PHIL KARSHIS, COURTESY POEH CENTER

REDEFINING INDIGENOUS ART FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

a generation of innovation

BY SUZAN SHOWN HARJO

IT'S "VERY CHIC RIGHT NOW" to be Native, admits Mateo Romero, the Cochiti painter who, at 40, already has an international following for his photo-transfer and mixed-media paintings that merge historical tribal imagery with a contemporary edge. "Our Pueblo ancestors are from this area," he says, "and to be able to speak to a contemporary audience from the perspective of the history of this place is extraordinary." He also admits attitudes weren't always this way. From his small studio in Pojoaque, Romero recalls the life of his father, the late Santiago Romero, a traditional Cochiti painter who studied under Dorothy Dunn at the Santa Fe Indian School and took part in the 1937 American Indian Exposition and Congress. "In his day, local Pueblo Indians were looked down upon. They weren't allowed to use the public restrooms," he says, "they had to sit in the balcony at the Lensic Theater marked 'Nigger Heaven,' and were generally despised by most Santa Feans." Even in New Mexico, home to some 74,000 Pueblo people, the right to vote wasn't fully enforced for Native Americans until the 1960s.

But these days, Native art and artists are given "tremendous attention and respect," Romero says, with a sly sense of humor. "They even let us use the public bathrooms." The variety of cultures indigenous people must circumnavigate in today's multi-faceted world makes for a complicated yet creative dance. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, approximately 2 million people in the United States identify themselves as Native American—a mere 2 percent of our population. Yet this tiny fraction of our country produces a high-profile—and high-dollar—art market with a global audience, from world-class museums to international collectors. And each August, Santa Fe Indian Market is the epicenter of this world.

COURTESY SWAIA

Above: *Crazy Horse in the City*, framed beadwork by Marcus Amerman, using size 13 beads. Left: *Untitled*, by Mateo Romero, from his *Buffalo Dancers* series

> "Our art speaks with the voice of the people."
> —MATEO ROMERO (COCHITI PUEBLO)

"Our art speaks with the voice of the people," says Romero. Even though he grew up in Berkeley, California, studied at Dartmouth, and earned a master of fine arts from the University of New Mexico, "ultimately," he says, "the Native art community is my community, the one which I feel closest to on all levels—culturally, aesthetically, socially." As a 15-year veteran of Indian Market and a three-term board member of the Southwestern Association for Indian Arts, he calls SWAIA "the foremost organization symbolizing these issues to me." To him, "Santa Fe Indian Market is a feast day for artists."

Romero is not alone. With Native people scattered globally these days, Santa Fe Indian Market becomes a microcosm of indigenous arts, unrivaled in the depth and breadth of work, brought together for two short days on the Plaza each summer. More than 1,000 artists are accepted into this juried show and sale, each of them on hand with paintings,

MICHAEL NEESE/STUDIO DEVEN PRODUCTIONS

Turtle gorget necklace in 18 kt yellow gold, platinum, U.S. coins, diamonds, and peridot, by Kenneth Johnson (Muscogee/Seminole). The gorget design is adapted from Moundbuilder culture.

sculpture, jewelry, textiles, and other traditional and non-traditional forms. All of them—from iconic art figures to rising stars—are from Native American nations, cultures, and families.

