That limbless sign the thesis document.

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THAT LIMBLESS SIGN
THE THESIS DOCUMENT

By

Donna R. Charging
B.F.A., University of Illinois at Chicago, 2004

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
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In Studio Art and Design

Department of Art and Design
University of Louisville
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THAT LIMBLESS SIGN
THE THESIS DOCUMENT

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A Thesis Approved on

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ABSTRACT

THAT LIMBLESS SIGN

Donna R. Charging

January 15, 2024

Native American Art resists all attempts by non-Natives to define, restrain, and replicate it. THAT LIMBLESS SIGN is a concrete substantiation of this quality of resistance through the scope of language. Native Art indicates a continuity, not of tradition, but of people. In THAT LIMBLESS SIGN, Native people become signs; that is, inimitable cipher devices of the real, living members of tribes who remain in the United States of America. Language is one of the last refuges of Native existence because it represents the point of power where Native realities cannot be transcribed into a superficial, indelible system such as English.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. A SIGN WE ARE</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. UNDER ALL IS THE LAND</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. WHEN IT WAS ALIVE</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV. PICTURE PLANE AS RECLAIMED SPACE</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER V. WHEN I WAS A CHARGING HORSE</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CURRICULUM VITAE</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Native American Art has no indexical beginning. This is reflected in the constellation of Native creation stories, each varying from tribe to tribe and maintained by elders who pass them on to each successive generation. Anishinaabe scholar, Gerald Vizenor, identifies the connective tissue between Native American Art and literature in one of his many essays on Native survivance. Vizenor writes that, “Native narratives are literary art, and theories are translations or uncertain interpretations…”¹ He rejects the idea that theory can fully cope with works of Native American Art. “Literary theory may provide the discourse to compare and construe the apparent evolution of literature, but the traces, tricky turns and visionary reach of Native narratives forever haunt interpreters and translators.”²

Collective memory is of utmost importance to Native culture, allowing us to infuse objects with significant yet thoroughly ineffable meaning through choice of color and proximate material almost always with ties to the land. These creative decisions constitute the deployment of knowledge not readily available to people outside of a given tribe. When I paint, I am aware of the prescribed meanings for images and materials that my family has transmitted to me. This should not be misunderstood to imply that each

² Ibid. 50.
painting I finish becomes an artifact of illustrative autobiography. Rather, I am aware that I must create work according to esoteric rules set forth before I was born. I recall my father’s express prohibition against using the imagery of bison in my artwork, for example. Mainstream (non-Native) attitudes toward art command absolute freedom in artistic invention which is expressly not the case with Native American Art. Native Art production is memory that transcends time and place, resisting the mundane forces of standard American artistic practices that often emphasize irreverence and individuality.

I must also consider the paintings, sculptures, prints, and drawings made by other Native artists who came before me. Meskwaki painter Duane Slick explains how in his youth he was forbidden to speak about tribal experiences and ceremonies in school among his non-Native peers and how he resolved to address those experiences visually in his artwork. I am generating individual visual representations of personal experiences from having lived on the Reservation. The viewpoints and positions I express here are my own.

Native American identity is not a self-serve process; it is both collaborative and collective. The Indian Arts and Crafts Board oversees the production of Native Art on a federal level via the Indian Arts and Crafts Act (IACA) of 1990 (P.L. 101-644). The law prohibits fraudulence in the advertisement and sale of Native Art which “covers all Indian and Indian-style traditional and contemporary arts and crafts produced after 1934.” I am an enrolled member of the Three Affiliated Tribes (Mandan/Hidatsa/Arikara) whose reservation is located at Fort Berthold in North Dakota.

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My father was born there, and my mother is a member of the Eastern Shoshone tribe. I grew up on the Wind River Indian Reservation which is shared by the Eastern Shoshone and the Northern Arapaho tribes in the state of Wyoming. Separate from the legal definitions, my origins and background inject history and content into my work which, like Duane Slick, I am compelled to safeguard.

I also take into account the creative work of Native American writers, such as Diné poet Orlando White, author of LETTERRS. His contemporary, fellow Diné writer Sherwin Bitsui, describes White’s poetry as “work [that] resonates Navajo thought moving through typography, sound, breath, and utterance, enacting a seamless and ever-extending pathway between English and Diné bizaad; […] it broadens the perceived ‘difference’ of those languages and perspectives, introducing a new way of ‘being’ in language[.]”

Orlando White’s work provides the useful leap from Native language to body, a concept that threads its way throughout this thesis. In his first book, Bone Light: Poems, White likens a letter written in the English language to a human body in his poem, Ats’ííts’in. “Below the skull there is a part of a letter / shaped like a bone. But the skull is not a skull; / it is a black dot with white teeth. And the piece / of the letter under it is not really a bone, / rather a dark spine. This is not the end of language. / When it was alive it had a ribcage.”

