

AFTER COLUMBUS

In 1992, Native artists and curators marked the five hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas with exhibitions highlighting a legacy of resistance to colonization.

by Anya Montiel

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith: *Paper Dolls for A Post Columbian World with Ensembles Contributed by the US Government*, 1991, watercolor, pencil, and Xerox on paper, 13 sheets, 17 by 11 inches each. Courtesy Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, Indianapolis.

POLITICALLY ORIENTED exhibitions that championed multiculturalism played a defining role in the American art world of the early 1990s. Among the most prominent was the 1993 Whitney Biennial, which critics at the time celebrated for its inclusive selection of artists with diverse racial backgrounds and gender identities, or critiqued for its presentation of overtly politicized work in a context described by *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith as “rife with fashionable buzzwords: identity, difference, otherness.”¹ True to the spirit of such exhibitions, recent period surveys including “Come as You Are: Art of the 1990s” (2015) at the Montclair Art Museum in New Jersey and “NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star” (2013) at the New Museum in New York highlighted artists engaged with critical social issues.

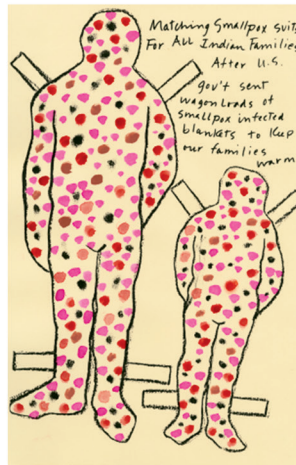
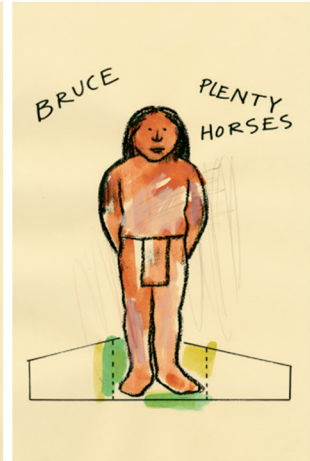
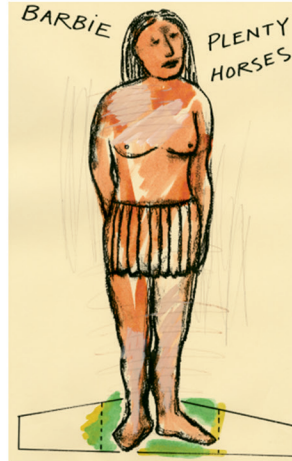
Notably absent from these retrospective surveys, however, were Native American artists.² Indeed, the contributions of Native artists in the early 1990s are often overlooked today, an omission that is particularly surprising given the prevalence of exhibitions featuring contemporary Native art organized in response to the 1992 quincentennial of Christopher Columbus's first voyage. Traveling to venues across the country and often organized collaboratively by multiple institutions, these shows foregrounded Indigenous perspectives on the history of European colonialism in the Americas, offering striking counterpoints to state-sponsored festivities designed to honor the momentous occasion. Though these exhibitions were prompted by the specific circumstances of '92, much about them appears prescient. By affirming Indigenous historical narratives, leveraging the subversive power of self-representation, and engaging with ecological protest movements, Native artists of the time pursued strategies and themes that remain trenchant today.