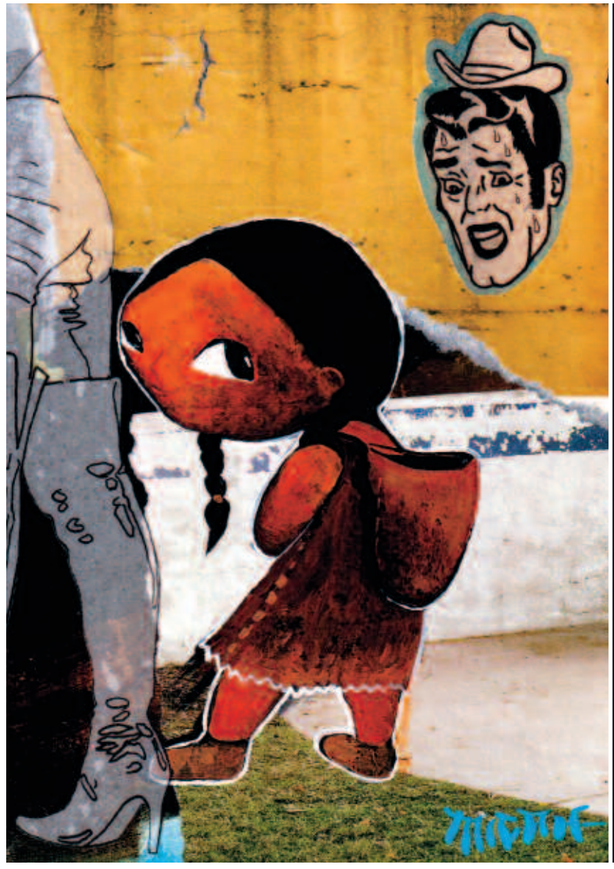
Some artists initially are drawn to the show by the money: Many earn over half their annual income during these two days each year. Yet many return for the recognition, the fellowship, the inspiration, and the unparalleled gathering of like minds despite the enormous variety in aesthetics and style. "It's like sitting on the bank of a river of people," says accomplished bead artist Marcus Amerman (Choctaw), who, at 47, has shown at Market for the past 22 years and has had work exhibited at major museums across the country, the Eiteljorg and the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian among them. Although he's mastered various mediums, from painting to glass, Amerman is best-known for his unusual beading, in which he often reappropriates Native imagery, including portraits of such icons as Lloyd Kiva New, Crazy Horse, and even the Statue of Liberty. When asked what it means, for him, to be a Native artist today, he replies, "That is such a hard question to answer, because the range of creativity and purpose is so varied in the Indian art world."

> "Being a Native artist carries a sense of responsibility."
> —KENNETH JOHNSON (MUSCOGEE/SEMINOLE)

The bottom line: When you come to Market this month, make sure to lose—or at least loosen—your expectations about what Native American art really *is* these days.

Case in point: At 40 years of age, metalsmith Kenneth Johnson is taking traditional Native American jewelry-making into a new realm. This Oklahoma artist of Muscogee and Seminole heritage studied mechanical engineering at the University of Oklahoma before taking up silversmithing in 1988, when he apprenticed for Choctaw jeweler Johnson Bobb. By using high-tech tools like CAD software to design what he calls "virtual stampwork," and incorporating traditional Seminole patterns and Southeastern iconography—birds, spiders, turtles, and bears—Johnson fashions distinctive pieces instantly recognizable as his own. "Traditional methods use contrast: stamping to create relief. I create that through different materials and different heights. ... I incorporate the basic elements of circle, square, and triangle into concentric lines that relate to our old designs." His pieces bridge the gap between what you might think of as Native American jewelry and what is simply elegant—and often elaborate—design, with subtle hints of his indigenous heritage cleverly woven throughout each piece. For the cuff bracelet titled *Cahcahcakwv,* the Muscogee word for the ivory-billed woodpecker. Johnson created a silver, copper, and 18 kt yellow gold design featuring two heads of the mysterious bird (thought to be extinct for roughly half a century), based on iconography from his Southeastern Moundbuilder culture. "It was my response to the supposed recent rediscovery of the woodpecker in Arkansas," he explains. "To me, it's funny to think that something can be rediscovered, kind of like how Indians were 'rediscovered,' because we've always been here."

Says this former Smithsonian NMAI artist-in-residence: "Being a Native artist carries a sense of responsibility. You have a unique origin, and the medium to express it through your art." In terms of Indian Market, where he's



COURTESY SWAIA

From left: *Bringing Home a White Boy,* by Micah Wesley (Wind Clan/Kiowa); *Baby on Board* cradleboard, by Jamie Okuma (Shoshone Bannuck/Luiseno)

shown for 13 years: "It's a place to knock down stereotypes and build new ones." He even loves having to begin the day at 5 AM, with a line of collectors usually waiting at his booth. "It's the pinnacle, the defining place to be. It's great to see who shows up, to get the gossip, to meet the challenge of competition, to know the hot topic and the hot artist, watching the envelope being pushed, young artists stretching, older artists passing the baton with their families and their booths, their kids taking on their profession," he says. "It's the cycle of life."

Painter Micah Wesley—a student at the Institute of American Indian Arts, DJ, collaborator with local band Chocolate Helicopter, and emerging mixed-media painter who is part of the Native Agents (nativeagents.com) arts collective—is pushing the envelope even farther beyond historical expectations about Native art. He says being a Native artist today "means that I can never be stopped or satisfied."

