

GROUNDBREAKERS



MELISSA CODY



FRITZ CASUSE

Breaking ground in Native art often means taking traditional materials and methods and forging ahead with them into new creative territory. But it can also mean re-breaking ancient ground, retrieving once-common knowledge and skills and presenting them anew to the world.

Here are three artists creating groundbreaking work in the first sense, and one reclaiming an almost-lost art from his tribe's past. All four will take part in the Heard Museum Guild Indian Fair & Market on March 6 and 7.



MARLA ALLISON



COURTESY SERPANTIC COMMUNITY RELATIONS OFFICE

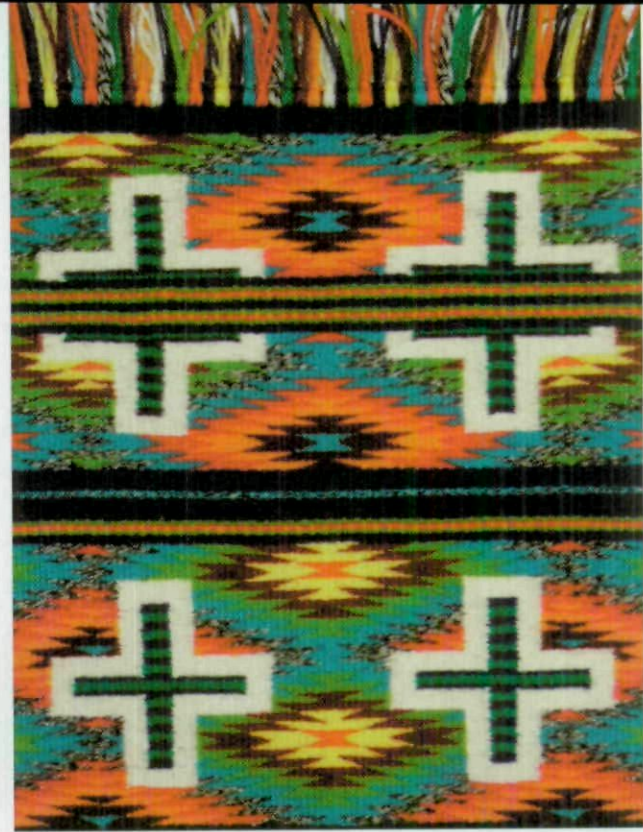
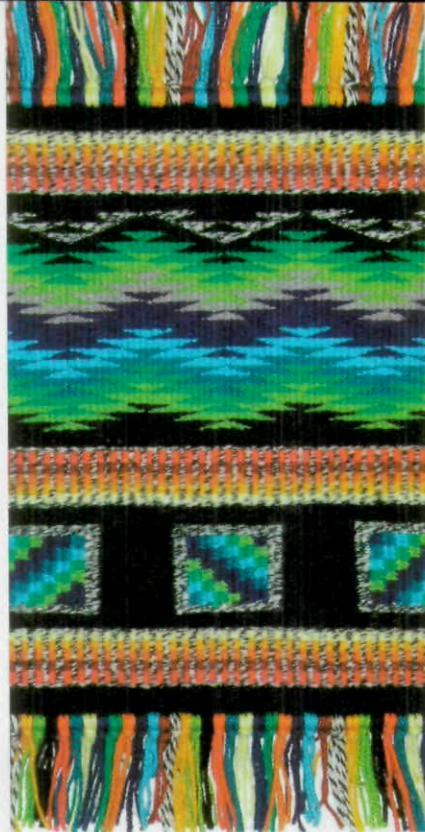
ROYCE MANUEL

From left: Germantown sampler weaving by Melissa Cody. "Churning the Sea of Milk," by Fritz Casuse, fabricated hinged ring, engraved, stamped, lapidary, sterling silver, 14-karat gold, platinum druzy, opal, red coral, cultured pearl, white sapphire and mother of pearl. "Personal Faith," by Marla Allison, acrylic on canvas, 46" x 36", 2008. Traditional O'odham agave burden basket with saguaro ribs by Royce Manuel. The round willow frame is approximately 22" in diameter and woven with at least 27 prepared agave leaves.

MOVING ON

BY GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY

MELISSA CODY



COURTESY MELISSA CODY

Germantown sampler weavings.

A photo of Melissa Cody at her loom might give the impression of a weaver enveloped in the quiet of a meditative calm as she skillfully maneuvers warp and weft. But from the 26-year-old Diné artist's perspective, the experience is more stimulating than serene. Hardcore punk music rocks through her iPod; a TV with the sound on mute adds quick-change motion to the mood; and neon colors from the video games of her teenage years return to pulsate through her art.

"I can sit there weaving for hours on end, so especially with complex designs, you need the environment to be comfortable," she explains. "You need that stimulation, to know that things are still moving around you."

Things are clearly dynamic in Cody's vividly hued, award-winning art. Her textiles build on tradition in much the same way Navajo weaving has evolved over generations: through continual innovation and the incorporation of ideas and materials, which, at the time, are exciting and new.

Cody's approach often begins with the influence of brightly colored, late 19th-century blankets in sampler and eye-dazzler patterns. The rugs were called Germantown, after the manufacturer of synthetically dyed wool that Navajo weavers encountered beginning in 1864, when they were forced by the U.S. government to leave their homelands and walk across New Mexico and were held near Ft. Sumner at Bosque Redondo.

"It's my tie to that point in the history of the Navajo culture," the artist notes. From this starting place, she pushes color into even more electric realms. She layers and combines traditional geometric patterns with design concepts inspired by sources as diverse as contemporary painting and sculpture, Super Nintendo and ancient Egypt.

Cody is a fourth-generation weaver, the daughter of Lola Cody

and granddaughter of Martha Schultz. Growing up on the Navajo Reservation in Arizona, and for a time in southern California and Texas, she often sat beside her mother at the loom. She produced her first small weaving at age five. In a newspaper photo taken as she was giving a weaving demonstration at her elementary school, little Melissa sits at a miniature loom built by her carpenter father. "The whole loom and I fit on top of a table," she laughs.

From an early age as well, she was caught up in the family spirit of friendly competition, constantly striving for excellence at the loom. Her grandmother, aunts and cousins frequently asked what she was working on and encouraged her exploration of the form. She earned her first ribbon in Santa Fe Indian Market's youth competition when she was nine and has continued to earn awards since then.

For this year's Heard show, Cody plans to introduce a new series honoring her father—who still builds all her looms—that plays off the name of his home community, No Water Mesa. The designs will be more minimalist, yet with bold elements. They are meant to reflect the spirit of a place that bore fruit with little resources, she explains.

In all her weaving, Cody is conscious of fine art fundamentals such as contrast, composition and color. "I want the viewer's eye to scan the entire piece and have areas that are attention-grabbing and places where the eye can rest," she observes. But for the weaver, the experience needs to be riveting rather than restful. "I'm trying to create more than a two-dimensional feel so I can throw myself into it and explore different elements and conflicts within the colors," she says. "Otherwise it gets stagnant, and the last thing I would want in my work is to have it become uninteresting to me."

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