



PORTLAND ART MUSEUM

CONNECTING LINES ŁOKŁET TG ŁGŁGR.Ł

Brenda Mallory and Luzene Hill
March 11–October 29, 2017

Center for Contemporary Native Art

Written by Ashley Holland

AN INTRODUCTION

Art is powerful. It has the ability to take an idea, a concept, and mold it into an object. It can become the physical embodiment of an emotion. Art may change perceptions or even cause pain, but it can also heal. The works of Luzene Hill and Brenda Mallory serve many purposes. Like the artists themselves, the installations presented here are complex, reflective, and beautiful. While art is powerful, it is the artists who must harness and manifest this power for the viewer.

Connecting Lines is a visual representation of two Cherokee women artists. It documents their struggles, fears, hopes, and successes. Each work presents concepts of survival, culture, and self-representation. The end result is an exhibition of contemporary Cherokee identity and continued connections to the past.

RECLAIMING SELF: *ENATE* AND *RECURRING CHAPTERS IN THE BOOK OF INEVITABLE OUTCOMES*

“Art is an expression. It’s an expression that comes straight from the unconscious and for that reason it can and should elicit an unconscious response from the viewer. It’s the artist’s core communicating with the viewer’s core. The response can be positive or negative, that doesn’t matter. What matters is the act of expressing, and the subsequent dialogue the expression provokes.

“I believe the act of making art, as an indigenous woman, conveys identity, survival and power. The medium is far more than a message. The medium is the identity, the survival, the power.”

—Luzene Hill

Luzene Hill creates installations that are deeply personal and heartbreakingly relatable. Sexual assault, rape, and violence are a constant threat for many Native women. Hill takes from her own experience of a violent sexual assault that occurred in 1994 while she was jogging in an Atlanta park. Her journey from that moment was one of trauma, therapy, introspection, creation, and survival. Rape is about more than a physical assault on the body. It is a violent act that strips away power from the victim. In refusing to remain powerless, Hill became and remains a survivor fully in control, and her art displays this reality.

Enate (2017) is a complex installation with an important performance component that embeds the artist, Hill, within her work. The dominant color in this work and many of her other installations—a deep red created through the use of cochineal—represents both pre-contact indigenous life and feminine power. Cochineal dye, which was extensively used in Central America prior to European contact, is a natural vibrant red developed from the carminic acid that is produced by a specific type of adult female insect in order to protect itself from predators. The resulting color denoted sacred life and death and was generally used for ceremonies. When Spanish invaders arrived, they appropriated

the dye and began using it for their own purposes, such as the coloring of Catholic Cardinal's robes.

The symbolism behind Hill's use of cochineal dye speaks visually to that reclaiming of power once lost. With the cochineal, Hill has dyed 6956 silk taffeta silhouettes that resemble ancient depictions of women, 6956 being the number of reported rapes of Native American women each year.¹ Native women are three times more likely to be raped than other women in the United States (the majority by non-Native men) and Hill conveys this through the triple layering of silhouettes.² The end result is a mantle which drapes around the artist like a cloak of protection as she walks through the gallery. But in wearing the object during the initial installation and documented performance, Hill also passes her power of survival on to the represented Native women. The shadows cast between the cochineal-dyed silhouettes, at the same time, stand in for those women who do not report their sexual assaults. They are not forgotten, though they remain unseen, but instead move forward with their sisters towards reclaiming their power.

"I think art often expresses meanings that words cannot. Words are definite, and once uttered, a thought is concretized, whereas images reach a part of the brain where the viewer becomes a participant in making meaning depending on the information they bring from their own brain. There can be multiple and deeply embedded meanings that are not always obvious."