Wesley describes his work as "pop surrealism, or lowbrow, or outsider work," placing his emphasis solidly on present-day realities. He first showed at Indian Market in 1988, at 18, when he was helping sell paintings by his late father, Tiller Wesley, and at last year's Market, he walked away with a ribbon himself—second place in miniatures for "a drawing of a pregnant devil-woman smoking a cigarette," he says. At 29, this Wind Clan Creek and Kiowa artist, who grew up in Albuquerque, paints and collages old records, as well as canvas, with images that merge pop imagery with Native references. He often incorporates Frankenstein figures "as a symbol for Indians being displaced and built up out of greed," he says. The relation? "When I tell people it's as if America created a monster through moving us to boarding schools and

COURTESY SWAIA

O'Brien Germantown 2, an 8 x 6′ textile by fourth-generation Navajo weaver Melissa Cody

reservations, they start clicking it" His inspiration: "My father. He wanted to be a mechanic and oceanographer. Though he never became the latter, he was an amazing painter."

At the other end of the spectrum, artists like Jamie Okuma rely heavily on centuries-old techniques and aesthetic values. Born in Los Angeles and reared at California's La Jolla Indian Reservation, Okuma, a mere 29, is one of the country's foremost bead artists of this generation. Of Shoshone-Bannock and Luiseno heritage, she took up the art form at an early age. In 2000, when she was 21, she was awarded a SWAIA fellowship,

> «Being a Native artist means being current and changing with the times."
> —MELISSA CODY (NAVAJO)

began studying at the Institute of American Indian Arts, and took home an Indian Market Best of Show for *Oren*, a Crow warrior doll. In 2002, she won another Best of Show for a fully beaded Lakota woman. These figures, often standing about two feet tall, are painstakingly outfitted in traditional dress, often with minimal facial details. Although born to painter Sandra Okuma, Jamie took up beading on her own—and despite the cultural implications of her art form, she says, "[Being Native American] isn't something I think about. I think of myself more as an artist and less of the Native aspect, as that is who I am to begin with. We're a completely different generation than those who came before us at Market," she says of the greats who paved the way. "This is our life, and I love it. I'm so grateful. Every day I'm grateful I get to do what I do as an artist and not as a 'Native' artist in any way."

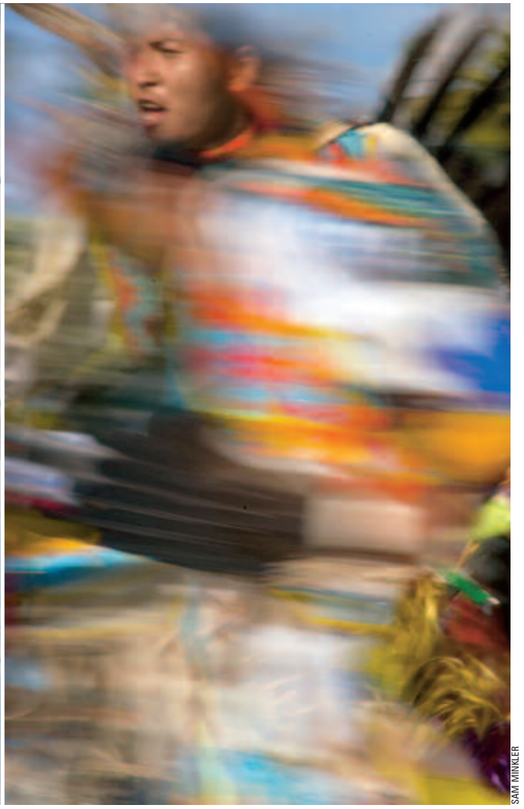
And while Okuma feels fortunate to be able to take her heritage for granted, it still has an impact in the art world: For *The Legacy of Generations: Pottery By American Indian Women*, an exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts and the Heard Museum, sculptor Anita Fields (Osage) was proclaimed "probably the first Indian potter to create conceptual installation pieces." Fields's distinctive pieces, influenced by traditional Osage ribbonwork coupled with figurative imagery and semi-abstractions, address universal themes like the landscape, the spirits, and distant childhood memories. "I use the earth as a way to shape warmth, and figures and to express how I feel about the common experiences we share of loss, of truth, of the essence of being," says the Oklahoma-based artist, whose work is included in the permanent collections at the IAIA Museum and the Heard Museum in Phoenix. "I like to know that others understand that feeling. That's what I'm doing as an artist."

Fields, 56, has been a regular artist at Indian Market for nearly 20 years. Accompanied by her husband, Tom Fields, a Creek photographer, and their three grown children, Fields makes Market an annual family event. "It's our way of tuning in to a lot of art and performance," Fields says. "We get to see other artists' work and meet emerging artists."