White relates the story of learning English while growing up on the Navajo Nation in the introduction, To See Letters. The poem Bleach Ink reveals his

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7 White, Bone Light, 13.
perception of seeing the letter “i” and immediately viewing it as a man wearing a black suit with a white necktie.⁸

The act of merging letter with body provides a basis for understanding my series of animated GIF imagery. I remember hearing my father and mother speaking in their respective Native languages to their friends and relatives when I was growing up. There was an immediate linguistic veil thrown over the communication that I did not understand fully; their responses to my requests for translations could never fully capture the meanings. In my GIF series, the looped, moving images function as living language (attached to live organisms) in direct opposition to the static, dead state of non-Native language (printed English). The GIF, or Graphics Interchange Format, requires electricity, a digital screen, and a program to run in perpetuity. To be “alive,” its dependency on an outside energy source finds a parallel in Native American culture since both require collective human energy to exist. The GIFs are also time-based and must be experienced live and in-person. Oral storytelling, i.e. relating a creation story, has this quality; otherwise, I believe the stories should be considered “dead.” I am pursuit of relaying the essence of a living culture through my artwork, not in revitalizing the dead.

The title of this thesis, THAT LIMBLESS SIGN, comes from the closing line of Orlando White’s poem, Configuration, published in his book, LETTERRS.⁹ The white spaces are to be read as pauses (silences.)¹⁰

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⁸ White, Bone Light, 27.
That limbless sign       head

disjoins      its form to set

apart—strip it clean of ink-cloth

reveal       spinal syntax

on the scaffold of     page,

its head       a bone dot

backbone       a sentence

My prints and paintings extend the metaphor of language-bodies when viewed within the framework of a Native understanding of the world. I populate my two-dimensional work with furniture that operates as a body in a field. Chairs, benches, and tables have the capacity to exist in both real and imagined spaces, at times hidden after being painted over, but never completely displaced. This concept echoes the Native body which has tethered itself to a pre-contact history while functioning fully in the present. Unseen, unacknowledged Nativeness defies the notion of a vanquished/vanished people so long as it exists in my work.
CHAPTER I
A SIGN WE ARE

Ein Zeichen sind wir, deutungslos,
Schmerzlos sind wir und haben fast
Die Sprache in der Fremde verloren.

A sign we are, without interpretation
Without pain we are and have almost
Lost our language in foreign parts,
—Friedrich Hölderlin, Mnemosyne

German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin’s poem titled Mnemosyne, referring to the Greek goddess of memory and the mother of the Muses, opens with a metaphor of a person as a “sign” “without interpretation.” Anselm Haverkamp connects Mnemosyne, to the “devastated city” of Eleutherai (meaning freedom.) He writes, “The ciphers of the vanishing past are all that remains readable in the disappearance of Eleutherai. The history to which this devastation testifies and the myth that it helps to localize have become unreadable.”

I created two works for my thesis exhibition, Block Cipher and an i will forget its direction based on my belief and understanding that while Native

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12 Haverkamp, Leaves of Mourning, 45.
13 Ibid., 45.
American people still live in the United States today, we will cease to exist once our culture and lifeways have finally been dissolved. I resist the idea that cultural and language revitalization programs do more good than harm. These types of activities began to spring up following the enactment of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, when Native people could publicly display and worship as they wanted to and the beginning of the new relationship with the federal government that started with the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975.

My father retold the story of the ending of the world as his tribe knew it with the building of the Garrison Dam on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation which took place when he was a child. It was said that the world would end if trees ever showed their roots and if the Missouri River ran in reverse. Both signs took place in 1953 as the dam was built. Elbowoods, the settlement where my father was born, is now located under the manmade Lake Sakakawea. I have included extended references to the dam and to the striking photograph of tribal chairman George Gillette crying during the Garrison Dam contract signing. He is wearing a distinctive pinstriped suit with his hand covering his eyes in an unusual public display of emotion, surrounded by other men from the tribe dressed formally in suits who stand expressionless while Secretary of the Interior, J.A. Krug countersigns.14 The suit is a sign that recurs throughout my drawings, paintings, and prints. The painting an i will forget its direction includes two contours of the present-day reservation overlapping to form the outline of a traditional earthlodge. The Missouri River pours forth from the earthlodge doorway in paint the same color as the

14 Garrison Dam contract signing, 1948.
background which is Sherwin-Williams’s “Lucy Blue,” a tint reminiscent of a body of water or a patch of North Dakota sky.

