

Art Spotlight

“WE’RE HERE. WE’RE STRONG.”

An Interview with noted Northern Arapaho artist Robert Martinez

Bishop Paul-Gordon Chandler had the opportunity to interview the highly acclaimed Northern Arapaho artist Robert Martinez, who is based on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, and who is the Artistic Curator of our upcoming GROUNDED exhibition.



Robert Martinez holding *Hinen Man*, Airbrushed Acrylic & Oil on Panel w/raised accent

Robert Martinez is a celebrated Northern Arapaho artist who was born in Wyoming on the Wind River Reservation. A member of the Northern Arapaho tribe, he attended the Rocky Mountain College of Art & Design (RMCAD) and graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts specializing in Painting & Drawing and minoring in sculpture. At the age of 19, he became the youngest Native American to graduate from RMCAD at that time. His native heritage remains a constant inspiration and source of ideas for his art. The past and present resonate strongly in his home state of Wyoming and those historical and contemporary chords echo throughout his pieces.



Much of Robert's current work uses the historical imagery, myths and stories of both the West and Arapaho Culture combined with modern themes to create images that make a statement on the issues of today. Using intense vibrant color and contrasting shades of light and dark, he paints and draws striking forms that confront and engage the viewer.

His paintings and drawings have been shown across the USA and have garnered noted acclaim. His work is included in the permanent collections of the Red Cloud Heritage Museum, The Brinton Museum, The Plains Indian Museum at the Cody Center of the West, and the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. A strong supporter of Education and of the Arts, Robert is the Founder of the Creative Indigenous Collective and Northern Arapaho Artists Society, and is committed to helping and mentoring emerging artists on his reservation in Wyoming and the western region.

When did you start creating art and know it would become your life's calling?

Martinez: I've been creating for as long as I can remember. My mother used to tell me that I'd get in trouble for drawing on walls with my crayons as a toddler; pencil, pen, marker... whatever was handy. I would just let the world go, and draw. It's been something that I enjoy and seemed to come very naturally for me.



Sometime in my early teens someone (and I can never remember who) said to me, "God gives us all gifts, and if we don't use them, it's a kind of sin." That always stuck with me so I was never shy about creating. My first high school art teacher recognized my talent and moved me to an upper-level art class my freshman year. He passed away a year later and a younger teacher came into that position. He also recognized my talent, challenged me a little more and actually applied for art scholarships on my behalf. I took as many art classes as I could, and my favorite teacher taught both art and pottery. Without them, I would never have gone to art school.

It really wasn't until I was awarded a scholarship that I thought about a creative future. It was when I actually made the decision to go to Rocky Mountain College of Art & Design in Denver, Colorado that I put a lot of time and effort into becoming an artist.

What formative influences have shaped your life as an artist?

Martinez: Looking back on it, my first influencers were my family. My mother Irene Lawson was a very talented beadwork artist, though she wouldn't call herself that. The elder women on my reservation have and continue to tell me how good her beadwork is. Her mother sewed and made quilts, my paternal grandmother painted, my uncles could draw and shape wood. They all allowed me to explore my creativity. My high school teachers Tino Navarro, Brenden Weaver and Nancy Gray-Sinner were my first real "art" influencers. They taught me many of the basics and allowed me to experiment.



In art school, the awesome techniques and characters of Don Seastrum, Jim Valone, and Clark Richert were huge. They modeled how great your art could be when you're a real professional and also how you can pass on that knowledge.

Stylistically, I've always enjoyed the art giants of the Renaissance; Michelangelo is my favorite. The works of Edgar Degas and Diego Velazquez are very impressive to me, and Rembrandt...those guys knew how to paint (and sculpt!). The fun and mythological works of pin-up artists Alberto Vargas, Olivia and the works of Frank Frazzetta and Boris Vallejo were major influences, especially in my early work.

Your work is very unique. Can you share with us about your use of vibrant colors and the composition in your work?

