



Melissa Cody is both a fourth-generation Navajo weaver and a contemporary artist, deftly balancing tradition and self-expression.

STORY BY *Foyce Lovelace*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Reed Rahn*

CLEAR FOCUS



ABOVE:

Cody's **Coagulation** (2011) was a response to her father's Parkinson's disease diagnosis. It was hung in the office of the president of the Navajo Nation in 2012–13.

LEFT:

Cody at her family's ranch near Flagstaff, Arizona, with **Photographic Memory** (2011). "I try to make my work very crisp and sharp," she says.

MELISSA CODY MAKES DEEPLY personal, beautifully crafted, powerfully expressive works of art that speak to her culture and generation, yet are also somehow timeless. In other words, she's a traditional Navajo weaver – the tradition, in this case, being one of dedication and inventiveness.

"People say to me, 'What you're doing is so contemporary, it's almost not even traditional,'" says the 32-year-old artist, who divides her time between downtown Los Angeles and her family's ranch on the reservation near Flagstaff, Arizona. "But I always make the point that in 50 or 100 years, my work will be considered traditional Navajo."

A fourth-generation weaver from a family known for textiles of extraordinary quality, Cody was just 5 when she started learning the craft. Together with her mother, grandmother, aunts, siblings, and cousins, she grew up selling her pieces at such venues as the famed Santa Fe Indian Market. (Her earliest incentive was earning money for school clothes.) Weaving was so much a part of daily life that, she says, “I thought all little girls had looms in their living rooms.”

Today, like the iconic Navajo rugs and blankets considered characteristic of the genre, Cody’s tapestries are sophisticated geometric arrangements in striking color combinations. Designed at the loom as she weaves, they’re so artfully composed that they can seem almost three-dimensional, yet so tightly woven (“I try to make my work very crisp and sharp”) that they can be read as graphic statements. (It’s no surprise that Cody also works in prints and, recently, quilts.) She uses classic Navajo motifs: the cross representing Spider Woman, who brought the gift of weaving to the people; the Rainbow Person, symbolizing protection. But what she expresses with these elements is all her own, be it emotion, experience, or a bold statement of cultural pride. Fully grounded in her heritage, she easily walks the line between respect for the past and the artist’s quest for self-expression.

“I think that comes with making art that has a purpose,” Cody reflects, “not doing art just for shock value, or to be different or nontraditional. What I’ve been striving to do all these years is balance my personal story within every piece that I create, and make art that has a voice.”

“A voice? I’ll take it to the next step – when you see her work in person, it *screams*.