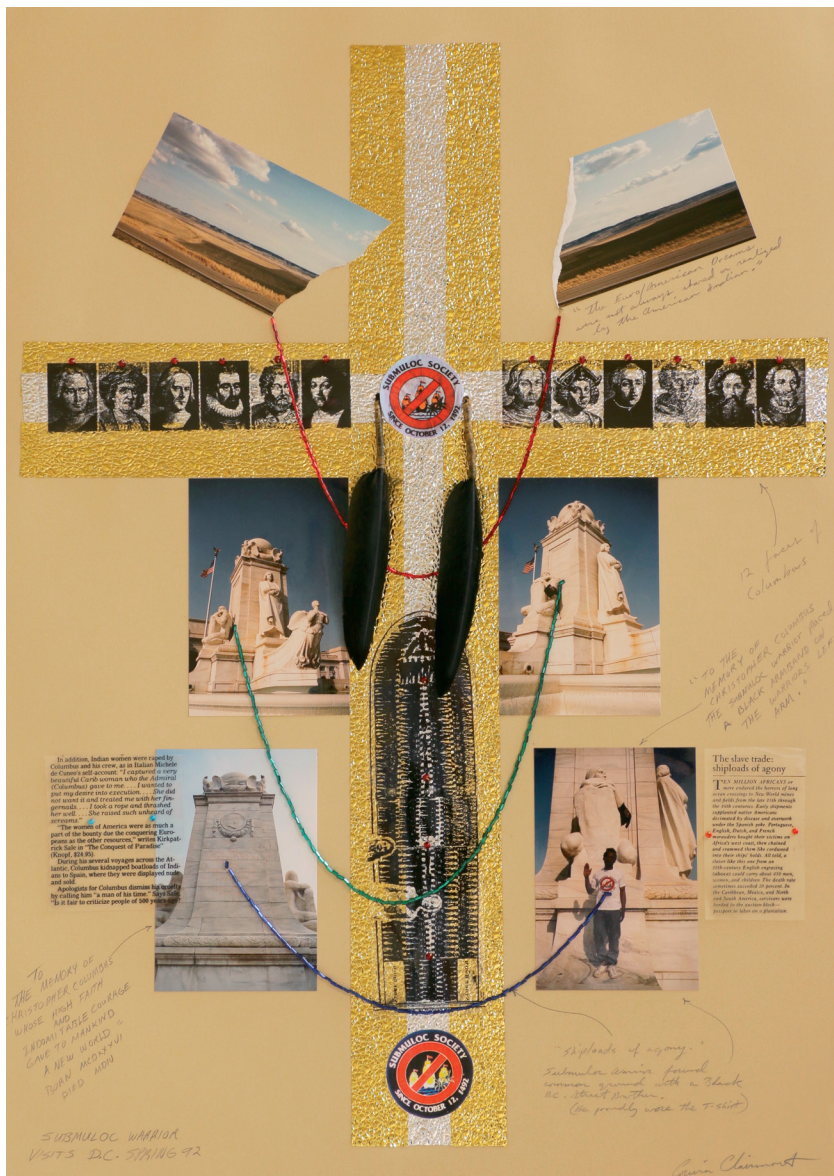
The anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas afforded artists, anthropologists, and historians alike a high-profile opportunity to challenge once-dominant popular narratives about the “discovery” of the “New World.” The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, for example, presented “Seeds of Change: A Quincentennial Commemoration,” a didactic presentation highlighting the Native cultures thriving at the time of Columbus's journey. In their catalogue and exhibition texts, the organizers rejected traditional descriptions of a noble “conquest” in favor of more nuanced discussions of “encounter” and cultural “exchange.” “What Columbus had really discovered was . . . another old world,” the exhibition's catalogue argues, “one long populated by numerous and diverse peoples with cultures as distinct, vibrant and worthy as any to be found in Europe.”³

Though it was groundbreaking at the time for a public institution to offer such revisionist accounts, contemporary Native artists and curators produced exhibitions that went much further and directly countered the celebratory tone of quincentennial events, describing Columbus's “encounter” as an act of genocide and framing Native cultural production as a form of resistance to the legacy of subjugation he initiated. Exemplifying this approach is “The Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs,” which was produced by Atlatl, a national Native arts organization based at the time in Phoenix, for venues around the country. The show was curated by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Salish), an artist who was also one of the most active and influential Native curators of the 1980s and '90s. Her statement in the catalogue is unequivocal: “Columbus personally began one of the world's major holocausts,” she states. His men “beat, raped, tortured, killed, and enslaved 300,000 Taino Indians [in the Caribbean] within 15 years.”⁴

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Corwin Clairmont: *Submuloc Warrior Visits D.C., 1992*, photography and collage, 30 by 22 inches. Courtesy The College of Wooster Art Museum, Wooster, Ohio.