For Haverkamp, Hölderlin’s late work returns the allegory to a more earthbound dimension from its former heights. Haverkamp refers specifically to apples, comparing the later work to that of Paul Cezanne’s directly rendered apples. He writes, “Extracted from their mythic sources, plucked from the tree of another knowledge, they suggest a this-worldliness that lights up in translucent materiality of signs, in the abstraction precisely not of forms but of schemes.” This parallels the notion of the “apple” in Native American urban lingo. Donald L. Fixico, Shawnee, Sac and Fox, Muscogee Creek and Seminole, professor of history at Arizona State University, defines this as “‘Apples’—red on the outside, white on the inside.” To be called an apple is the ultimate insult; appearing Native American on the surface is not enough to transmit a core Native aspect to a person.

Perry G. Horse, Kiowa, writes about Native American identity, in the fields of education and psychology, “We are still the original Native people of North America. We are Kiowa, Navajo, Comanche, Apache, Wichita, and so on down the list of five hundred or more Indian tribes. We cling to that distinction consciously and unconsciously. That realization, that consciousness, is where Native American identity begins.” Still he opens the discussion about his theory on the five dimensions of our identity by relating a remark made by his grandmother implying that one day we will all become like

15 Haverkamp, Leaves of Mourning, 6-7.
mainstream Americans, based mostly on the loss of our language. He writes, “‘Some day we’re all going to be like white people,’ my grandmother said in 1950.”

I created the wall installation *THAT LIMBLESS SIGN*, discussed primarily in Chapter III, with an experiential component that connects this idea of a Native consciousness to the loss of language. Attached to the top of the installation is a motion-activated speaker that plays a recording of spoken Shoshone made in 2024 on the Wind River Indian Reservation. The moving screens of the installation are not intended to translate the oral language but to challenge the viewer’s assumptions about what it means to live in a community of oral tradition. On the opposite side of the wall, I mounted 8 square works on paper that mirror the moving GIFs on the screens embedded in the wall. These still images represent the repugnant attempts to capture the meaning and transmission of Native thought which is ultimately elusive.

Ruth Ronen writes that while not a philosopher, Jacques Lacan, the French post-structuralist, has a particular view on the relationship between thought and language:

…the philosophy of Decartes and Kant and Hegel after him, not only uses the signifier and its effects to infer a reply to the question “Who/what am I?,” but also identifies Being with what stems from the fact that thought is built like a language.19

The poetic output of Orlando White serves to make the final connection between Native American thinking-bodies. The smaller 4 x 4-inch work on paper mounted on a wooden panel, *Block Cipher*, comes from his poem of the same title. The fifth line reads, “Where breath within paper functions a sensation thought, /

18 Horse, “Native America Identity”, 61.
actions charge form.” In other words, he is emitting a Native thoughtform on paper where breath represents the necessary respiration of life.

Sherwin Bitsui writes about White’s poems, “…here is a fellow Navajo who sees that language doesn’t need to feel captured or corralled on the page but sparkles with dazzling brilliance, enticing the viewer to look closer, to see that language’s vitality and verve are not diminished; rather they are enhanced, set in motion…when committed to script.”20 Like both Bitsui and White, I use non-Native art materials (paper, pens, oil paints) to organize my thinking and being Native by composing imagery with my awareness as a Native person. It is not important for me to communicate either one literal personal narrative or identifiable political message to my audience because Native people do not exist in the mainstream of American consciousness in an open, direct way. My life continues to reveal the residual effects of various traditions, concepts, and memories of the Reservation, and those revealed are committed to canvas and paper as a means of ongoing investigation.

CHAPTER II
UNDER ALL IS THE LAND

Under all is the land.
— NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®, The Preamble to the Code of Ethics

The assumption that the land making up the United States is undisputed territory reaches into the consciousness of most non-Natives who view the displacement of many tribes from their homelands as a necessary and essential part of this country’s mythology.

I first became aware of the possibility that furniture could be deployed as bodies in my paintings when I lived in New York, New York. I became self-employed as a real estate licensee. The real estate firm holding my license sold luxury residential properties, mostly multimillion dollar apartments in Manhattan, and I learned that it was nearly impossible to sell an empty apartment because potential buyers could not visualize themselves living in the space without the presence of furniture. It is the reason why some sellers pay to have their apartments staged. Even the most rudimentary-looking living room setup will garner offers for purchase whereas a completely empty space will not.

This also led to an awareness of the long history of housing discrimination which should have been prevented by one of the most important changes to the U.S. Constitution, the Fourteenth Amendment, put in place in the aftermath of the American
civil war.21 The New York Department of State requires continuing education for licensees which includes fair housing history and application of the law.22

Through this experience, I uncovered the visual links among land, discrimination, and wealth in the form of the government-sponsored Home Owner’s Loan Corporation (HOLC).23 “During the Great Depression of the late 1930s, the U.S. government-sponsored Home Owner’s Loan Corporation (HOLC) graded and mapped the creditworthiness of neighborhoods across many cities. Relying on appraisals from HOLC staff, local realtors, and banking experts, the HOLC maps employed an A to D color-coded scheme.”24 This practice of restricting lending to white neighborhoods created a grave disparity among neighborhoods in cities across the U.S. that continues to reverberate to the present-day. I connected these coded boundaries to Reservations.