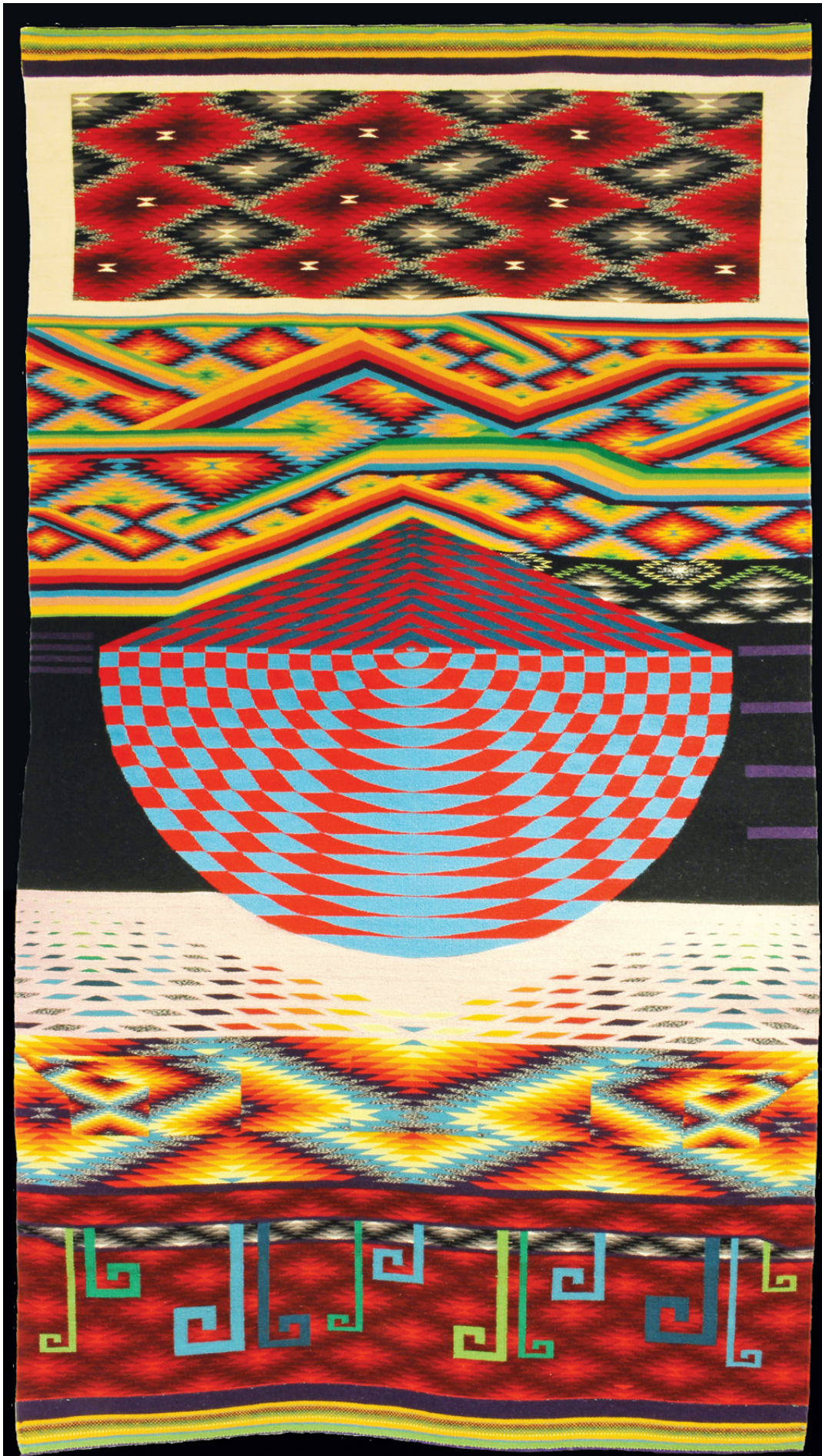


Cody comes from a family of weavers. Her mother, Lola S. Cody, and her grandmother, Martha Gorman Schultz, have taught and guided her from an early age.

LEFT: Cody brings her personal story to every piece she creates. Her **Dopamine Regression** (2010), some 6 feet high, is another in her Parkinson’s series.

RIGHT: Cody’s latest large textile, **World Traveler** (2014), is made of 3-ply wool, aniline dyes, wool warp, and 6-ply selvedge cords. It measures 7.5 feet by 4 feet.

Cody strives to make art that has a purpose, to “make art that has a voice.”



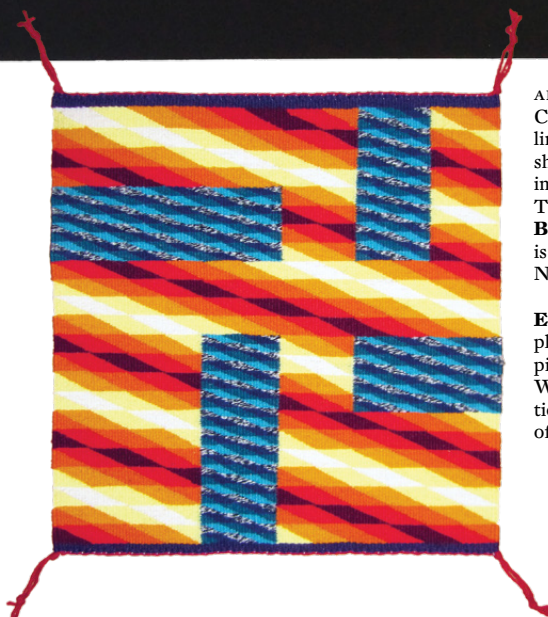
Tweeter photo: Stark Museum of Art, Orange, TX, 2014.1.1

It is just so *there*,” says Joe Horse Capture, associate curator at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC. He became aware of Cody and her work a few years ago, when he was a curator at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. He remembers being intrigued by her youthful look and attitude – hip, tattooed, a little edgy. “She comes from this sort of skateboard culture, and she’s weaving. I thought, ‘Wow, this looks like a really interesting person,’” he recalls. “Then I saw some of her material, and I realized she’s using these fundamentals of weaving, not just techniques but also aesthetic principles. She’s giving them a real modern twist, while still keeping her foundation, her roots, in her Diné weaving tradition.” (Horse Capture favors Diné, the tribe’s original name for itself, over the more commonly used Navajo.)

He ended up recommending one of her pieces be acquired for the MIA collection – *Deep Brain Stimulation* (2011), a mesmerizing composition that fully delivers on the promise of its title, with crosses that seem to float on a pulsating field of serrated diamonds.

“When you see pictures of it, it’s one thing. In the gallery, it completely knocks your socks off,” says Horse Capture. “Personally, I think she’s one of the most important contemporary Native American artists working today.”

“Melissa is a pioneer, in her own way. It’s wonderful to see a young person actively pushing, drawing on her family’s ways, searching and asserting her own sense of self,” says Jill Ahlberg Yohe, a current curator of Native American art at MIA. While Cody’s work “punctures our ideas of what Navajo weaving is,” Ahlberg Yohe points out that the tradition has always



ABOVE: Cody also works in linoleum prints, which share the bold, graphic impact of her weavings. **The hand-burnished *Burntwater* (2013)** is inspired by traditional Navajo textile design.