Artist Corwin Clairmont (Salish/Kootenai), whose work inspired the exhibition's title, explained, "Submuloc, Columbus spelled backwards, is an attempt to reverse the disastrous 500 years of Columbus' impact."⁵ Many of the thirty-seven artists in the show conceived their works in this spirit of reversal. Clairmont's own mixed-medium images from the "Submuloc Society Warrior" series (1991–92) countered the reverential treatment of Columbus in the United States. Clairmont emblazoned photographs of public monuments dedicated to Columbus with excerpts from Washington Irving's *History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (1828), a hagiographic text laced with spurious claims that obfuscate the violence of colonization. The juxtaposition pointed to the fictions and myths at the heart of Columbus's heroic image. Floyd Solomon (Laguna/Zuni) offered a more direct challenge to that image. He reimagined the first Caribbean landing in *Deceptus Magnus—October 12, 1492* (1992), an etching that portrays Columbus as the devil and Spanish soldiers as an army of Grim Reapers.

Elsewhere, many Indigenous artists argued that Columbus's arrival heralded not the beginning of a new and fruitful cultural exchange, but a devastating invasion of the continent and a global cataclysm.⁶ "Counter Colón-ialismo," which opened at the Centro

Cultural de la Raza in San Diego, included artists who lived in the Southwest US and Mexico. The show's title conflates the Spanish version of Columbus's name and "colonialism," acknowledging the broad implications of his arrival. Rather than mourn, the curators—Patricio Chávez, Liz Lerma, and Sylvia Orozco—aimed to "celebrate 500 years of resistance to genocide, ecocide, rape and . . . the enslavement of African people."⁷ An installation by James Luna (Luiseño), *What Goes Around Comes Around* (1992), conveyed this spirit of confrontation and Native American solidarity with African people. A party banner strung on a wall read WELCOME HOME TROOPS and four large portrait photographs hung below it. Three of these depicted the historic Native leaders Little Raven (Arapaho), Cino Duro Mataweer (Ipai), and Big Tree (Kiowa); the fourth is a portrait of South African anti-apartheid activist and politician Nelson Mandela, who had recently been released from prison and elected president of the African National Congress. On the floor, packages of plastic "cowboy and Indian" toys and other figurines were arranged around a cookie jar in the shape of a friar with THOU SHALL NOT STEAL written around its base. However playful its presentation, the warning took on added force within the context of Luna's speculative victory party for people who fought to recover their homelands.

"Counter Colón-ialismo" wasn't the only exhibition to foster ties between Native Americans and anticolonial activists around the world. Scottish/Ghanaian artist Maud Sulter organized "Columbus Drowning" for the Rochdale Art Gallery in England.⁸ "In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue . . . and it turned red," Sulter declared in the catalogue.⁹ Anticipating current debates about global Indigeneity, Sulter featured women artists of Native American, African, or Polynesian descent, highlighting the commonalities between their critiques of colonialism. Quick-to-See Smith exhibited *Paper Dolls for a Post Columbian World* (1991), a faux activity kit for children portraying the Plenty Horses family—Ken, Barbie, and their son Bruce—as well as the Jesuit priest tasked with converting them. The family is provided with various outfits emblematic of Indigenous experiences under colonization: a bulky capote received in exchange for "trading" land with the government, "matching smallpox suits" for an adult and child sickened by infected blankets, and a maid outfit representing one of the manual jobs the federal Indian schools trained Native women to do. Robyn Kahukiwa (Maori) presented four oil paintings of Maori women modeled after historic photographs she found in New Zealand's Turnbull Library. By repainting the portraits and enlarging their scale to six by seven feet, Kahukiwa provides a critical counterpoint to the anonymous photographs in the colonial archives, allowing the subjects to become monumental figures on par with Columbus.