I first used the color scheme from the Brooklyn redline map in creating a landscape that employs furniture combined with the well-known “Indian Villages, Paths, Ponds and Places in Kings County” held in the Brooklyn Historical Society’s Library & Archives in the first version of Under All is the Land in 2021.25 It was a combination of drawing, collage, and painting on a raw wooden panel measuring 36 x 48 inches. I attempted to create layers of action, presence, and human memories on a single field. I included empty parking lots, a brownstone façade, and a section from the redline map cut

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24 Lyons, “Inheriting the Grade.”
25 Mary Mann, "'Indian Villages': The Story Behind a Map,” last modified April 30, 2020, https://www.bklynlibrary.org/blog/2020/04/30/indian-villages-story
from an Italian puzzle magazine turned upright to resemble the arch in Brooklyn’s Grand Army Plaza and Washington Square Park.

In *THAT LIMBLESS SIGN*, I expanded the series using the redline map of Louisville to make several oil paintings. Each painting uses house paint to size the canvas or panel. The source of the house paint comes from custom-made tints mixed for customers who return them to the hardware stores of origin because they didn’t like the paint result. The first in the series has a white house paint base and is focused on the Portland neighborhood where the University of Louisville’s Hite Art Institute MFA Building is located. I also used maps of the city made in the late 19th century to recreate the sense of a grid and the past contours of the Ohio River.

The next painting features a green house paint base and turns the composition into a vertical landscape at 48 x 60 inches. It repeats two shapes derived from digital photographs taken in Louisville. The first is a wrought-iron bench found in the Old Louisville neighborhood, and the second is half-dead tree growing on 15th Street near Market Street. Women’s disembodied legs rest on a pale green bench in one corner of the canvas while another pair of legs forms a diamond (not quite a grove) with the trees in the right-hand side of the composition. A large, unfinished grid section of the Louisville redline map is turned on its side to mimic a brick warehouse similar to those in the industrial area of the Portland neighborhood. The upper right corner of the canvas incorporates transparent circles into a heavy cloud full of industrial pollution about to burst forth with rain.

The third painting in the series uses a warm-toned blue on a wooden panel, again taking redline map sections, and turning them from an aerial perspective and
transforming them into buildings. In the foreground, I used the traditional red (or Fourth Grade) from the Louisville maps to create a horizontal landscape with very rough brushstrokes. On the right-hand side of the painting, one seemingly organic shape appears to advance upon the scene: a white phantom resembling the shape of Cherokee Park.

Frederick Law Olmsted designed Cherokee Park; he also designed New York’s Central Park and Brooklyn’s Prospect Park.26 The inclusion of Cherokee Park reimposition of “Cherokee” in the state of Kentucky where Native people were removed from the land.

The final painting in the series, Under All is the Land (Series 4), also the largest, measures 53.3 x 83 inches, and is composed on a cold, gray house paint base. It expresses an inside/outside combination with a black chandelier hanging from an unseen ceiling not unlike the chandeliers displayed in the tall naves and apses of Gothic cathedrals. A fully-formed credenza sits near the bottom of the painting while its faint mirror image (or soul) ascends to the afterlife. Once again, a section of the Louisville redline map creates a freestanding edifice that mockingly overlaps the painted border of an unidentified Reservation.

The series is ongoing and will continue with the title, Under All is the Land. It comes from the first line of the preamble to the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice of the National Association of Realtors (NAR), and it is significant that the NAR worked hand-in-hand with the HOLC to cause lasting harm to society on the basis of racial discrimination.27 The series of paintings is a likewise coded vision of the traceable past layered with the dim possibilities of an alternative future.

27 “Preamble to the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice of the National Association of Realtors®,” Governing Documents Code of Ethics, National Association of Realtors, last modified January 1, 2024,
CHAPTER III
WHEN IT WAS ALIVE

I created my first GIF in 2021 with the intention of making a drawing that remained in a state of perpetual motion. It was not the idea of a thing making itself, but the notion that the drawing could remain forever in a restless state as if it were an immortal organism. Orlando White writes about the letter “i” in his poem, Ats’íists’iín, “When it was alive it had a ribcage[.]”28 The word ats’íists’iín in the Diné language is the equivalent to “skeleton.” In writing about a single letterform in English, he not only bestows it with the physical characteristic of a living being (it had a ribcage), and he also makes an unmistakable correlation to the first-person “I.”

