

FEATURES SEPTEMBER 2, 2020

Artist Brad Kahlhamer Assists Food Drive for Navajo, Hopi

BY SANDRA HALE SCHULMAN



Sunset Sketchbook Drawing (Photo courtesy of Brad Kahlhamer)

Artist Brad Kahlhamer lives in two worlds and makes spiritual, cosmic drawings, paintings and sculpture to create what he calls a “third place.”

Kahlhamer was born in Tucson, Arizona, to an Apache couple and then adopted by a German family and raised in Mesa.

In the 1980s, he moved to New York City, where he found major success as an artist, exhibiting with top galleries Deitch Projects and Jack Shainman and being featured in a recent show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Numerous other museums across the country also have displayed his work.

Before the pandemic hit, Kahlhamer was in Mesa, Arizona, to escape the New York winter and create work for an upcoming show at Phoenix’s Heard Museum and for a 2021 solo show called “Swap Meet” at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art. He also was building on his “Nomadic Sketchbook” watercolor series of landscapes and people.

Once the shutdown hit in March, he stayed in Mesa to continue working.

At a dinner with a curator, he met part-time musician Celina Osuna, scholar of desert literature who works as a coordinator at Arizona State University’s Institute for Humanities Research. She told him about a weekly food drive that was happening at Mesa restaurant República Empanada.

“I got involved in June because it was a direct way to help with transparency,” Osuna said. “I could see and be a part of the supplies going straight to the reservations. I mentioned it to Brad, and he wanted to help us.”

The restaurant’s dining room had to close in March due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Owner Marco Meraz, with the help of family, friends and the community, has turned the restaurant into a collection site for hundreds of pounds of food and supplies. These supplies are sorted and boxed up weekly for a 700-mile round trip north.

“This is an ongoing donation drive,” Meraz said by phone. “Every day during business hours, we are figuring out how to stay open and keep the drive going.”

Every Wednesday, about 10 volunteers help organize the boxes of food and load them into trucks. They then leave at 5 a.m. the next day and head to Navajo and Hopi villages, Meraz said.

“We are building relationships there, and as long as donations keep coming in, we’ll keep going up,” he said.

It was good timing for Kahlhamer to join in and volunteer.

After decades of living full-time in New York City, playing in punk bands at CBGB, working first as a graphic illustrator then having major exhibitions at galleries and museums as a fine artist, Kahlhamer decided to start spending winters in Mesa and set up a studio.

He plans to develop his Arizona studio and “phase out” of New York.

“I’m distancing myself from that whole Chelsea art scene,” Kahlhamer said by phone. “I think I’m bored with it, and being in Arizona making new work feels more authentic now.”

He described the upcoming Heard exhibit as a “real benchmark show.”

Featuring the top Indigenous artists working today, “Larger Than Memory: Contemporary Art From Indigenous North America” will present works by contemporary artists working across the United States and Canada, including Kahlhamer, Cara Romero, Jeffrey Gibson and Kent Monkman. There will be no official opening reception, and attendance at the museum will be limited with the necessary safety precautions.

Kahlhamer’s paintings are reminiscent of 1800s ledgers he calls the “modern graphic novel,” with braided Natives surrounded by a psychedelic swirl of javelinas, Saguaro cactus and teepees with scrawled words and phrases that evoke time and place. He makes sculptures of kokopellis and buffalo heads from dead cactus.

Every Wednesday Kahlhamer has been at the restaurant with his mask on, bagging boxes of rice, produce and other donated supplies. It’s hard physical work but gratifying.

“It feels good to be back in my homeland and feels good to be helping out,” he said. “They asked me to donate some art as a raffle fundraiser so that’s something else I can contribute.”

To make the donation trips a reality, coordination through the team, community and volunteers are necessary on a weekly basis. Each week Meraz posts a wanted list to his social media pages for República Empanada. The list includes celery, carrots and onions, rice, beans, honey and salt. Other needed items include bars of soap, Clorox wipes and diapers.

Meraz noted the high number of tribal citizens on the reservations who lack running water.

“It is hard times for tradition and culture just to survive,” he said. “We are a well-oiled machine by now. Even though we missed 40 percent of our annual sales already, we have kept our heads up, and I have not let anyone go. We are a fabric of the community.”

Donations can be brought to República Empanada in Mesa, 24 Carrots in Tempe and Pomegranate Cafe in Chandler.

Those who can’t make it out to the drop-off spots can donate money instead. Meraz set up a Venmo account, @navajonation2020, where supporters can donate. The money goes toward truck and trailer rentals, gas and extra supplies.