

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF  
THE AMERICAN INDIAN  
AND ART IN EMBASSIES  
PROGRAM PRINT SERIES

W E A R E A L L K N O T S



The National Museum of the American Indian and the ART in Embassies Program joined together to produce this print portfolio by five influential Native artists from across the United States with the goal of broadening international understanding and appreciation for contemporary Native art. The donated works will be distributed to American Embassies throughout the world.

Norman Akers, Mario Martinez, Larry McNeil, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, and Marie Watt worked with printers from the Tamarind Institute in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to create this important collection of prints. Based at the University of New Mexico, Tamarind is a center for fine art lithography that trains master printers, engages in teaching and research, and houses a professional collaborative studio for artists. It is recognized internationally for its contributions to the growth of contemporary printmaking around the world.

Today's Native artists do not identify themselves based on whether their work is "traditional" or can be defined as "modern." As these artists demonstrate, Native art cannot be judged or categorized according to old assumptions about artistic authenticity. Their work reflects a nuanced and sophisticated approach in both subject and composition that speaks to the contemporary Native experience.

The condition of being modern is commonly, though ambiguously, defined as a break with tradition. Within Native art, modern art is work that breaks from the rules or visual language of culturally specific artistic traditions. No single date or era marks the beginning of modernity for Native art. Numerous contemporary art forms, such as two-dimensional abstract and representational painting, have their roots in ancient indigenous artistic customs. The integration of new media into existing art forms – as when trade goods such as beadwork came into use – has been ongoing both

## We Are All Knots

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among and between Native and non-Native cultures long before the conflicts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The twentieth century marked a shift in the economic role of artistic activity among Native people, particularly after World War II, as communities increasingly took advantage of the tourist trade and individuals reached out to the larger national art scene through exhibitions and educational institutions. Although many modernist artists viewed their work as part of a cultural continuum, their artistic expressions stressed individual aesthetics and influences over the rules of culturally specific traditions, contradicting expectations about what Indian art could and should be.

The artists in this portfolio have inherited both the legacy of their ancestors and the twentieth-century struggle for individual expression: their work is an integral component of a larger web connecting the past

and the present. They move beyond stultifying expectations – largely derived from romanticized and often constructed imagery: popular culture, advertising, Hollywood – which require easily identifiable iconography or symbols that shout “INDIAN.” Instead, these artists subvert these expectations.

**Larry McNeil**, a member of the K’et Gooshi H’it (Killerwhale Fin House) from Klukwan, Alaska, of the Chilkat Tlingit Nation, keenly critiques a familiar and moody photograph by Edward Curtis, a chronicler of turn-of-the-century Native people who has been both celebrated and vilified for his romantic portraits of the “vanishing race.” With *First Light, Winter Solstice*, McNeil rewrites this scenario of obliteration, adding a dilapidated “rez car” to the landscape and framing the entire scene against a bright turquoise ground with gestural forms referencing pictographs of Raven, a trickster figure in the Tlingit cosmology.

*We Are All Knots in the Great Net of Life* by **Jaune Quick-to-See Smith** also plays with our perception of familiar “Indian” imagery. Could that be our friend and faithful Indian guide Tonto, turning his back to us? Or is he silently leading us? The print is filled with clues to guide us: animals that reference creation, a spider’s web, and a skull remind us of both the fragility and cyclical nature of life – and our precarious place within it. Smith is an enrolled Flathead Salish member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Indian Nation, Montana.

**Norman Akers** references nature and place with *All Things Connected*. In this work, a magnificent elk draws the viewer’s attention immediately, its regal pose framed within a yellow halo. One realizes upon closer observation that the background of blue and red lines is an abstraction of the highways and roads of a map. Thus the Osage artist, who was born in Fairfax,

Oklahoma, draws us into the reality of his existence: physical separation from his ancestral homelands expressed through exploration of the symbols and images of the land.

*The Desert, The Yaquis and NYC* by **Mario Martinez** is also about the essence and understanding of place. This complex composition, with its swirling, amorphous forms juxtaposed against the outlined architectural shapes, reveals what at first seems to be a collision of worlds. The urban grit and unforgiving skyline are framed and overcome by organic elements which suggest world rejuvenation. Martinez’s work reminds us of the connectivity and continuity between the natural and manmade landscape of the city. Born in Penjamo, Arizona, the Yaqui artist has deep connections to his home community and his urban homes in San Francisco and New York City.

