

ARTIST STATEMENT

Matriarchal Strength and Indigenous Identity Through Art

Avis Charley

I am a Spirit Lake Dakota/Diné visual artist born and raised in Los Angeles, California. I create figurative drawings and paintings that explore our evolving Native American identity from pre-reservation period to the present day, from ancestral homelands to city life. I began my career with drawings on antique paper and used the female form as my main subject. The Dakota people used pictorial images for hundreds of generations and used plant and mineral pigments to document our history on buffalo hides. During the end of the nineteenth century, Native peoples transferred this practice to the ruled pages of ledger or account books used by settlers on their lands to resist their forced relocation and captivity. “Ledger Art” began as a male-dominated art form invented by my ancestors who were imprisoned far from our homelands through colonial policies. Colored pencils, crayons, and pages from discarded ledger books were adapted by folks such as Howling Wolf, Black Hawk, and many others to remember and document the masculine aspects of culture, depicting stories of hunting, fighting, and courting scenes. Ledger art was my first art form; I learned from and was encouraged by Terrence Guardipee (Blackfeet). I became a ledger artist to bring a woman’s perspective into a male-dominated art form. As a female ledger artist, I share stories of parenting, family, and community. My dynamic figures come alive and engage us with their humanity. They are empowered with bold colors and intricate details in their adornment as they assert their presence, narrative, and strength.

I eventually transitioned from Prisma color pencils to oil paintings. I wanted to start portraying Indigenous women in modern settings celebrating resistance and survival to assimilation and colonization with vibrant hues and details not possible in my ledger pieces. I aim to give voice and representation to contemporary Native people by portraying how we continue to survive and thrive while maintaining cultural ties through our persistence and existence. This manifests itself in many ways, including our artistry, powwow culture, language work, returning home for traditional ceremonies, or participation in the growing activism that is taking place in Indian Country. These are a few avenues that we might take to engage and remain connected to our communities. I am interested in the present moment and enjoy documenting our stories and experiences for future generations. The message I seek to communicate is that despite the tragedy in our collective history as Native people, the strength and resiliency derived from our Indigenous matriarchs, sisters, and daughters is what keeps us moving forward and inspiring others.

The images featured in this issue are examples of that effort. The cover image—*In the Moment*—is an oil painting that depicts a message about staying present and appreciating the moment. My images are for future generations as I imagine them studying our current works, similar to how we memorize our ancestors' black and white historical photos. I aim to accurately document our stories and experiences, from contemporary fashion trends such as ribbon skirts with Chucks and dentalium earrings by Native jewelry-maker Jamie Okuma.

A second oil portrait is titled, *Together*. This woman pictured here with the placard exemplifies the many inspiring Indigenous women creating positive changes in their communities and protecting other Native women and children that I am honored to witness. We are brave Indigenous matriarchs who fight for accurate representation and justice. Together our collective

power will create a better world for future generations, and this piece conveys this hope.

Another oil painting I have shared here is *Changing Lanes*. This painting celebrates the various avenues we take as Native women today to remain connected to our cultures. These avenues may vary from art, activism, academia, ceremony, language work, and participation in the powwow world. The subject is Mallory Oakes, my favorite champion jingle dress dancer from Canada who is getting ready to change into her regalia. She is tightening her moccasins with tape.

Think Long, Think Wrong is another portrait that fulfills my desire to create images I wish I would have seen growing up: beautifully adorned Indigenous women who carry themselves with pride and grace, their dynamic figures coming alive and engaging us with their humanity. This painting is about putting aside distractions and staying present while paying homage to TC Cannon's, *Waiting for the Bus (Anadarko Princess)*, 1977 that similarly depicts a Native woman sitting on a wooden bench.

The image in *Our Days of Opulence* shares how our artistry keeps us connected to tradition yet allows us to communicate our own stories, styles, and aesthetics. The subject is my friend Kaa, a mother and talented Santa Clara Pueblo clay potter I greatly admire.

The two pieces of ledger art included in this issue are *Protectors* and *Her Power*. The three women featured in *Protectors* reflect the way Bison herds form circles to protect the young and old when in danger. I see similarities between them and the matriarchs of our communities who continuously work to protect our youth and create positive change. The women's grace, strength,

and sense of community inspired me to create this drawing. Lastly, the figure in *Her Power* is a Dakota woman stepping into her power. She is healing and on her journey to becoming her best self while beautifully adorned. She represents us on the same trajectory of self-actualization and acceptance.