

ARTIST STATEMENT: Four Directions

Sarah Ortegon

My name is Sarah Ortegon. I was born into a family of twelve in Denver, Colorado, but spent my summers on the Wind River reservation in Wyoming with my Aunt Shirley and Uncle George Enos, near Ft. Washakie. I grew up playing on dirt hills, splashing in rivers, and shooting BB guns for fun. All the while I was taming my spirit while attending school in Denver, where I graduated from North High School in 2004. I went on to graduate from Metropolitan State University of Denver in 2013 with a Bachelor in Fine Arts with a concentration in drawing.

Voted most shy in high school, I decided that I needed to see what I could accomplish despite my usually introverted persona. I decided to compete in Miss Native American, USA in 2013. If nothing else, it was something to experience for the first time. To my surprise, I was titled Miss Native American, USA 2013/2014. While I held my title, I traveled with Larry Yazzie and the Native Pride Dancers to various places such as Guatemala and Moldova to perform the jingle dress dance, funded through the US Embassy. Within the past year I have branched out to acting and have been in a play, a musical titled *Sitting Bull's Last Waltz*, which was produced in Hollywood, California. I also played in the BBC/NBC miniseries titled *Jamestown*. Filmed in Budapest, Hungary, it airs in 2017.

My art focuses on the strength of the feminine energy, through the depiction of my daydreams mixed with what I imagine to be visions of freedom from my point of view. This body of work specifically touches on “deconstructing the equality state: remnants of colonialism, trauma and invisibility,” the theme of

the MALCS 2016 Summer Institute. I employ the use of traditional Native American beadwork along with acrylic paint on thirty-by-thirty-inch canvases. The use of thirty-inch-square canvas is in conjunction with the state of Wyoming as well, since the borders of the state create a rough square.

The piece titled *Heart of The People/Buffalo Mound* is a reflection of a picture of a pile of bison skulls in the 1870s. The U.S. government paid hunters to exterminate the Native American's main food source, the buffalo. In only a few dozen years, the tens of millions of bison who once roamed the Great Plains were depleted to less than one thousand. The U.S. government also paid scalp bounties for the killing of Native Americans. The remnants of colonialism can clearly be seen in my depiction of a drawing of a buffalo heart, copied 565 times to reflect the number of federally recognized tribes. The number of hearts shows that we remain strong regardless of the previous traumas we have endured.

We still endure the trauma. At the North Dakota Access Pipeline, where Native residents seek to protect tribal water from oil contamination, security guards maced and set their dogs on protesters. I was there on September 3, 2016, to witness these actions. These security guards were not even licensed to be security guards in North Dakota. I come to an understanding of our invisibility because the protesters/protectors have been at this camp since April of this year. However, it took mounting violence from authorities to finally make it to any news or media sources. We still face remarks like "if you do not want to be arrested, do not break the law."

Well, at certain times in American History we can see many inhumane laws that many people had to break free of in order to be treated as equals. Consider the separation of Indian children from their parents under the policy known

as “Kill the Indian; Save the Man” Native Americans were not even considered citizens until 1924, and until 1957 some states barred Native Americans from voting! If people did not break the law and fight slavery and segregation, it would still be law today. *Heart of The People/Buffalo Mound* is five separate panels, with a mound of red hearts leading into the floor, and is installed with the remnants of an actual buffalo skull and robe. I wanted the viewers to see the remnants of history in front of them, and I wanted the viewers to have to take the material into their space. I wanted it to be big, and I wanted to break away from our invisibility in this piece.

Under One Moon is an acrylic painting on thirty-by-thirty canvas, placing Monument Valley in Arizona, Crow Heart Butte in Wyoming, and Niagara Falls in New York all in the same picture plane under a beaded moon. The geometric shapes under the natural shapes of Earth show the underlying movement of our inner selves. The remnants of colonialism can also be seen through the geometric shapes. These structures are straight and rigid, much like the boarding schools that children were forced into in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The trauma that the Earth continues to face from the extraction of nonrenewable energy resources can be seen through the movement of the thin black broken lines. All this movement is happening below the surface. If you were to walk through my painting, you would not see the movement of color happening below.

Originally, I decided to use the color red because I am Eastern Shoshone, and the red stood for the Shoshone Rose that the tribe uses as an emblem on its flag. I also chose yellow because the Wyoming State has a large yellow cowboy in the center of the state's flag. I always use black and white because I love the mixture of black and white depictions surrounded by blasts of color. However, after deciding to use these four colors, I realized that I had also chosen the

color scheme of the medicine wheel. The medicine wheel reflects the four directions, four seasons, the cycle of life. These colors have added a variety of subliminal meanings in my paintings.

These are also the colors of the American Indian Movement, and in Denver this past month we joined together and did the four directions march. Each direction had a color and a flag that the people marched with, all uniting in the center from North, South, East and West. Coming from all the directions of the city and united next to the State Capital, the march celebrated Indigenous Peoples Day, which was passed permanently in the city of Denver, and also protested the statewide celebration of Columbus Day in Colorado.

The fact that the tradition of beadwork still exists within the culture shows the resiliency of Indigenous women. The beadwork that I use in my paintings is typically not traditional in the historical sense. My beadwork depicts organic images, such as birds or feathers. Using multiple layers of the same color beads creates effects such as shadowing. The continued use of beadwork and attention to detail, which usually is used to create images on clothing, is deployed as a decolonial strategy, because I am fighting the mass colonial mind set of mass production. Beadwork is tedious and needs a certain amount of energy and patience to complete. The practice alone is like meditation. I believe that beadwork adds an intimacy to my paintings; luring the viewer to look closer once they realize that there is beadwork on the canvas. Usually when faced with a larger canvas, viewers feel the need to step back. After stepping back I want the viewer to take a closer look at all the details and the tedious work that is involved with beadwork.

The feminine energy is felt through each of my pieces, not because each piece has a literal woman depicted in each of them, but on the contrary, because

I created the paintings. I am the feminine energy behind the pieces and my creations will always have a tie to the creator. We as women are the only ones who can create a life within ourselves. That is what I am doing through these paintings: each one of them is my child that I have nurtured to have a beautiful existence. The medicine wheel colors along with the beadwork are a clear tie to my Shoshone and Arapaho roots. The images depicted all have meaning to me, but I want them to also have meaning to my viewers.