## We Are All Knots

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**Marie Watt**, a Seneca artist born in Seattle, Washington, takes an approach that is at once more abstract and more concrete with *Blanket Stories: Continuum (Book I/Book III)*. Blankets are a recurring motif in the artist's sculpture and mixed media work, with deep resonance for Native people. On the one hand, blankets denote community, comfort, and ceremony; on the other, poverty and disease. In her sculptural work, Watt has used their formal qualities to build new shapes and forms. In this print, she literally creates a swatch of fabric with the blanket stories she has collected, elegantly capturing the letters and words of language to form the warp and weft.

The National Museum of the American Indian recognizes and celebrates the diversity in current artistic expression by Native people. This portfolio provides only a glimpse of this vibrant and remarkable art scene, but it evidences the quality, beauty, and complexity of the work produced today. These artists have each chosen to define for themselves what it means to be a Native artist, enriching us all with their exceptional contributions to world art discourse.

– Kathleen Ash-Milby, Curator,  
National Museum of the American Indian

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## National Museum of the American Indian

The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, established in 1989, through an Act of Congress, is an institution of living cultures dedicated to advancing knowledge and understanding of the life, languages, literature, history and arts of the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere. The museum includes the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall; the George Gustav Heye Center, a permanent museum in lower Manhattan; and the Cultural Resources Center, a research and collections facility in Suitland, Maryland. The Museum's collection

of more than 800,000 objects, and extensive paper and photographic archives, represents Native peoples from the Arctic Circle to the tip of Tierra del Fuego and spans more than 10,000 years of Native heritage. In addition to permanent collections-based exhibitions, temporary contemporary art exhibitions are presented in Washington, D.C. and New York. Both locations are also venues for performances and public programs including films, lectures, and symposia. For complete information, visit [www.AmericanIndian.si.edu](http://www.AmericanIndian.si.edu).

## Norman Akers born 1958

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For many Native Americans the experience of modern life creates a kaleidoscope of differing realities, with which we live. Growing up in a small rural community on the edge of the tallgrass prairie created a strong bond with place. The surrounding landscape where the Osages live is a place of belonging and the inspiration of much of my work. Maintaining a sense of tribal identity while living away from my home creates the distinct experience of existing in a state of being “in between”.

My art mediates this experience for me; an experience many Native people deal with in today’s society. Where the boundaries of self and culture can be clearly defined or not so clear, where the past and present, tribal and western cultures coexist, and the gestalt of the modern experience occurs.

*All Things Connected* makes use of the elk and road map as primary symbols that represent place. The elk image symbolically embodies the physical land [on which] we live and the road map serves to orient us to place. Both symbols assist us in defining that place where we belong. While each functions within their histories and set of cultural values we survive by the act of a shared existence.

– Norman Akers (Osage)





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Norman Akers

*All Things Connected, 2007*

*Five color lithograph printed on white  
Somerset paper*

*Image size: 30 x 22 in. (76,2 x 55,9 cm)*

*Collaborating printer: Sharon Lee*

*Edition of 60*

**Mario Martinez** born 1953

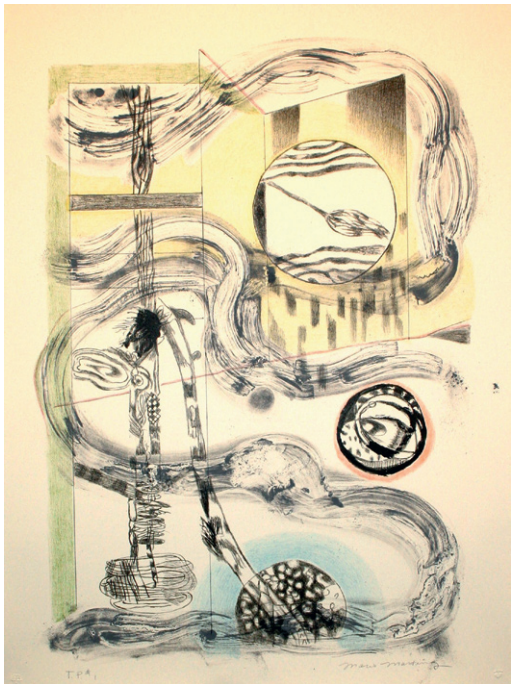
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My work is a result of an intuitive artistic process. I feel my work combines the great abstract tradition in western art and a personal sense of “Yaquiness.” When I say “Yaquiness,” I mean ancient and modern Yaqui culture, the Great Sonoran Desert and diverse American popular culture.