Yet family tradition has a funny way of transforming itself. For Melissa Cody, a fourth-generation Navajo weaver, "being a Native artist means being current and changing with the times." Using her traditional construction techniques, Cody applies her own spin to a contemporary Germantown revival mode, which dates back to the Navajo Long Walk of 1863–64, when commercial yarns and materials were first introduced to the Navajo during their forced relocation to Fort Sumner, New Mexico. The style, named for an area near Philadelphia where much of the yarn was produced, is known for its bright colors and intricate designs. "I grew up in the 1980s with video games and technological and pop influences," she explains, "so my colors are bright, vibrant geometric shapes and I like to work with open spaces and to make eye-dazzlers in lime green and bright orange." She's been showing at Indian Market's Youth section since she was nine, joining her mother, weaver Lola Cody, and other relatives as a regular booth artist in 1992. Now, at 29, she has a bachelor's degree in museum studies from the Institute of American Indian Arts and hopes to make a career of textile conservation work for museums. (She's already interned at the National Museum of the American Indian.)

Also focused on fusing influences from different eras is artist Teri Greeves (Kiowa), 37, who grew up in her mother's trading post on the Wind River Reservation in Fort Washakie, Wyoming, and has shown her contemporary beadwork at Market since 1998. Greeves applies her artwork to rather atypical canvases: from high-top Converse tennis shoes to wall panels and jewelry. Her second time at Market, she took home a Best of Show award for a hide umbrella decorated with a parade scene around its perimeter. The piece sold soon after for $10,000. "I'm compelled to teach and to use my art to educate, so it's not just pretty to look at, but it also informs," says Greeves, who also teaches beadwork at the Institute of American Indian Arts. "For me, it means being able to utilize traditional techniques CONTINUED ON PAGE 210

COURTESY AMERICA MEREDITH



SAM MINKLER

From left: *Squawkies*, by San Francisco–based painter America Meredith (Cherokee); *ASU Dancer*, by Northern Arizona University photography professor Sam Minkler (Navajo)

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 117 and materials with the integrity of a modern perspective. It is my act of resistance and my survival tactic: that a 21st-century beadworker can not just make a living but contribute to a dialogue of what it means to be an Indian, and specifically a Kiowa, today is a blessing and stands as testament to all of the Kiowa women beadworkers before me."

That translates into global terms in the eyes of Sam Minkler, a photography professor at Northern Arizona University, in Flagstaff. Now 56, Minkler (Navajo) was first introduced to the scene when a friend, who traded silver and turquoise, brought him in 1972: "I admired artists from the many tribes that represent artistic perspectives of their cultures. I saw excellence, originality, and the innovations of Indian culture." Besides revealing a vibrant and multifarious indigenous experience, "It made me wait and wait," he says, "until I felt good enough to even try to be one of these artists." This year marks his fourth year participating. "You have to know your audience, so this is my way of meeting that audience." And, he adds, again thinking broadly, "Maybe this is like being at Chaco Canyon at its height, way back in time."

For America Meredith (Cherokee), whose politically charged paintings demand collectors' attention the world over, Indian Market is a unique phenomenon. Now based in San Francisco and Oklahoma City, Meredith anticipates the annual pilgrimage back to Santa Fe, which provides a "level of energy and excitement about Indian art that sustains me all year," she says. "It's fun to briefly feel a bit like a rock star." Meredith, 35, first showed at Indian Market in 2003 and has returned every year since because "the quality of dialogue is better for me than most art openings—people really take the time to learn about underlying meanings behind my paintings."

Taking issue with the inconsistent use of "traditional," Meredith says the concept permeates the entire weekend, but is applied arbitrarily. "Some art forms that date back no earlier than the 1970s are designated as traditional, while art forms such as photography that have been used by Indians for over 120 years are still regarded as non-traditional."

Meredith says being a Native artist means that "first and foremost, I paint for my tribe"—what she sees as her primary audience and subject matter. "There is plenty of room for individual innovation, but unlike the mainstream art world, that isn't the only goal," she explains. "Native artists balance their individual voice with their community and innovation with traditions. This balance is one reason why Native American art as a whole is more coherent and comprehensible, even to non-Natives, than the mainstream art world."

She agrees with Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chad Smith, who once said, "Native art is not 'art for art's sake'—it is all about communication." Only rarely are Native people "able to accurately represent themselves in the mainstream media, but in the fine-art world, Native artists can tell their own stories directly to the public," she adds.