In upstate New York, I completed 25 drawings using the established process of scanning my drawing progress to generate frames for an animated GIF. I traveled to the Woodstock Byrdcliffe Guild, formerly a utopian artist colony founded in 1902 by Ralph Whitehead and his wife Jane Byrd McCall, Bolton Brown, and Hervey White to research the remaining collection of Arts and Crafts furniture produced there. Each piece of furniture was handmade at the colony according to the precepts of the Arts and Crafts


28 White, Bone Light, 22.
movement in alignment with John Ruskin and William Morris.\textsuperscript{29} I wanted to use these handmade pieces of furniture that were completely specific to the place where they were conceived and fabricated. Researcher Ellen Denker describes the furniture that came out of Byrdcliffe as embodying very principled ideals.

Byrdcliffe furniture measured up to the prevailing Arts and Crafts standard in that it was made at a community of artisans who in many ways attempted to live the ‘simple life,’ which was to be enhanced by art and appreciation of beauty. It was expected that the use of such furniture would improve the quality of life whether or not its owner professed an Arts and Crafts philosophy. Whitehead was not an entrepreneur like Elbert Hubbard or Gustav Stickley, so he had furniture made at his colony because it was part of his design for living and not because he intended to profit from the project.\textsuperscript{30}

I selected many furniture pieces (extending in some cases to sinks and bathtubs) from those remaining in situ at Jane Byrd McCall and Ralph Whitehead’s chalet-style manor house, \textit{White Pines}. I photographed the most striking furnishings with the intent to use them in my drawings, constructing a 5 x 5-inch square grid of 25. I used mostly a combination of origami paper and Faber-Castell ink for the drawings.

The completed GIFs represent oral language as it exists among extant Native American tribes. For the \textit{THAT LIMBLESS SIGN} installation, I have embedded eight screens into a finished wall in a grid like configuration. There are nine squares in the wall, but the 9\textsuperscript{th} square, bottom row on the left, is an opening through the wall. The viewer is meant to peek through the wall and take notice of a small wooden red chair hidden behind a tiny paper curtain fashioned from cream-colored dress pattern paper.

This is a body covered by a body (the clothing) accompanied by spoken Shoshone

\textsuperscript{30} Denker, “Byrdcliffe Furniture,” 89.
language emitting from a motion-sensitive speaker installed on the top of the wall. As soon as the viewer approaches the wall, a woman’s voice begins speaking in Shoshone without any translation or promise of one. It’s unclear whether the speaker is intending to converse with the viewer about the art or if the words are intended to convey a separate narrative.

Mounted on the other side of the wall are eight finished drawings arranged in a grid to echo the grid of screens on the “live” side of the wall. Here, the drawings are meant to display language captured in written form, a “dead” format wherein the language is expected to deteriorate in time with fixed meanings and ill-informed translations. One specific expression in Shoshone encapsulates this impending deterioration of meaning; the epithet for a person who “doesn’t listen” is often translated for English speaker as “no ears.” This is an extreme case where having no physical capacity to hear is very different from a person who selectively chooses to ignore or heed commands. The poor translation, if taken at full face value, risks the important nuances and is probably already committed to a vocabulary book somewhere for Shoshone language learners. I posit that the loss of language is a form of death, and the idea provides a bleak connotation to the phrase “when it was alive.”
CHAPTER IV
PICTURE PLANE AS RECLAIMED SPACE

Wassily Kandinsky described his idea of picture plane in this book in 1926, *Point and Line to Plane: A Contribution to the Analysis of Pictorial Elements*, as being the “material plane which is called upon to accommodate the content of the work of art.” In my paintings, drawings, and prints, I seek to exercise a reclamation of space in a way that I cannot reclaim land or territories as a Native American person in this country. “A 1905 Congressional act opened nearly 1 million acres of Wind River [Indian R]eservation lands in central Wyoming for non-Indian homesteaders, miners and new towns. Later acts restored much of that area as part of the reservation, but 171,000 acres, including [the town of] Riverton, were never officially returned to the tribes.” Besides contradicting the original treaty agreements with regard to the Eastern Shoshone tribe by shrinking the size and location of Shoshone lands, this fact also affects federal laws such as the Major Crimes Act (U.S. Statutes at Large, 23:385) which addresses issues of jurisdiction on tribal land. By taking the land and not returning it to the tribe, this creates another square in the checkerboard of land ownership that makes up the reservation. Other “squares”

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31 Wassily Kandinsky, Kenneth Clement Lindsay, and Peter Vergo, “Point and Line to Plane,” in *Kandinsky Complete Writings on Art*, ed. by Kenneth Clement Lindsay and Peter Vergo of The Documents of Twentieth Century Art (Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall, 1982), 637.
include the Shoshone National Forest in the Wind River Mountains that promise rugged hiking trails and camping adventures primarily for non-Native tourists.