In *The Desert, The Yaquis, and NYC*, I revisit my ongoing primary theme, abstract natural forms. I see the image as a structure of organic energy. The image also contains straight architectural lines referencing the urban “cityscape” (San Francisco and New York City). The print was drawn mostly on lithostone, a process I had not used in decades. That process lends itself to a drawing-like quality, which is what attracted me to lithography as a young artist in college.

In short, I feel *The Desert, The Yaquis, and NYC* is a true reflection of what has impacted my life in the past to the present: the Sonoran Desert (the primordial home of my people); Yaqui cultural and spiritual traditions (such as our animal dances and ancient ‘Mythology,’ both based on nature); western modernism; and my contemporary life which began in a small Yaqui village (called “Penjamo” in Scottsdale, Arizona) and continues in a great urban environment called New York City.

– Mario Martinez (Yaqui)



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Mario Martinez

*The Desert, the Yaquis and NYC*  
Seven color lithograph printed  
on Soft White Somerset Satin  
Image size: 27 x 18 ½ in. (68,6 x 47 cm)  
Collaborating Printer: Aaron Shipps  
Edition of 60

## Larry McNeil born 1955

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I love the idea of making art that was designed to act so specifically as an ambassador for our people. I was thinking of who we really are as Americans, both Indigenous and the proverbial “melting pot” that forms our collective identity. I was thinking of early Cowboy and Indian films that formed the world’s perception of who we are, especially as a mythical place.

I wanted a heroic Raven pictograph for the background because he is from our own creation story and frequently amuses himself with the often-subliminal nature of a quasi-educator, a poetic rascal. Something is a bit amiss though; the bottom of the pictograph is pixilated. The image of the Indians riding their horses into the sunrise has them taking a fleeting look at a weathered “Rez car.” A Rez car is often old and beat up, sometimes barely running, sometimes trying to blend back into the earth. Rez cars have become part of our identity. This image is a revised mythologi-

cal view of Indians because it includes a Rez car and is not the romanticized view of Indians as being a vanishing race.

The sepia tone is important because it references a stereotype that is updated for the 21st Century. A lot of the photographs of Indians (made by non-Indians) in the 19th and 20th centuries are romanticized sepia views whose implied message has us as being from the past and certainly not the present. By using this sepia toned photograph I am playing with the perception that Indians are only in the past and bringing them right into the present, and doing it with a bit of a sly joke that we can chuckle about. If we can take outdated stereotypical ideas and laugh about them, we acknowledge that they were indeed a bit absurd and we can move on in a good way.

– Larry McNeil (Tlingit)

*First Light, Winter Solstice, 2007*  
Six color lithograph printed on white  
Somerset satin paper  
Image size: 22 1/8 x 29 7/8 in.  
(56,2 x 75,9 cm)  
Collaborating printer: Brooke Steiger  
Edition of 60



## Jaune Quick-to-See Smith born 1940

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Plants, animals and humans appear together in a looping circle of life reaffirming the Native philosophy that all life forms are connected. Native peoples often reference North America as Turtle Island which is part of the Iroquois creation story. So I added the turtle as an important American Indian symbol representing survival of the indigenous peoples. The corn represents another survival symbol as well. Corn and other food crops were domesticated in the Americas around the same time that agriculture appeared in Mesopotamia about 9,000 B.C. The corn plant spread throughout

most of the western hemisphere on our trade routes. Another aspect to this print is the fact that I am an organic gardener and a constant observer of nature. I plant indigenous plants that feed and create habitats as well as eco-systems for small animals, butterflies, wild bees, insects and birds around my home. This lithographic drawing is a symbolic microcosm of my life but has analogies to the larger system on our planet.

– Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Flathead Salish)



## Jaune Quick-to-See Smith

*We Are All Knots in the Great Net of Life, 2007*

*Five color lithograph printed on white Somerset satin paper*

*Image size: 26 7/8 x 20 in. (68,3 x 50,8 cm)*

*Collaborating printer: Jim Teskey*

*Edition of 60*

## Marie Watt

born 1967

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My work explores human stories and rituals implicit in everyday objects. Recently I have been exploring the history of common wool blankets. I am attracted to a blanket's two- and three-dimensional qualities. On a wall, a blanket functions as a tapestry, but on a body it functions as a robe and living object. As I fold and stack blankets they begin to form columns that have references to linen closets, architectural braces, memorials (Trajan), sculpture (Brancusi, for one), the great totem poles of the Northwest, and the conifer trees with which I grew up.

In the native communities, including my own, the Seneca, we give blankets away to honor people for being witness to important life events – births, coming-of-age, graduations, marriages, namings and honorings. For this reason, it is as much of a privilege to give a blanket away as it is to receive one.

As friends come over and witness my blanket projects in process, I am struck by how the blankets function as markers for their memories and stories. Blankets hang

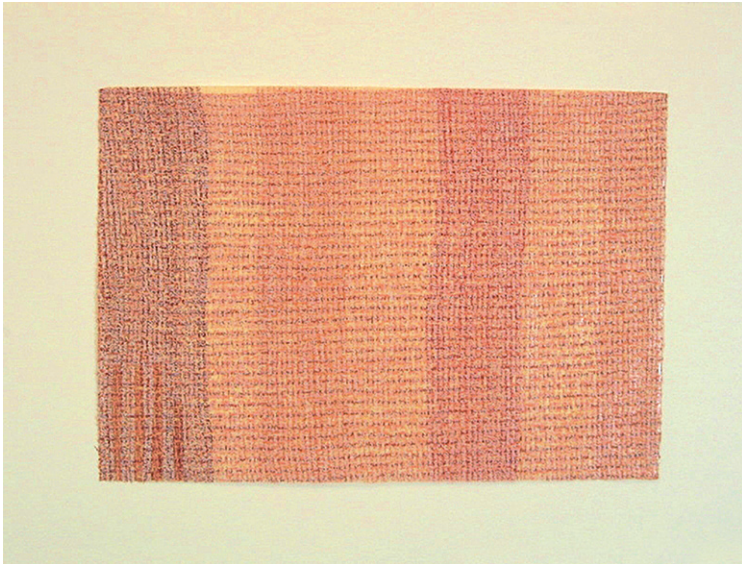
around in our lives and families – they gain meaning through use. Collecting observations through paper tags, audio, and blank books in which people share their blanket stories is a part of the object's making and life.

In my recent Tamarind prints I was interested in transcribing the blanket story entries from the books which accompany my installations. My hope was to create a blanket of words, by transcribing each story into a warp and weft. The act of transcribing the stories was meditative and contemplative, perhaps not so different from the slowness which accompanies the act of weaving or the concentration that accompanies the telling of a story. The prints are named according to which exhibition that the books and their respective texts come from.

In this way, my work is about personal, social, and cultural histories imbedded in commonplace objects. I consciously draw from indigenous design principles, oral traditions, and personal experience to shape the inner logic of the work I make.

— Marie Watt (Seneca)





*Blanket Stories: Continuum*  
*(Book I/Book III), 2007*

*Six color lithograph printed on natural  
Sekishu on white Arches paper  
15 ¼ x 22 ¼ in. (38,7 x 56,5 cm)  
Collaborating printer: Brooke Steiger  
Edition of 60*

## The ART in Embassies Program

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Founded in 1964, the U.S. Department of State ART in Embassies Program is a unique blend of art and diplomacy. Through exhibitions with diverse themes and content, ART presents more than 3,500 original works of art by U.S. citizens in a variety of media and styles. They are obtained through loan from sources that include museums, galleries, corporations, artists, and private collectors, and displayed in the public rooms of some 180 U.S. Embassy residences and diplomatic missions worldwide.

The ART exhibitions are a source of great pride to U.S. ambassadors, assisting them to reach the host country's educational, cultural, business, and diplomatic communities. In viewing the exhibitions, the thousands of guests who visit U.S. Embassy residences each year have the opportunity to learn about our nation – its history, customs, values, and aspirations – by experiencing American art firsthand. Detailed information about the Program may be obtained by accessing the ART web site, <http://aiep.state.gov>. It functions as an interactive global museum featuring on-line versions of all current exhibitions.

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