Martinez: For many non-indigenous viewers, their lasting view of Native people are of black and white or sepia toned historical photographs. Because of that, they think of us as a dead culture, people from the past who are no longer here and have no place in modern society.

To combat that mentality and that imagery, I paint in extremely vibrant "alive" colors to confront the viewer and remind them that "We're Here, We're Strong."

I also tend to make my figures look directly back at the viewer, forcing that confrontation of stereotypes and expectation.



You are a Founding Member of the Creative Indigenous Collective and the Northern Arapaho Artists Society. Can you tell us a little about them?

Martinez: I helped co-found the Northern Arapaho Artists Society (NAAS) in 2012 with Eugene Ridgebear Jr, Bruce Cook and Ron Howard. We all knew each other and lamented that there were no venues for Arapaho artists to exhibit and sell their work locally. So, we created the society and through our individual networks we've been able to find one or two local and regional venues and exhibits for Arapaho artists each year since our inception. We recently held a show at the Museum of Boulder in Colorado.

The Creative Indigenous Collective (CIC) takes a similar approach; however, our focus is finding national or international exhibits to showcase Contemporary Art from Northern Plains Artists. Ben Pease, John Pepion, Lauren Monroe, Louis & Gina Still Smoking and Holly Young are my co-founders. To date we have had numerous ground-breaking exhibits in Montana, and Wyoming.

In 2017, we were the first Contemporary Native Artists to show (ever!) in the Wyoming State Museum since its opening in 1896. In 2018, we were the first group of contemporary native artists to exhibit at the Plains Indian Museum at the Bill Cody Center of the West.



What do you feel Native Americans can offer our world today from the wisdom of your ancestors?

Martinez: I think the most obvious wisdom would be to respect Mother Nature and the ecosystems of the earth. It seems like very basic common sense, but humanity has such a hard time putting it into actual practice. We often forget (or just plain ignore) all the little things we can do.

I also believe there's a big lesson in how my ancestors treated people. Non-tribal people were judged by their actions and intent. Very often different people were accepted as part of the family despite their skin color or "group" they were affiliated with. There are many stories of non-indigenous people becoming part of a tribe. I think it is this potential for inclusion rather than exclusion, that makes indigenous wisdom special.

Do you think there is enough awareness in the world about our connection to the earth and the importance of that connection?

Martinez: I think there's a general awareness that it is important, however I'm not sure there's enough practical knowledge of how much a "regular" person can do to both help and enjoy their connection to the earth. There's a ton of "Save This" or "This is will affect the future," but in my opinion not enough of "Go take a walk outside. If you see some trash, just pick up a couple pieces and throw it in a trashcan."

Modern life moves so fast with so many technological tools that our connection to the planet gets lost or becomes so tenuous that we forget how good it feels to get away from all our screens... then when we do, we have to post about it to others so they know (and can envy) how "connected" we are to nature. Or how #blessed we are to be able to enjoy the beach, camping, a sunset etc...

Can you share with us why you are excited about curating and participating in GROUNDED?



Martinez: In my work with the NAAS, the CIC, and my advocating for contemporary indigenous artists, I love being able to bring new original Indigenous Artwork to people who have never seen it. There is always a pleasant and (usually) positive reaction. Most first-time viewers have a stereotypical expectation of what "Native Art" is until they realize what it can be.

Too often, because we deal with cultural and societal themes that are important to us, native artists are often pigeonholed into a niche genre and as a result are often overlooked by more "mainstream" exhibit venues.

Our images and stories have for the most part been used and told by non-natives; it is well past time for us to tell our own stories from our perspectives.

Can you share with us what you are currently working on?

Martinez: I'm continually working on my usual style of painting and drawing in the ledger art tradition, and I'm always trying to hone my skill and play with materials in a new way. My favorite piece is always the one I'm still working on.

I also minored in sculpture, but haven't found enough time to do some projects I've had in mind. However, I'm currently flexing my 3D muscles to experiment with some traditional types of craft adornment and cast sculpture.