I use the space afforded by the picture plane to reclaim art space as Native space. I view the negative space left in my two-dimensional artworks as full of active energy and consciousness rather than merely devoid of marks and matter. Space, in Native thought, can also communicate and be alive, according to Orlando White and Gerald Vizenor. White writes, “With space, one can shape sound and language to create a poetic field. And with that, one may express a silence.”\(^{33}\) Vizenor expresses his idea of being present in time and space, “For instance, survivance, in the sense of Native survivance, is more than survival, more than endurance or mere response; the stories of survivance are an active presence.”\(^{34}\)

*Interlocking/Intertribal* is a limited series of drawings and prints derived from my ongoing interest in using collage as a means to identify and illuminate the displacement of Native American people in the United States. For my work, the vibrant colors of the paper are reminiscent of my family’s application of manufactured synthetic materials in making traditional powwow regalia. The predictable commentary from non-native viewers of clothing and other cultural artifacts usually supposes that our incorporation of mass-produced ribbon and fabric constitutes a loss of culture or a move toward assimilation. To me, it represents innovation and ingenuity. The name intertribal comes from the pan-Indian name for a powwow dance in which anyone of any dance style can join. Men, women, children, young, old, spectators not wearing regalia can participate. The only requirement is for the dancers to follow the beat of the drum.

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\(^{33}\) White, “Functional White.”

\(^{34}\) Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*, 15.
I leave generous amounts of space in the Interlocking/Intertribal series to allow for silence and rest. The space also resonates with other Native American artwork such as Fred Kabotie’s, Hopi, *Mountain Sheep Dance*, (n.d.) where the five figures dressed in traditional Hopi clothing encircle a single fir tree, surrounded by a seemingly infinite nothingness. Like Kabotie, I do not need to turn my work into a supreme illustration with details of every feature in the background. Yet it is understood that Kabotie’s Hopi women are not falling through space. Rather, his space, like mine, provides a pathway for the work to change its meaning upon successive viewings as the viewer can imagine the possibilities of different scenarios taking place in the emptiness. This is not “decolonizing” the space since I understand the concept to be another folly not unlike that of “land acknowledgments,” trendy and hollow.

In Interlocking/Intertribal, an elk-tooth dress like the one I used to own in my childhood turns the teeth into gold nuggets dripping from the red yoke. A man wearing a suit made from dress-pattern paper with the trouser cuffs rolled up leans with insolence upon a side table based on a Shaker design and cut from a photocopy of a wooden floor. The man has rolled up his trouser cuffs to reveal that he is wearing “beaded” moccasins made from Japanese Chiyogami paper. The diptych itself does not force a specific narrative since there are large areas of blank Rives BFK paper surrounding the figures; the figures have their own autonomy to create their own destinies on the page.

Orlando White consciously uses the functional white of the page to create a Native space. Likewise, on the picture plane of the canvas (or the flat surface of the

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36 White, “Functional White.”
works on paper), I am creating a space for Native language and bodies to exist with the
acknowledgement of the temporality and precariousness of our presence. Without the
Native body, culture will no longer exist. One day, there will be no need for the language
to continue without the Native mind to respect and understand it.
CHAPTER V
WHEN I WAS A CHARGING HORSE

In the foreword to the book, *American Indian Beadwork*, authors W. Ben Hunt and J.F. Burshears acknowledge the practice of creating objects using glass trade beads as having captured the quintessential aura of summer camp handicrafts. “The romance and beauty of the costumes of the American Indian have so endeared them to children and adults alike all over the world, that it is natural for every child to want to make something Indian.”

Hunt and Burshears are old Boy Scouts “playing Indian,” complete with black and white photographs of themselves dressed head-to-toe in fully beaded chief regalia (including moccasins, armbands, and a warbonnet) in the book’s endpapers. They are not actually Native American, but one would be hard-pressed to tell based on the photographs alone. Their names offer much insight since family names can reveal tribal membership and clan associations for Native people.

Philip J. Deloria (Yankton Sioux) described the origins of this hobbyist approach to Native culture in his influential book, *Playing Indian*.

In the Cold War United States, the more direct kind of Indian play addressed anxieties focused on a perceived lack of personal identity. As we have seen, playing Indian has been central to efforts to imagine and materialize distinctive American identities. Indianness helped enable the American Revolution, and it aided in solidifying and expressing new national ideals. At the turn of the twentieth century, Indian play helped preserve a sense of frontier toughness,

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communal warmth, and connection to the continent often figured around the idea of the authentic.

*Miscellaneous Reduced Designs* denies that convenience of a hobbyist narrative by poking fun at its earnest approach to mimicking Native culture.