***Emergence* (2012)** plays with themes of pixelization and the Whirling Log, a traditional Navajo symbol of abundance and luck.

been dynamic. “Few art forms have evolved in such splendor as Navajo weaving. It has always changed, with every weaver who sits down to weave. Melissa embodies that change. She embraces and lives it, is boldly a figure of it.”

Cody started to develop her distinct voice in her teens. Up to then, she had woven mainly homespun yarns in natural, vegetable-dyed colors. “Then a friend of the family turned me on to Germantown Revival, a style that dated to the Long Walk,” she says, referring to the US government’s forced migration and internment of Navajo people at Bosque Redondo, New Mexico, in the 1860s. Supplied with blankets of wool milled in Germantown, Pennsylvania, weavers unraveled them and reweave the brightly colored commercial yarns in their own way. From there emerged the Navajo Germantown style, characterized by vibrant hues and geometric designs appropriately called eye-dazzlers.

Cody loved the look, “but I was also interested in the story behind it – this group of weavers still creating in this terrible, terrible time in our history. There was an exchange of ideas, of creativity, still happening even though they were being oppressed.” Navajo textiles went on to flourish as both art form and commodity in the late 19th century, she learned, as weavers skillfully adapted outside influences – for instance, design elements found in Oriental and Persian rugs – to satisfy the tastes of the tourist trade. Inspired, Cody resolved to bring a similar innovative spirit to her own art. She also felt a sense of mission, to help keep the tradition alive by making work that would resonate with people her own age, in particular young Native Americans who were losing interest in the craft.

"I wanted to do something that would speak not only for me, but for other kids in my generation."

Good Luck (2014) features the Whirling Log symbol of good fortune encircled in a gesture of protection by the Rainbow Person. "I just wanted an in-your-face positivity flowing from it," says Cody.





ABOVE:
The Rainbow Person appears here in a 2015 linoleum print.



ABOVE:
Cody recently has begun experimenting with quilts. "There's always something to learn from Melissa's creative outlook," says Ann Lane Hedlund, director of the Gloria F. Ross Center for Tapestry Studies.

RIGHT:
Measuring 40 by 30.75 inches, **Deep Brain Stimulation** (2011) was selected for the Minneapolis Institute of Arts' collection. The crosses represent Spider Woman, who taught Navajo people the art of weaving.

No matter the medium, the depth and dimension of Cody's work engages the viewer.

"I wanted to do something that would speak not only for me, but for other kids in my generation, who felt a tie to their culture but didn't really know how to bridge that gap," she says. With their electric colors, geometric shapes and grids, playful motifs, and kinetic optical effects, the Germantown weavings felt familiar. "I'm a child of '80s video game culture. Pac-Man, Frogger, Nintendo – I grew up with this world of pixelization." She began weaving pieces in that vein, out of Germantown-style wool yarns (her main material to this day). Ever since, her signature has been a quality of depth and dimension that forces the viewer to engage.

After high school, Cody attended the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, earning degrees in studio art and museum studies. She then held a series of curatorial and conservation internships at places such as the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe and the National Museum of the American Indian in DC. That experience made her see the importance of preserving "not just tribal history but also personal history," since until recently, general art museums largely relegated Native American objects to ethnographical collections, categorized by tribe. "There's never a face to these works of fine art," Cody points out. It strengthened her desire to be recognized as an individual, to have her work seen in a broad context of contemporary as well as Native American art.

She gets support and validation for her artistic endeavors from her family – especially her mother, Lola S. Cody, and grandmother, Martha Gorman Schultz, both noted weavers in their own right – and other weavers in their circle. Lola has guided

her daughter in balancing cultural authenticity with personal vision: "To her credit, she was very aware of the two, and the need for both to be highlighted in the work that I was going to create."

Cody has achieved that essential balance (and garnered art world attention) with bold works including her recent Whirling Log series, featuring the Navajo symbol of good fortune. A sacred symbol in several cultures, in fact, the motif, also called a swastika, became an image of horror in the Western world after its appropriation by the Nazis. She reclaims its beauty and meaning in joyous fashion, in pieces such as *Good Luck*, a textile (and later a linoleum print) that depicts the Rainbow Person wrapped around the Whirling Log in a gesture of protection: "I just wanted an in-your-face positivity flowing from it."

At other times, that balance flows from a deeply personal place, in works that, even when somber, radiate Cody's characteristic energy and uplift. *The Dopamine Regression* (2010) is a large, complex weaving about her father's Parkinson's disease. He's doing well now, she says, but at the time she felt the need to make "a storytelling piece about my emotional process of working through and dealing with his diagnosis." Black crosses sink down the length of the weaving, suggesting the weight of her sadness. Yet at the top is another cross, big and red, a nod to the medical community, perhaps, and certainly to Spider Woman. Strong and seemingly indomitable, it's a beacon of endurance and hope – as Cody says, "rising and still there, living, progressing."

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www.codytextiles.com
Foyce Lovelace is contributing editor for American Craft.

