

Native artists assert artistic, cultural independence with new gallery

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Several years ago, painter and ledger artist Chris Pappan created a groundbreaking exhibition in the outdated, problematic Native North America Hall at the Field Museum.

Pappan replicated his work on decals, which he placed directly on the glass of the old exhibit cases of mannequins wearing headdresses and moccasins.

Visitors were forced to confront contemporary Native artwork before they could engage the items of the past. Still, not everyone received the message.

"I heard a woman say to a child, 'Everyone in these cases is dead,' right in front of me," said Pappan, 52, of Albany Park, who is of Kanza, Osage and Lakota heritage. "I'm not the only one who's had that experience here. There are other Native artists that have been told to their faces, 'I thought all Natives were extinct.'"

Today, Pappan is still working to provide that visibility in Chicago, which boasts a population of more than 215,000 Native Americans representing over 140 tribal nations, according to the American Indian Center. In September, he and his wife, Debra Yepa-Pappan, along with other Native artists Monica Rickert-Bolter and Andrea Carlson, opened the Center for Native Futures, located at 56 W. Adams St. in the Marquette Building in the Loop.

Citing limited opportunities for artists and problematic treatment of Native art and items at Chicago museums, the founders have created one of the only Native-owned contemporary art galleries in Chicago. The space embraces the concept of Indigenous futurism, which they say paints a more complete picture of Native Americans by not only considering their past, but placing them in the present and future.

As the Field Museum and other institutions are forced to reevaluate their collections, Native artists are changing the narrative in their own spaces



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ABOVE: Debra Yepa-Pappan, co-founder of the Center for Native Futures, stands by her work "Ancestors Speak (a visual reparation)" in the gallery at 56 W. Adams St. in the Marquette Building.

LEFT: An Indigenous futurist piece by artist X titled "GHOST TOUCH: Synesthesia" hangs at the Center for Native Futures.

TYLER PASCIAK LARIVIERE/SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

contemporary Native works in partnership with Native communities.

"Having the Center for Native Futures is basically proof of our existence," Pappan said.

Chicago museums are rethinking their collections

In recent years, Chicago museums have been taking steps to reevaluate their collections of Native art and items.

Following Pappan's "Drawing on Tradition" exhibition, the Field Museum de-installed the Native North America Hall and replaced it with "Native Truths: Our Voices, Our Stories," a permanent exhibition of contemporary Native art created with input from Native people representing over 100 tribes.

However, the museum has long faced criticism for its Ancient Americas hall, which features tools, pottery and other sacred Native American items. In January, the museum, along with others across the country, covered a bulk of display cases of items from the present-day United States following updates to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). Passed in 1990, the law "addresses the repatriation and disposition of Native American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony," according to the National Park Service.

The act now requires that museums obtain consent from tribes, descendants or other Native groups before exhibiting human remains or cultural items.

The Field Museum will consult with Native communities to re-curate the exhibition, according to Jaap Hoogstraten, head of exhibitions. Although not required to do so under NAGPRA, the Field Museum said it will also evaluate items from present-day Canada in its Northwest Coast Collections.

"We are committed, based on our work with 'Native Truths,' to not talk on behalf of people that are not in the room, whether it's the display of items, but also the stories that the items tell," Hoogstraten said. "The most important thing is that there is an attitudinal shift in how we think about this in terms of priority. And that will have an impact long-term."

Debra Yepa-Pappan, former Field Museum community engagement coordinator who worked on "Native Truths," said she thinks the institu-

As they gradually build a hub for both local and national Native artists, Chicago-area institutions such as the Field Museum, Mitchell

Museum of the American Indian and others are attempting to take corrective actions — returning sacred Native items and showcasing

tion should shut down both its Ancient Americas hall and Northwest Coast Collections area altogether.

"I'm glad they finally made this move," said Yepa-Pappan, 52, who is of Jemez Pueblo and Korean heritage, "but at the same time, I'm disappointed that it had to take a change in the law to help move them in this direction, because they had so many opportunities to remove items or cover up cases, or really just close down those halls."

Yepa-Pappan directly references ancestral pottery in the Field Museum in her artwork for "Native Futures," the inaugural exhibition at the Center for Native Futures.

Titled "Ancestors Speak," the piece depicts the pottery through digital images on antique ledger paper, copper leaf and birch panels.

"This piece is my attempt to rescue them, to rescue my ancestors, to free their spirits, and to share their visual language so we may hear them speak once again," Yepa-Pappan says in her artist statement.