WHILE THE QUINCENTENNIAL inspired broad reflections on world historical events, some Native curators in the US aimed to spotlight artists' individual stories and local concerns. For example, "Ancestral Memories: A Tribute to Native American Survival," at the Falkirk Cultural Center in San Rafael, California, presented work by ten artists paying homage to "native elders and ancestors who, through their will to survive and ability to cope with dramatic change, contributed to the very essence that allows and provides for future generations."¹⁰ Curator Theresa Harlan (Santo Domingo/Jemez) explained in a recent interview, "I knew there were large, national [quincentennial] shows planned, but I wanted something . . . responsive to the local community."¹¹ Judith Lowry (Hamowi Pit River/Mountain Maidu/

The quincentennial exhibitions reflected on the past five hundred years and called for action for the next five hundred.

Washoe) contributed *Going Home* (1992), a painting depicting a young girl with frozen blue skin standing in mounds of snow, arms outstretched. An owl with similarly outstretched wings flies over to her body. The girl is Lowry's great-aunt who ran away from an Indian residential school in 1916 and died from exposure; a search party of Native people found her four days later. Lowry learned about her aunt's death while doing genealogy research at the University of Nevada, and the painting became, as she revealed, "my method for dealing with this tragic news and the effect it had on my family . . . depict[ing] Margaret's death as a moment of peace and, perhaps, enlightenment as the owl guides her into the next world."¹² These government and religious schools stripped Native children of their families, cultures, and languages in the name of assimilation. Some Native children experienced sexual and physical abuse by teachers and clergy. While deeply personal and heartbreaking, "Lowry's homage paintings," according to Harlan, "fill part of the void left by American history and Western art, which has denied the humanity and ignored the dignity of native men, women, and children."¹³

For many Native artists in the 1990s, photography was an important tool for asserting identities and narrating historical experiences. The medium itself was particularly charged, as iconic images by non-Native photographers played a significant role in defining public perceptions of Native people. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, settler photographers docu-



Joe Feddersen:
*Inheritance Obscured
by Neglect*, 1989,
mixed mediums
on paper, 22 by 30
inches. Courtesy
Froelick Gallery,
Portland.

mented Indigenous people and cultural practices believed to be vanishing. Many of these photos reinforced archetypes that would be endlessly repeated: images of the Noble savage surrounded by nature and locked in the past. As historian Ned Blackhawk (Shoshone) describes it, "familiar representations of defeated, noble and 'disappearing' Indians anchored celebratory theories of American history and fostered new forms of civic identity for newly arrived European immigrants."¹⁴ Among the most influential quincentennial exhibitions of Native photography was "We, the Human Beings," organized by Quick-to-See Smith for the College of Wooster Art Museum in Ohio and featuring work by Carm Little Turtle (Apache/Tarahumara), Larry McNeil (Tlingit/Nisga'a), Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora), Jeffrey Thomas (Onondaga/Cayuga), and Richard Ray Whitman (Yuchi). The title, a literal translation of the name of Quick-to-See Smith's tribal nation, Salish, suggests the participating artists' concern with asserting identity.

One of the show's most striking works was Thomas's color portrait of powwow dancer Kevin Haywahe (Assiniboine) gazing directly at the camera, his face painted yellow and red. In a statement printed in the show's catalogue, Thomas described his aim to "[move] from behind the shadow cast over Aboriginal peoples by historical photographers. . . . I have chosen the powwow world to count coup [touch an enemy] on the appropriated and stereotypical image, best exemplified by the work of Edward S. Curtis."¹⁵ Thomas's color photo documents a contemporary, thriving culture, not some vanishing curiosity. And its "subject" stares back: he is clearly performing with full knowledge of the camera, depriving viewers of a voyeuristic thrill. Little Turtle's work for the exhibition captured a quotidian moment. Her painted photograph *Earthman Thinking About Dancing with Woman from Other Tribe* (1991) depicts a woman standing next to a man who is perched on a rock

