

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

Action/Abstraction Redefined: Modern Native Art, 1940s–1970s

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

THIS STORY MIGHT BE FAMILIAR: In 1941 Jackson Pollock stepped into the Museum of Modern Art to see Charley Turquoise (Diné, ca. 1868–1960) and Dinay Chilli Bitsoey (Diné, ca. 1913–unknown)¹ creating a sandpainting on the gallery floor. After several subsequent visits, Pollock placed *his* canvas on the floor, dripped paint from above, and became the face of Abstract Expressionism, hailed by critics as American rather than European. Pollock was not alone: Barnett Newman looked to Northwest Coast art as source material for a modernism that could transcend social difference. Mark Rothko, interested in Native religions, attended Hopi and Pueblo dances before developing his distinctive abstract composition. Histories of Native art twist around the canon of modern abstraction; yet many Native artists who actively participated in the movement—and expanded upon it—have only recently been acknowledged by mainstream art institutions.

Action/Abstraction Redefined, at the Saint Louis Art Museum (SLAM) through September 3, 2023, was the first major traveling exhibition to explore the complex history of mid-20th-century Native abstraction. “The exhibition expands the narratives of abstract studio art in the US in the decades following WWII,” Alexander Brier Marr, associate curator of Native American art, stated. “It demonstrates how Indigenous artists participated in national movements and styles by bringing their own artistic heritage to bear on vocabularies of abstraction.” Curated by Manuela Well-Off-Man, Tatiana Lomahaftewa-Singer (Hopi/Choctaw), and Lara M. Evans (Cherokee Nation), the show was



ABOVE Installation view, *Action/Abstraction Redefined*. Image courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

originally installed at the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts in Santa Fe and will travel until May 2024.

The exhibition features nearly 100 works produced by Native abstractionists between the late 1930s through the 1970s, a period often neglected by scholars and museums that nevertheless witnessed a flourish of nonfigurative work. Artists drew on Indigenous knowledge(s) and historical works from their communities and engaged in critical debates in places like New York. The exhibition also builds on a wave of recent scholarship that addresses histories of abstraction outside an overstudied Western canon. A riff on *Action/Abstraction*, a 2008 exhibition about Pollock and Willem de Kooning’s New York School, *Action/Abstraction Redefined* positions itself not simply as an effort at inclusion into a predefined canon. It presents Native abstraction as its own fully formed discourse developed in parallel with—rather than in reaction to—other abstract artistic movements.

Central to this history is the opening of the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in 1962. The experimental pedagogy of cofounder Lloyd Kiva New (Cherokee Nation, 1916–2002) emphasized the combination of material experimentation grounded in students’

Indigenous heritage and knowledge of global arts. The curriculum developed individual expression while it encouraged cultural pride. *Action/Abstraction Redefined* celebrates several generations of IAIA’s faculty and students, but its largely chronological story begins much earlier. “Indigenous abstraction is a longstanding practice in North America that predates the establishment of IAIA by thousands of years,” Marr pointed out. And while the exhibition focuses on studio painting rather than historical works, it begins in the 1940s and ’50s prior to IAIA. Greeted by *Edwin C. Hill*, a triptych by Mary Sully (Yankton Dakota, 1896–1963), a viewer is immediately divested of the expectation that definitions of *abstraction* will be simple or straightforward. Sully defied categorization. Her “personality prints,” as she called them, drew from inspirations as diverse as historical events, comic books, archetypes, and celebrities, and were equally indebted to parfleche and pop culture. Across the gallery we see the work of George Morrison (Grand Portage Ojibwe, 1919–2000), *White Environ IV*. Morrison, active in the New York School, denied any influence of his Native identity on his paintings, at least initially. “The phenomenon of paint was what the painting was really about,” he’s quoted as

1. Their names might also be spelled Charlie Turquoise and Denet Chilli Bitsui. —Ed.

saying on the wall label. Meanwhile, other artists in the gallery such as Joe Hilario Herrera (Cochiti, 1921–2001) painted in an abstract language inseparable from ancient Pueblo petroglyphs.

