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A Millennial Weaver Carries a Centuries-Old Craft Forward

Melissa Cody mastered a weaving tradition dating back millenniums, but her eye-dazzling patterns joyously venture beyond it.

BY PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN APRIL 18, 2024

Works by Melissa Cody at MoMA PS1. From left, "Into the Depths, She Rappels" (2023); "The Three Rivers" (2021); "World Traveler" (2014); "Walking Off No Water Mesa" (2021); "Untitled" (2022). Photo: Rebecca Smeyne for The New York Times

Spiders are weavers. The Navajo artist and weaver Melissa Cody knows this palpably. As she sits cross-legged on sheepskins at her loom, on one of the wooden platforms that boost her higher as her stack of monumental tapestries grows, the sacred knowledge of Spider Woman and Spider Man, who brought the gift of looms and weaving to the Diné, or Navajo, is right there in her studio with her.

It also infuses "Melissa Cody: Webbed Skies," the first major solo exhibition of the artist's work, which is on view at MoMA PS1 through Sept. 9. in a co-production with the São Paulo Museum of Art in Brazil (known as MASP).

The exhibition is part of the overdue recognition of Indigenous artists by museums and other institutions, from the recent retrospective of Jaune Quick-to-See-Smith's work at the Whitney Museum of American Art to the expanding roster of artists at the Venice Biennale. Cody, 41, is a millennial at the forefront of an art form harking back millenniums — at once building on tradition and joyously venturing beyond it.

Her show's title alludes to her 2021 work "Under Cover of Webbed Skies," in which hourglass shapes resembling a spider's underbelly stand in for the artist herself, passing Spider Woman's wisdom on to future generations and a web of motherly protection from mountain to sky. (Selected works are also at the Garth Greenan Gallery from April 25 to June 15.)

Cody was weaned on weaving, tapping weft yarns for her nine-foot-tall textiles with the same wood comb she started out with at age 5. She grew up on the western edge of the Navajo Nation in Arizona, the fourth generation from a family of distinguished female weavers, most notably her award-winning mother, Lola S. Cody, who raises her own churro sheep for traditional patterns like "Two Grey Hills," and her grandmother Martha Gorman Schultz, still pioneering in her 90s on her outdoor loom.

Cody's complex and multidimensional woven canvases — or what she calls her "vibe" — are layered with past, present and future histories, including her own. She describes herself as a "voice for kids who grew up in the '80s" and she will often incorporate imagery and typography from early video games like Pac-Man and Pong and magnify individual pixels so that they appear to move fluidly across the surfaces of her tapestries and become a life force all their own.

Her weavings are worlds-within-worlds that tweak perspective and juxtapose ancient and contemporary motifs in an electric palette of aniline-dyed yarns. There's a reason the vertiginous Diné patterns of bright serrated diamonds that Cody prizes are called "eye-dazzlers."

In one stunning work, "Into the Depths, She Rappels," a symbolic Spider Woman lowers herself by a single thread into a shocking fuchsia abyss in which animated rainbow-colored pixels seem ready to duke it out with a bevy of eye-dazzlers.

"Hundreds of years ago, Navajo weaving played with illusion, creating 3-D effects with the overlapping and overlay of motifs," said Ann Lane Hedlund, a cultural anthropologist and retired curator who works with artists. "Melissa has taken that to a new realm."

She has mastered a slow art in a fast world.

Cody's vibrant Germantown Revival color palette emerged from a dark era: the devastating 1863–1866 U.S. government campaign to annihilate the Diné by burning villages, killing herds and removing more than 10,000 Navajo from their homelands. In a forced march, the Navajo walked for hundreds of miles to Bosque Redondo at Fort Sumner, in present-day New Mexico, where they were incarcerated. There, in a creative act of resistance, women unraveled government-issued synthetically dyed wool blankets made in Germantown, Pa., and rewove them in their own designs, surmounting trauma and loss through sheer perseverance and beauty.

In the coming decades, white trading post operators convinced many Diné weavers to limit themselves to "authentic" textiles in natural yarns tied to specific Navajo communities. Some non-Native scholars followed suit, dismissing the aniline-dyed Germantown Revival style as inauthentic.