View of James
Luna's installation
*What Goes Around
Comes Around*, 1992.
Courtesy Institute
of American Indian
Arts, Santa Fe,
James Luna Papers.



in a desert landscape. Visible from the waist down, the woman wears leopard-print tights and strappy heels and holds a red parasol. The man faces away from her, his hand obscuring his face. Though their expressions are not visible, the tension between the couple is undeniable. Their present-day dilemma is hinted at, perhaps, in the title's reference to an archetypal narrative of infidelity. As the artist explained in a later statement, she conceived her work as a way to represent the particularities of contemporary Native people without fetishizing difference. "I try to make an image that the viewer can read as his or her own," she said, describing how "photography can reveal the unnoticed and unseen and supply that which cannot be described by words."¹⁶

ONE LEGACY OF 1992 can be found in the renewed urgency with which Native communities confronted ecological crisis. Most of the exhibitions organized for the quincentennial included work engaged with environmental themes. "We, the Human Beings" featured the painting *Inheritance Obscured by Neglect* (1989) by Joe Feddersen (Colville). The work is a meditation on the Exxon Valdez tanker spill, which polluted Alaska's waters with eleven million gallons of oil. Forms reminiscent of Native petroglyphs are barely visible beneath a murky black background, a reflection of the cultural as well as ecological impact of the spill.¹⁷ At the Canadian Museum of Civilization (now the Canadian Museum of History), Gerald McMaster (Cree) and Lee-Ann Martin (Mohawk) curated "Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives" due to a concern "that indigenous peoples would be the recipient of a 500-year hangover without ever having attended Western Civilization's party."¹⁸ Featuring nineteen Indigenous artists and six Indigenous essayists, the exhibition and related conference provided a national forum to think broadly about the meaning of Native culture in the modern world. Environmental degradation was a major theme. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluption (Coast Salish/Okanagan) presented three works, including

Jolene Rickard:
I See Red in '92,
Fireball, 1992, color
photographs, 33 by
42 inches. Courtesy
The College of
Wooster Art
Museum.



Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in Sky (1990), a response to the 1985 discovery of a hole in the ozone layer. The painting depicts an Indigenous man, his body covered in the multicolored formline designs characteristic of Northwest Coast art. He gazes at a scientist attempting unsuccessfully to patch a section of the sky while teetering on the shoulders of another scientist. The nearby mountain range, composed of Northwest Coast masks, has been strip-mined. The masks are sick and suffering, their surfaces wilted and tongues exposed, regarding which Yuxweluption disclosed, "I cannot celebrate toxicological environmental hazards that are disrupting ecosystems, creating health hazards, causing toxic death."¹⁹

Yuxweluption also exhibited a painting depicting the ravages of clear-cut logging in "Land, Spirit, Power," an exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada featuring Indigenous reflections on the "power and spirit of the land."²⁰ A key work in the show was *Ottawa* (1992) by Truman Lowe (Ho-Chunk). Constructed from ash-colored wood strips mounted on tiered platforms, the sprawling sculpture resembles a cascading river. Since the 1800s, the once graceful Ottawa River has been polluted by lumber, hydroelectric, and paper manufacturing industries. Lowe commented, "I'm concerned about how we take our water for granted. We pollute it willingly. . . . It's really up to us to make a difference."²¹

As part of "Land, Spirit, Power," filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki) premiered *Oka* (1992), a documentary about the seventy-eight-day standoff in 1990 between the Kanestake Mohawk and the town of Oka, Quebec. The dispute began when the Oka mayor decided to expand a golf course and build condominiums on disputed Mohawk territory, a forested area that included a cemetery. The Mohawk responded by barricading a dirt road leading to the site. The mayor called in the Quebec Provincial Police, who used tear gas and concussion grenades on the protesters, escalating the situation. Ultimately, an officer was killed in disputed circumstances.²² The Kahnawake Mohawk then barricaded the Mercier Bridge, blocking access to Montreal. The government called in eight hundred troops, and Native and non-Native people came to Oka to support the Mohawk.