Native abstraction is already presented as far more heterogeneous than mainstream critical narratives of abstraction would suggest: that freed from the act of representing subjects in space, painting became a “pure” examination of the inherent properties of the medium itself [2], as Morrison alluded to. To the contrary, overlaps between painting and other artistic media, as the second gallery

suggests, permeate Native abstraction. *Untitled (Squares)* and *Indian Beadwork*, two paintings by New, reference textiles. *Squares*, a patch-worked grid of twelve small canvases, seems to reference quilt squares or weaving. In *Indian Beadwork*, the canvas protrudes into three dimensions through tufted ridges, secured with metal studs. Set against flowing bolts of fabric printed by New and IAIA students, these paintings almost beg for their canvases to be recognized as textile, not just an invisible support for paint.

In the exhibition’s third gallery, this focused meditation on textile seems to

unfurl. Walls bloom with the reds and blues of *New Mexico*, a series by Fritz Scholder (Luiseño, 1937–2005), and Pueblo-inspired architectural paintings by Neil Parsons (Piikani). Paintings such as the hard-edged *Indian Blanket* by Alfred Young Man (Chippewa Cree) that were inspired by research into anthropological photographs of blankets and the artist’s firsthand observations of textiles on his reservation, epitomize how artists expanded the formal language of abstraction with historically and culturally specific references.³ Against a wall of windows rest sculptures by Otellie Loloma (Hopi, 1921–1993), Bertha Lujan (Taos), and other first-generation IAIA affiliates. A wooden sculpture by Doug Hyde (Nez Perce, tribally designated artisan), featuring nails in the style of Kongo fetishes, attests to IAIA’s emphasis on global studies and his jewelry training with Charles Loloma (Hopi, 1921–1991). Together, an image of a pan-medium, pan-Indigenous education materialized; through difference, relation, conversation, and solidarity, artistic innovation emerged.

The gallery and works therein also quietly prod at a question that haunts historians of abstraction: namely, whether *abstraction* is even an appropriate or useful term. Whereas sculptures like *Construction* by John Cruz Romero (Taos) resemble Bauhaus studies of “pure” space and material, the undulating wooden *Totem* by Bill Prokopiou (Unanga, 1944–1999) integrates formline carvings of animals. Placed in the same line of sight as works like Scholder’s, a viewer questions whether the term abstraction falsely holds together strategies that share fewer commonalities than differences. In so doing, the exhibition highlights a need for more nuanced language about different histories of nonfigurative or nonobjective art. As a non-Native viewer, I also wondered whether certain works that appeared abstract *to me* carried particular meanings to people within an artist’s community; the relationship between abstraction, secrecy, and intentionally stratified levels of access remained an open question throughout the exhibition.



ABOVE Lloyd Kiva New (Cherokee Nation, 1916–2002), *Untitled (Squares)*, 1968, acrylic on canvas, 42¼ × 31½ in., collection of the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, Fe CHE-23. © Estate of Lloyd Kiva New. Image courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

2. Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).
 3. Alfred Young Man, email message to editor, August 10, 2023.

TULSA

**Protection:
Adaptation and
Resilience**

Living Arts of Tulsa

THE FIRST THING I noticed about *Protection: Adaptation and Resistance* was its immense scale—literally and figuratively.

This exhibition takes up a lot of space, not just because it has large pieces, but because it makes and leaves room for the complexities it describes and the conversations it begins.

Protection: Adaptation and Resistance is a collaborative project initiated by the nonprofit Bunnell Street Arts Center in Tuggeht (Homer, Alaska). Between the fall of 2019 and the winter of 2021 and 2022, Bunnell presented five workshops and four mentorships for Indigenous artist-mentors and Indigenous artist-learners. Many of the pieces in the exhibition grew from these workshops. An excellent online catalogue on the art center's website (bunnellarts.org) explains that the exhibition was co-curated by Asia Freeman, artistic director of Bunnell Street Arts Center, and the 52 participating Alaska Native artists.