Cody relished color and an eclectic aesthetic early on, spurred by a cache of dizzyingly bold yarns given as a gift by a friend.

She describes Leupp, Ariz., where she grew up, as "desolate and Mars-like," a landscape of towering red rocks, sand dunes and mesas. The family home was lit by kerosene, without running water, and an hour of staticky television was available only when her father, Alfred, a professional carpenter, fired up the gas generator.

Cody thought all little girls had looms, her mother recalled. Young Melissa and her older sister Reynalda traveled frequently to major art shows at the Heard Museum in Phoenix, the Santa Fe Indian Market and elsewhere along with her grandmother Martha and an inventive aunt, Marilou Schultz, whose "Replica of a Chip" — a 1994 commission by Intel of a microprocessor translated in wool — is currently at the National Gallery of Art.

Many shows had youth divisions, and Cody would frequently compete against her sister and a male cousin who is half-Hopi. (Diné weavers are traditionally female.) "I wanted to be as good as her," she said of her sister. Cody won her first ribbon at age 8 at the Santa Fe Indian Market, reflecting an inner drive that had her glued to the loom after school and even while watching Saturday morning cartoons.

She credits her mother, whose loom was in the living room, with "instilling independence in what I created."

"She taught me a heightened, technically precise level of work, without a lot of negative space and every inch filled with geometric patterning," she explained. "When I asked her about colors and if she liked them, she'd say, 'Do you like them? What do *you* think about it?' So there was a lot of self-reflection."

Cody's years perfecting traditional techniques gave her the confidence to experiment and create more personal work. "It's 'What emotion am I trying to convey?'" she said. "What's the thesis behind it?"

Some of her most ambitious pieces have been responses to personal crises. In 2015, her anguish over the sudden death of her 38-year-old fiancé prompted an unusual set of weavings with block lettering, including an excerpt from the Rat Pack crooner Dean Martin's "Sweet, Sweet Lovable You."

Her father's diagnosis of Parkinson's disease led to a similar breakthrough with "Dopamine Regression," one in a series in which hallucinatory eye-dazzlers shift directions and are overlaid with black Spider Woman crosses, some abstracted. A bold red cross synonymous with medical care extends into a rainbow, a symbol indicating the presence of holy people and their blessings. "It's her way of dealing with it," her mother said. "It's how she expresses her thoughts."

Not all curators relate to Cody's boundary-breaking tapestries, however. "She's spicy," said Marcus Monenerkit, the Heard Museum's director of community engagement, and also a fan. "That doesn't always work with people."

Cody conceptualizes her weavings as scrolls that can be "read from bottom to top or top to bottom," she said. "I think of where the attention-grabbing elements are — and where can the viewers' eye rest."

To a non-weaver, one of the most extraordinary aspects of Navajo weaving is its largely spontaneous quality, accomplished with nary a sketch. "We're graphing it out in a mental image — maybe a texture out in nature or the feel of a city, or a color, and then replicating it in woven form," Cody said. "It's a slow-moving fluidity, with everything calculated down to each individual string." A large-scale weaving takes six months or more to complete.

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Along with others, Cody has revived culturally significant motifs like the Whirling Log, a symbol of the origins of the Diné people that had disappeared after World War II because it was mistaken for Nazi swastikas. "To move forward as Indigenous artists, we need to reclaim our stories and respect our true selves in the work we create," she said.

She continues to pass on her knowledge: In Los Angeles, Cody is teaching elementary school students in an under-resourced district through the organization Wide Rainbow. She is also teaming up with the Autry Museum of the American West on summer workshops for local Diné weavers. "A big part of Native American culture is reciprocity," said Amanda Wixon (Chickasaw Nation), an associate curator. "Melissa has it in her bones."

In Long Beach recently, her black hair spilling down the entire length of her spine, Cody manipulated wefts of jubilant yarns. Her thoughts often drift to her grandmother, who continues to experiment and remains a student of the art. "Ancient knowledge coveted by my ancestors comes through my fingertips, which is a huge honor," she said. "I do feel I breathe a life into a textile. And vice versa, the weaving gives me life."