Obomsawin, who released an expanded version of the documentary in 1993 as *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, stayed in Oka with a small film crew, sleeping in a tent made from a garbage bag. In one scene, she captured the deep racial tensions against the Mohawks as Oka townspeople burned an effigy of a Native man while shouting, "Savages!" The construction never happened, and the land remains in dispute. The Oka Crisis increased public awareness of Indigenous activism and mobilized Native people. As a reporter for the *Montreal Gazette* recounted twenty years later, the Oka Crisis "reinforced the link between Aboriginal rights and the environmental movement, spurring awareness of struggles to save natural habitats, whether in urban areas or remote communities threatened by oilsands or pipelines."²³ While it may be surprising that many Native artworks commented on current global environmental issues, the quincentennial exhibitions reflected on the past five hundred years and called for human responsibility and action for the next five hundred.

DESPITE THE ATTENTION paid to Native artists in 1992, many feared that their work was being instrumentalized to serve a passing trend. In 1991, James Luna famously told an interviewer for *High Performance* magazine: "Now everyone is saying let's have



an Indian show or let's have a colonialism show. So when people call me I have to ask why didn't you call me before? You're calling me now but are you going to call me in '93?"²⁴

Were Luna's fears justified? Looking back on the quincennial exhibitions, it's clear that the infrastructure for Native art has radically changed. Curators at the time relied on a circuit of small galleries and community spaces, but many of these venues have closed. San Francisco's American Indian Contemporary Arts, for example, was evicted from its downtown space in the late 1990s and never reopened.²⁵ The Sacred Circle Gallery in Seattle, founded in 1981, struggled after the longtime gallery director left in 2001. Artist James Lavadour (Walla Walla) credited his first Sacred Circle show with later invitations to exhibit nationwide and in Europe, adding that "just about every important Native artist I've heard of has shown there."²⁶ The Two Rivers Gallery inside the American Indian Center in Minneapolis went on a ten-year hiatus, reopening in 2015.²⁷ Rising rents forced New York's American Indian Community House to move multiple times, and it has been seven years since it's had a permanent gallery space.

Twenty-five years later, the venues for Native art have shifted from small galleries to mainstream museums. In 1995, Edward Poitras (Métis) became the first Indigenous artist to represent a North American country (Canada) at the Venice Biennale; Canada then nominated Rebecca Belmore (Anishinaabe) in 2005. The United States has never selected a Native artist for the

Biennale, and Indigenous curators have responded by partnering with museums and other institutions to support Native artists showing at satellite venues in Venice.²⁸

As is evident in the artworks exhibited in the 1992 shows, there is not one image or style that represents the art of Native America. Instead, Native artists created works that ranged from personal narratives and perspectives to universal, human experiences. During the Columbus quincennial, Indigenous people refused to be silenced. Native curators responded by organizing bold, unapologetic exhibitions, on their terms, and erased national borders by including artists from Canada, Mexico, and beyond, proving that Native art, then and now, operates on a world stage. ○

Jeff Thomas: *Kevin Haywabe (Powerful Walking Wolf)*, Weston Memorial Community Centre Rink, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1991, color photograph, 24 by 20 inches.