The curatorial statement posed this question: "In times of climate crisis, pandemic, and ongoing assaults to human rights, how are Indigenous Alaska artists today strengthening self and community and guiding the next generation from surviving to thriving?" The short answer is "adaptation and resistance," expressed in the exhibition by three sections: Land and Culture Protectors, Activists for Justice and Sovereignty, and Resilient Futures. Moving through the sections elicits emotions ranging from rage to mourning, delight to laughter—but throughout, and most distinctly, hope.

In her catalogue essay, mentor Lily Hope (Tlingit) writes, "We Alaskan Natives are born into protection and adaptation. Our lives depend on practicing them." The project began just months before the COVID-19 pandemic. All the mentors and learners had to adapt by moving online for the literal protection of themselves and their community.

The following galleries expand upon these themes through painting, sculpture, and print. A focus gallery devoted to five students prompts viewers to identify visual influences between their works and their teachers' in previous galleries. The bold, vivid colors of turpentine-splattered paintings by Earl Biss (Apsáalooke, 1947–1998) and crisp, geometric works based on parfleche by Redstar Price (Apsáalooke), while stylistically distinct, seem to me to recall the color combinations of Scholder's works in the previous gallery. Likewise, labels and works attest to the mentorship of Otellie Loloma on Peter B. Jones (Onondaga). The next gallery, organized by the distinction between gestural abstraction on one side and hard-edge painting on the other, turns to techniques, while a third focuses on works on paper. A fourth highlights student exhibitions throughout the 1960s.

Together these galleries emphasize how students at IAIA worked between and across media. A sinuous monoprint by Christine Nofchissey McHorse (Diné, 1948–2021), trained as a potter, seems to anticipate her later sculptures, and a casein painting by Roger Tsabetsaye (Zuni) prompts consideration of what it means to flatten forms from pottery into two dimensions. Works by Michael Medicine Horse Zillioux (Akimel O'odham/Cheyenne/Pawnee, 1952–2020) and Alice Loiselle (Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe, 1949–2003) differently address the infamous drip associated with Pollock. A printed book, *Four*, demonstrates how New's curriculum extended to written and performing arts. Each of these galleries is focused and engaging; yet, I would have also appreciated a more direct thematic organization to these 1960s works. Several undercurrents that run through the exhibition—crossovers between textile and fine art, reclamations of Indigenous inspirations for New York School painters, different methods of interpreting customary materials, among others—seem to demand explicit focus. The exhibition also prompted questions about how abstract work by artists unaffiliated with IAIA differed from works by their contemporaries. As Marr explained, the SLAM installation

added several works from the 1950s and 1970s from beyond IAIA to the exhibition, a treatment that would have been fascinating for the 1960s as well. Lastly, stemming from scholarship on Black abstraction during the Civil Rights era, I was interested to learn more about how IAIA artists engaged with the American Indian Movement (AIM) and other political movements of the 1960s.

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This does not detract from the stunning celebration of the greater legacy of IAIA in the exhibition's final gallery called *The Rise of Contemporary Native Art*. In it we see familiar works anew. A series of 1970s terrain paintings by Kay WalkingStick (Cherokee Nation) is thrown into historical relief against her predecessors' abstract explorations of landscape. We now see George Morrison's *Red Totem I* and Fritz Scholder's famous *Indian Rug* series within a larger historical trajectory of each artist's experimentation and development. Even after a viewer exits the exhibition into Saint Louis Art Museum's contemporary galleries, a quick glance to the right puts them face to face with the bright wisps of *Neuf Series* (1995) by Edgar Heap of Birds (Southern Cheyenne) and the work of Dyani White Hawk (Sicangu Lakota) from 2019, *Untitled (Quiet Strength VI)*, an homage to Lakota quillwork. To a viewer leaving the exhibition, these contemporary works are likewise thrust into historical relief. As museums continue to collect and display contemporary Native art, exhibitions like *Action/Abstraction Redefined* will be crucial in recognizing historical actors who enable contemporary creation.

—Julia Silverman