Native artists in Chicago feel overlooked

Like the Field Museum, the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian in Evanston has taken steps to remove and return cultural items and focus on contemporary Native art and stories, including its current exhibition, "No Rest: The Epidemic of Stolen Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirits."

Named for a non-Native couple who donated their personal collection, the museum is undergoing a rebranding.

"The most important thing for me and our staff and our board is that whoever visits gets to know Native people who are here today," said Kim Vigue, the museum's first permanent Native executive director, who is of Menominee and Oneida heritage.

Chicago art museums have also faced criticism from artists who want to see more local contemporary Native art on their walls and relationships with Native communities that go beyond land acknowledgments on their websites.

"We're tired of waiting around," Yepa-Pappan said. "They're completely overlooking the folks that are right in their front yard."

Over the past five years, the Art Institute of Chicago has featured more than two dozen works by



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Display cases of Native American items in the Field Museum's Ancient Americas hall are covered. Museums are now required to obtain consent from tribes, descendants or other Native groups before exhibiting human remains or cultural items.



The entrance to "Native Truths: Our Voices, Our Stories" at the Field Museum. The permanent exhibition of contemporary Native art was created with input from Native people representing over 100 tribes. PROVIDED



Monica Rickert-Bolter, co-founder of the Center for Native Futures, stands in the gallery at 56 W. Adams St. TYLER PASCIAK LARIVIERE/SUN-TIMES

contemporary Native artists in its galleries and permanent collection, and hosted talks with Native artists, according to Andrew Hamilton, associate curator of "Arts of the Americas."

"The Art Institute of Chicago is deeply committed to exhibiting works by Indigenous artists and highlighting more work from these communities," Hamilton said in an email to the Sun-Times. "We demonstrate this commitment through our redeveloped department structure, by expanding the works in our galleries and in our collection, and by elevating these voices through public programming."

The museum said it has recently worked to recognize Native artists

from the Great Lakes region and aims "to feature more works by artists from communities with ties to the Chicago area, recognizing that historical displacements mean these artists may now reside in places like Nebraska, Kansas, or Oklahoma."

Chris Pappan and Debra Yepa-Pappan were invited to present their artwork in the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago's "The Long Dream" exhibition during the pandemic. And last year, the museum featured an exhibition by Native artist Duane Linklater, of Ontario, whose work interrogated museums' "historical exclusion of Indigenous content."

MCA did not immediately respond to the Sun-Times' requests

for further information about the museum's engagement with Native artists.

Where to find contemporary Native art

Prior to the opening of the Center for Native Futures, there were other spaces in the city dedicated to Native contemporary art. Operating from the 1970s through the 2000s in various locations in Chicago, the Jan Cicero Gallery notably featured Native artists — but it was not Native-owned.

In 2005, Dave Spencer helped open the Trickster Cultural Center in Schaumburg, a Native-owned organization that currently highlights contemporary Native art.

Now the interim executive director of the American Indian Center, Spencer has been operating a gallery featuring contemporary and traditional art in the space since 2018.

But while the Center for Native Futures highlights more experienced visual artists, the AIC Gallery mentors Native artists in the community, encouraging them to showcase their work for the first time.

"The Center for Native Futures is a great balance to what we're doing here," said Spencer, 55, of Aurora, who is of Mississippi Chata and Diné heritage.

"They're giving the huge opportunity of being in downtown Chicago to Native artists across the country. ... To have another space dedicated 100% to Native voice, I can only applaud that. We need more."

Over the next year, there will be opportunities to see contemporary Native art in exhibitions at the Schingoethe Center of American Art, which also donated a total of \$325,000 in seed funding and other grants to the Center for Native Futures.

Many of these efforts are being financially supported by the Terra Foundation for American Art, which also donated a total of \$325,000 in seed funding and other grants to the Center for Native Futures.

The new gallery serves as a powerful counter-narrative even in its own location in the Marquette Building, which features a Louis Comfort Tiffany mural in the lobby that incorrectly depicts the Native Americans encountered by European explorer Jacques Marquette. The building is owned by the MacArthur Foundation, which has been supportive of the Center for Native Futures and is even developing an "intervention" exhibition in response to the mural with Yepa-Pappan, Pappan and others.

People who are used to seeing such depictions of Native Americans are surprised when they enter the Center for Native Futures, said co-founder Monica Rickert-Bolter.

"The artistic world doesn't see what a lot of contemporary Native art can be," said Rickert-Bolter, 37, of Chicago's Little India neighborhood, who is of Potawatomi and Black heritage.

"The way people are using old techniques and then creating these new works is just blowing my mind. ... And we want to make sure that they have a place here."