"Native artists understand the mantle of responsibility they assume," says Meredith. "What they create reflects back on their families, their tribes, and Native Americans as a whole. I have zero interest in shock art, and there is nothing I paint that I would not be willing to show my grandfather. I do not believe this attitude limits or weakens my art; rather, it makes it stronger, because respect, affection, and harmony are part of my message."

* * *

building upon a storied past

Ask Connie Tsosie Gaussoin what it means to be a Native American artist these days and you'll get quite a response. Armed

with a lifetime of experience, this 58-year-old jeweler, weaver, and former SWAIA board member of Navajo and Picuris Pueblo heritage begins answering not by talking about herself but by pointing to her aunt, Rafaelita Yazza. "She came to market just when it was beginning," says Connie, and Rafaelita confirms. Now 81, Rafaelita remembers the days when she was 11 and first joined her family selling pots at Market under the Palace of the Governers portal.

The year was 1927. Maybe about 20 artists gathered in those days—transported by school buses from the pueblo—and returned by the end of the day, she recalls. Her family would come with an assortment of traditional micaceous clay pots: "I'd have a bean pot that, back then, we'd cook with," she says, and they'd sell for about $3 each. "Then we'd go to the store behind the Palace of the Governors, by the old Sears building, and buy groceries to take back."

"Back then, it was a way of life, a real livelihood, a way to eat," explains Connie, who first entered Market in the 1970s, a female jeweler in a sea of men. "As a Native American female, I had to prove myself." Since then, she's established herself as a respectable force, with her work, from miniature seed bowls to tufa-cast silver spurs, in collections at the San Diego Museum of Man and the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture. She's also passed on her talents and traditions to three sons and a daughter, all of whom are making a name for themselves in a far more contemporary style. "Maybe it's my age, but now I encourage younger artists to push the limits, in any medium and materials they want," she says—but with a caveat. "Times are changing, both in terms of techniques and our thoughts, and what we're being exposed to these days as artists. But that doesn't make us any less Indian," she says. "That's what's happening with these young, emerging artists. They may be Native American, but the art they're creating may not look Native American. It can be very progressive and avant-garde. And while they still know the traditional techniques, they're moving ahead."

Take, for instance, the simple matter of turquoise. In the 1970s, the material was abundant. Today, many mines are closed and only the tailings are readily accessible. "Maybe that's why the younger generation, like my sons, are shying away from turquoise and use other precious stones," she

muses. Transformation in the metals market means gold, stainless steel, platinum, and palladium are also more accessible. Her advice to the new generation of artists: "Stretch the limits and go for it. I've taught my sons to always remember the basic techniques before they push beyond, because they always need to respect the old traditional ways."

For the exhibition *Shared Images: The Jewelry of Yazzie Johnson and Gail Bird*, at the Heard Museum this year, curator Diana Pardue described the work of this longtime jewelry-making couple as "part of a generation of American Indian artists from the Southwest who have acknowledged and honored the tradition of their respective areas while pushing the creative boundaries and addressing contemporary concerns." For Gail Bird (Santo Domingo/Laguna), her response to being a Native American artist in today's world is simple: "You have to really enjoy what you're doing and not be bored by it, and hope people get it."

MICHAEL NANA PING GARCIA

Turquoise inlay bracelet by Michael NaNa Ping Garcia

Each year, she and Johnson (Navajo) craft a special concho belt for Indian Market and bring with them a host of their other designs in which unusual stones, from freshwater pearls to opals and agates, are set almost halo-like in various metals. "It's unusual in the fact that we're two people who work together," says Gail Bird. "Yazzie is the artist, the craftsman, and I think of things. But we work well together and can see things together. We have a deep love and respect for the traditions and the roots of it all."

Yet holding onto tradition isn't always easy. "The artists coming up today, at least in the last five years, have it tougher," says third-generation Yaqui silversmith Michael NaNa Ping Garcia. "I've been around jewelry all of my life, and was influenced by Charles Loloma, Jesse Monongye. These young ones weren't alive when they were alive, although they have more technology today than we did."

As a longtime SWAIA board member, Indian Market artist, and educator, he says he's watched the number of traditional artists dwindle over the years—but he's also witnessed a constant artistic evolution throughout his lifetime. "Because of Loloma, Dan Namingha, R.C. Gorman—these people changed the direction [of Native American art] 30 years ago, especially in jewelry." And that isn't necessarily negative. "I honor my roots, and I'll never forget where I come from, but I live in a very contemporary world." His answer about being Native American today: "I stress education. Learn the ways of the country, of the world, because you [as a Native American] will always have your traditional values."—*AM*