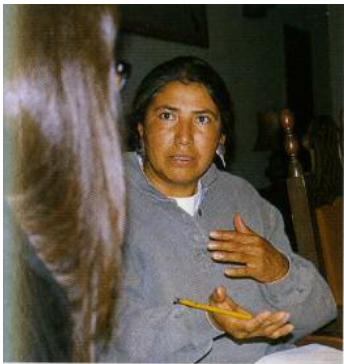
Michael Kabotie



Jeanette Katoney and Gary Yazzie

“Art is a lonely place.” —Emmi Whitehorse

Diane Reyna



Gary Yazzie (left) and Michael Kabotie



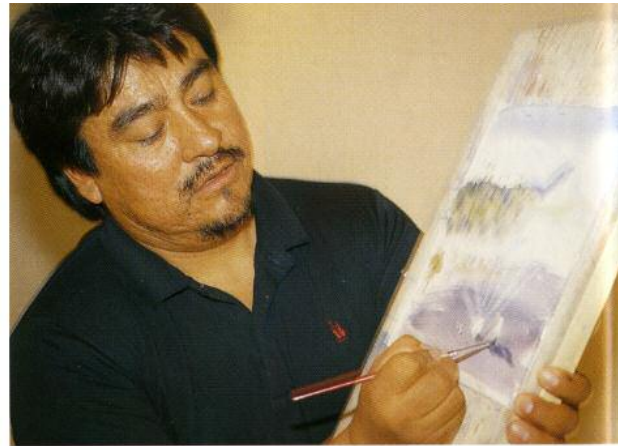
Group discussions

Emmi Whitehorse and
Gary Yazzie

"I think giving back is something instilled in Native people."

—Felice Lucero

Marcellus Medina



Michael Kabotie and Alex Seotewa

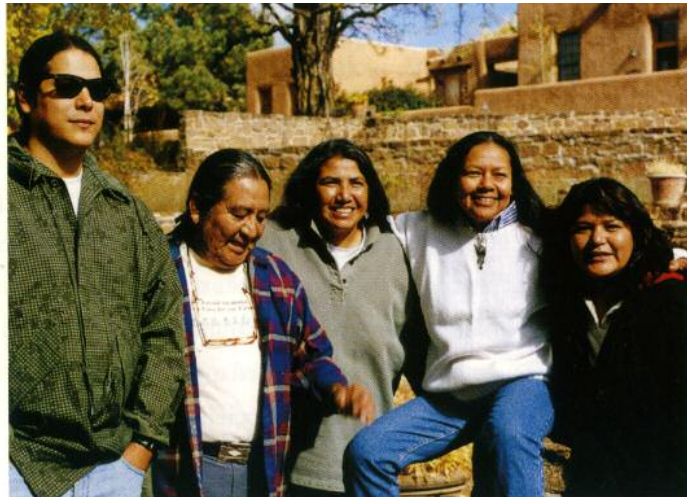


Emmi Whitehorse (left) and Diane Reyna

“I was raised to ultimately respect the decisions of elders, therefore I don’t touch [subject matter related to the sacred] ...Fortunately, I don’t need to, so there’s no pressure.”

—Diane Reyna

Group session



Mateo Romero, Michael Kabotie, Diane Reyna, Felice Romero, Jeanette Katoney

“Once I was involved in the market, but after my initiation I began to paint for myself. As soon as I got recognition I stopped painting because I was prostituting my art for money. I reevaluated and began other processes—got funding for the Artist Hopid project. This gave me exposure and involvement in the art world and market, but since I was doing all the business work I didn’t create art. I got burned out.... Once I left, I had to recover before getting back into my art.”

—Michael Kabotie