1. Roberta Smith, "At the Whitney, A Biennial with a Social Conscience," *New York Times*, March 5, 1993.
2. The New Museum exhibition, for example, focused on artists living and showing in New York in 1993. Native artists meeting that requirement include James Luna, Alan Michelson, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, and Kay WalkingStick. Luna was included in the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Jimmie Durham, whose Native background is disputed, also showed there.
3. Herman J. Viola, "Seeds of Change," in *Seeds of Change: A Quincennial Commemoration*, Washington, D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, p. 12.
4. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, "Curator's Statement," in *The Submuloc Show/Columbus Wobs: A Visual Commentary on the Columbus Quincennial from the Perspective of America's First People*, Phoenix, Ariz., Atlal, 1992, p. iii.
5. Corwin Clairmont, artist's statement in *The Submuloc Show/Columbus Wobs*, p. 24.
6. Patricio Chávez, Liz Lerma, and Sylvia Orozco, "Curatorial Statement," in *Counter Colonialismo*, San Diego, Calif., Centro Cultural de la Raza, 1992, p. 9.
7. Ibid.
8. The other artists in "Columbus Drowning" were Lubaina Himid, Magdalene Odundo, and Veronica Ryan.
9. Maud Sulter, *Columbus Drowning*, Rochdale, UK, Rochdale Art Gallery, 1992, p. 2.
10. Theresa Harlan, "Curator's Statement," in *Ancestral Memories: A Tribute to Native Survival*, San Rafael, Calif., Falkirk Cultural Center, 1992, p. 5.
11. Theresa Harlan, phone conversation with author, May 21, 2017.
12. Judith A. Lowry, "Artist's Statement," in *Ancestral Memories*, p. 13.
13. Theresa Harlan, "Looking Home," *Illuminations: Paintings by Judith Lowry*, Santa Fe, N.M., Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, 1999, p. 41.
14. Ned Blackhawk, "An Age of Pictures More Than Words: Theorizing Early American Indian Photography," in *For a Love of His People: The Photography of Horace Poolaw*, ed. Nancy Marie Mithlo, New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press, 2014, p. 67.
15. Jeffrey M. Thomas, artist's statement in *We, the Human Beings*, Wooster, Ohio, College of Wooster Art Museum, 1992, p. 38.
16. Carm Little Turtle, in *I Stand in the Center of the Good: Interviews with Contemporary Native American Artists*, ed. Lawrence Abbott, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1994, p. 146; Carm Little Turtle, in *We, the Human Beings*, p. 27.
17. Joe Feddersen, interview with author, May 17, 2017.
18. Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin, introduction to *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, Vancouver, Douglas & McIntyre, 1992, p. 15.
19. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptin, in *Indigena*, p. 158.
20. Diana Nemiroff, Robert Houle, and Charlotte Townsend-Gault, *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*, Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, 1992, p. 13.
21. Ibid., p. 188.
22. The tear gas and concussion grenades created a large smoke wall, and it was never determined who killed the officer.
23. Marian Scott, "Revising the Pines: Oka's Legacy," *Montreal Gazette*, July 10, 2015, montrealgazette.com.
24. Steven Durland, "Call Me in '93: An Interview with James Luna," *High Performance*, no. 56, Winter 1991, p. 36.
25. Rebecca Solnit, *Hollow City: The Siege of San Francisco and the Crisis of American Urbanism*, Verso, 2002, p. 174. Solnit notes that the gallery's rent went from \$3,500 per month to \$10,000.
26. Sheila Farr, "What Happened to Sacred Circle Gallery?" *Seattle Times*, June 8, 2007, seattletimes.com.
27. Sheila Regan, "A Re-birth for Two Rivers Gallery on Franklin Avenue," *Twin Cities Daily Planet*, May 20, 2015, tcdailyplanet.com.
28. The National Museum of the American Indian assisted in supporting a collaborative work between artist Shelley Niro (Mohawk) and poet Sherwin Bitsui (Diné) in 2003. James Luna in 2005, and Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne/Arapaho) in 2007. For the 2017 Venice Biennale, curators Nancy Marie Mithlo (Chiricahua Apache) and Mary Bordeaux (Sicangu/Oglala Lakota) organized "Wah.shka" with works by Marcella Ernest (Ojibwe), Shan Goshorn (Eastern Band of Cherokee), and Keli Mashburn (Osage).