I have planned an extensive installation project called *Miscellaneous Reduced Designs*, titled after Plate 7 in Section 3 of *American Indian Beadwork*. 38 I have chosen to recreate a loom beadwork piece on a large scale, in a move akin to Claes Oldenburg’s *Spoonbridge and Cherry*, 1985. This injects an element of humor into the thesis exhibition which otherwise deals with serious matters of signs and eschatology. I wanted to reference childhood memories of my mother’s beading practice since she always made everything by hand for the entire family’s powwow regalia. It was something she learned from her family, and I remember seeing an old cut-bead wallet that she kept locked away. It was absolutely perfect in both design and execution. High quality beadwork requires the beadworker to select uniform beads and sew them onto a prepared flat object with attention and precision. One such example of poorly constructed beadwork is the well-known and celebrated pair of beaded boots made by Jamie Okuma, Luiseno, Shoshone-Bannock, Wailaki, and Okinawan. 39

Loom beadwork is created with a set of strings like those used to make textiles but where the weft is made up of a string of beads. This makes the finished beadwork entirely flexible, and so it is used primarily for items like headbands and brows for warbonnets. People who are less skilled at flat beadwork will often create a loom design

38 Hunt and Burshears, *Beadwork*, 49.
and then glue it to an object such as a barrette or a bracelet mount. The ease of constructing loom beadwork makes it the perfect medium for dabblers and summer campers.

*Miscellaneous Reduced Designs* consists of 544 individual beads made from paraffin wax and held together with white cotton twine. Each bead is approximately 4 inches in diameter. Its title suggests an anonymity of the maker as it lacks a label of tribal origin unlike the remaining color plates in which Hunt and Burshears painstakingly list the names of the tribes of origin. *Miscellaneous* has a sense of monumentality to it with the scaled-up presence of the source material, seed beads.

The also title opens up the topic of naming. Perry G. Horse discusses the importance of ethnic nomenclature in referring to Native Americans. “…we became accustomed to identifying with the ethnic descriptor American Indian. As a generic descriptor, it was convenient and readily recognizable. All the major organizations that dealt with Indian issues carried that designation. The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs is one example.” He does not endorse one label for Native people as being universal or appropriate for all situations. As a Native American, my name has been a sensitive subject from the time that I started school.

I grew up on the Wind River Indian Reservation which is not in North Dakota where my father was born. The surname “Charging” is very common and accepted on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation. It does not literally mean charging like the verb; however, over the years I have been mistaken for every other type of “Charging” name. To list a few among other tribes, there are: Charging Eagle, Charging Crow, Charging

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40 Horse, “Native American Identity,” 62.
Bull. The act of carelessly renaming me has a trace of disrespect because my name serves to remind me of who I am based on my father’s tribe.

In 2023, I was invited to collaborate on a “Broadside” for Broadsided Press which is a 501(c)(3) organization that publishes original literature and artwork. A “Broadside” includes writing and a corresponding visual response. I was paired with poet Alica Mteuzi, Black, Caddo, Cheyenne and Arapaho, who wrote Bambi is Native. When I received the finished proof prior to publication of the entire folio, Broadside listed my name in several places as “Donna Charging Horse.” This was not the name I wrote on the signed publication contract and used in email correspondence sent throughout the development process. I also clearly labeled the submitted artwork with my name. I interpreted this careless mistake as evidence that Native people are too often not treated with consideration and respect in society. It’s always easier to make a joke about a group of people who are invisible in this country and fun to mock. This dynamic reflects the actions of Hunt and Burshears albeit on a whole different level. If “Charging” reminds me of where I come from, then Miscellaneous Reduced Designs is a monument to Native naming challenges in this country.
CONCLUSION

Gerald Vizenor concludes his essay on survivance with a reflection on the expectations of the marketplace and field of literature which hungers for a specific type of Native American story, and he inserts several examples in Native American contemporary literature that resist these expectations. “The narratives in these selections create an active sense of presence, a visionary motion of liberty, not an ethnic absence, and never an unseemly romantic levy of separatism, retreat, expiration or the simulations of heroic tragedy.” In THAT LIMBLESS SIGN, I seek to identify my own understanding of Native culture and presence, especially with those stories that reflect my parents’ experiences and respective tribal histories. It is through language that we express our vibrance and liveliness; it is the loss of language that truly threatens our people. I will continue to pursue of the essence of a living culture through my artwork, not seek to reconstitute the dead.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX: LIST OF FIGURES FROM THAT LIMBLESS SIGN

Under All is the Land (Series 2)
oil on canvas, 2022

THAT LIMBLESS SIGN
GIF, 2024

Interlocking/Intertribal (detail view)
origami, ink on Rives BFK, 2024

Miscellaneous Reduced Designs (installation view of 3D Printed Prototype), 2024
CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME: Donna R. Charging

ADDRESS: 1800 S. 2nd Street, Apt. 3
Louisville, KY 40208

DOB: September 30, 1981

EDUCATION:

2024 University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art and Design, graduation date Spring 2024
2004 – 2006 Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island Department of Teaching + Learning in Art + Design Education
2004 Malcolm X College, Chicago, Illinois
2004 University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Arts, with Distinction
2001 Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa

AWARDS:

2024 Geraldine D. Hamlet Scholarship, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky
2022 - 2024 Graduate Teaching Assistantship, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky
2023 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, Woodstock Byrdcliffe Guild, Woodstock, New York
TEAM Mentored Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities Grant, with Undergraduate Rebekah Flowers, “Everrrything…Social Justice and Art Making Project” at Grace M. James Academy of Excellence, University of Louisville, Kentucky
2022 Sarah Stanley Gordon Edwards and Archibald Cason Edwards Fellowship, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Amherst, Virginia
2009 Nomination, Louis Comfort Tiffany Biennial Award, Nominated by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith
2005 Graduate Division Fellowship, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island
2004 President’s Scholar, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island
Dean’s Discretionary Scholarship, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island
2003  Roin Family Award for Studio Art, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
2002  Professor John E. Walley Memorial Scholarship, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
2000  Presidential Scholar, Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS:

2024  Silence in a Moment is Imagination Selected Work by: Donna R. Charging, Capacity Contemporary Exchange, Louisville, Kentucky
25th International Open, Woman Made Gallery, Chicago, Illinois
2023  Beyond the Elements, Gallery at the MFA Building, Louisville, Kentucky
BELONGING: Community Work Spring 2023, Gallery at the MFA Building, Louisville, Kentucky
In Plain Sight: Sites of Memory and Rituals, Gallery at the MFA Building, Louisville, Kentucky
2022  Scorpio Assemblage, Darby Forever Gallery at Surface Noise, Louisville, Kentucky
Open Studio Louisville Juried Exhibition, Cressman Center for Visual Arts, Louisville Visual Art, Louisville, Kentucky
SPACES, Gallery at the MFA Building, Hite Art Institute Portland Studios, Louisville, Kentucky
2021  Embodiment Terrain, Carrie Able Gallery, Brooklyn, New York
Teacher | Student, Hearst Center for the Arts, Cedar Rapids, Iowa
2017  13th Annual Small Works Show, 440 Gallery, Brooklyn, New York
2016  Art3 mentor | faculty | mentoree, The Anderson Gallery at Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa
TYPECAST, Hillyer Art Space, Washington, D.C.
2012  Convergences, New York Art Residency & Studios Foundation Gallery, Brooklyn, New York
New York Abstractions, Fluxx Gallery, Des Moines, Iowa
2011  Single Fare: A Show of Small Works, Sloan Fine Art, New York, New York
2008  3 li’l NDNS, A Gathering of the Tribes Gallery, New York, New York
Artistic Expression: Modern Perspectives of a Modern People, JNB Center, Providence, Rhode Island
2004  postindians: BFA Thesis Exhibition, Gallery 400, University of Illinois at Chicago

ARTIST RESIDENCIES:

2024  School of Visual Arts, New York, New York, Artist Residency Program, Fine Arts: Painting and Mixed Media
2023 Woodstock Byrdcliffe Guild, Woodstock, New York Communal Artist Residency Program, Summer
2022 Virginia Center for the Creative Arts (VCCA), Amherst, Virginia, Fellow, June
2021 Carrie Able Gallery, Brooklyn, New York Artist-In-Residence Program, Fall
2019 Julio Valdez Project Space, New York, New York Artist-in-Residence Program, Printmaking

TEACHING & WORK EXPERIENCE:

2022 – 2024 University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky
Graduate Teaching Assistant, Foundation Drawing and Foundation 2D Design
2023 Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky
Guest Instructor December Adult Workshop: Combination Station
2023 Louisville Maker Faire 2023, Louisville, Kentucky, Maker, “Making Collage Happen”
Anne Braden Institute for Social Justice Research, University of Louisville, Intern, Louisville, Kentucky
Louisville Maker Faire 2023, Louisville, Kentucky, Maker, “Making Collage Happen”
Flower Shop Collective, Brooklyn, Kentucky, Member Artist

2014-2020 Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA), New York, New York, Volunteer, Education Program
Contracted Workshop Educator for “Dabble in Drawing” and Continuing Education Instructor

2010 – 2023 New York Cares, New York, New York, Volunteer/Team Leader
2011 – 2012 New York Art Residency & Studios Foundation (NARS), Brooklyn, New York, Volunteer
2011 New York Photo Festival, DUMBO, Brooklyn, New York, Volunteer
2010 DUMBO Arts Festival, Brooklyn, New York, Volunteer
2006 – 2007 Providence Children’s Museum, Providence, Rhode Island, Volunteer
2005 – 2006 Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island, Instructor, Hope High School Portfolio Studio
2005 Hope High School, Providence, Rhode Island, Student Teacher, Art I, Art II, and Art III
2004 Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island, Teaching Assistant, Department of Art + Design