—Brenda Mallory

The tactile and geometric work of Brenda Mallory is both installation and sculpture. It is an extension of herself, unspoken but strongly present, and the world around her. Often made up of multiple pieces able to exist on their own, the resulting work is multi-surfaced and immersive. Biological forms resembling spores, pods, and plant-like stalks are rendered through the marriage of harsh industrial metal objects and silky soft looking skins or fibers. *Recurring Chapters in the Book of Inevitable Outcomes* (2015) creates a landscape for the viewer that is foreign but inviting. For a visitor walking through the varying shapes, the urge to touch the waxed cloth is tempered by the harsh edges of the metal holding everything together.

The work Mallory creates is much like the environment that we live in, both beautiful and dangerous. It is also like life and history, full of pain and joy. She has shaped and arranged the installation to allow viewers to immerse themselves within it. Her work is a representation of her own self-realizations and personal history bared to the world, though still allowing for something to be kept protected within the imposing structures and complex spheres. The burst of colors and spore-like forms refer to fertility and future life while the dark, ruin-like towering stalks invoke loss, history, and the past. Like many

1 "Violence Against American Indian and Alaska Native Women and the Criminal Justice Response: What is Known," The National Crime Victimization Survey (1992-2005).

2 "Violence Against American Indian and Alaska Native Women and the Criminal Justice Response: What is Known," The National Crime Victimization Survey (1992-2005).

artists, Mallory holds a diversity of identities and roles: formative years in rural Oklahoma, tempered with years in Los Angeles and Portland—she is a mother, daughter, auntie, Cherokee, concerned citizen and creator.

Her work reflects this diversity of identity by grappling with the hard parts and forging them together with the soft. The mysteriousness of the installation allows for visitors to manifest their own interpretation simultaneously with Mallory's intent. The final product is a beautiful symphony of life, self, and the world.

A DIVERSE AND SHARED HISTORY: THE CHEROKEE PEOPLE

“I believe the single most important attribute of our culture, that we all have in common, is a sense of interdependence, and a sense of community — a responsibility to help one another. The fact that we still live within a value system and culture that enables us to care about one [another] and help one another is the most precious cultural attribute. The survival of a system of reciprocity among our people is absolutely amazing given everything that has happened to us...We still feel very strongly tied to our extended families, our clans, our communities and our nations. Our sense of community is a very precious attribute of our culture.”

—Wilma Mankiller³

Contemporary Cherokee people primarily belong to one of three federally recognized tribes. Both Luzene Hill and Brenda Mallory are enrolled Cherokee citizens; however, Hill is Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and Mallory is Cherokee Nation. The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians is headquartered in Cherokee, North Carolina, while the Cherokee Nation and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, the third group of Cherokee, are headquartered in Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

The ancestral lands of the original, united Cherokee is located in the southeast on what is now modern day Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. Initial migration from the ancestral lands began in the 1800s as white settlers began to encroach onto Cherokee land. These Cherokee, called the Old Settlers, moved to modern day Arkansas and Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. The discovery of gold on the Cherokee ancestral lands and increased pressure from white settlers resulted in the military's forceful removal of Cherokee people from their ancestral lands to Indian Territory between 1836 and 1839. This illegal relocation under the presidency of Andrew Jackson, also known as the Trail of Tears, was a result of the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the eventual signing of the Treaty of Echota in 1835. Further cultural disruptions happened during Oklahoma statehood as the Dawes Act forced allotment of communal tribal lands into individual ownership.

Despite the mass relocation of thousands of people from the southeast to Indian Territory, a small group of Cherokee were able to remain through actions such as hiding in the mountains despite

³ Mankiller, Wilma. “To Persevere as Tribal People,” *Native Americas* XIX 3&4 (Dec 31, 2002): 55.

being pursued by federal soldiers. These Cherokee, who would eventually become the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, were recognized as a sovereign, federally recognized tribe in the 20th century. Unique to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians is their reservation, which was formed from land purchased on behalf of the Cherokees who were able to avoid removal. Since Native peoples were not able to own land at that time, Will Thomas, a white man who had been adopted by the tribe, purchased the land for them in the mid-19th century. The land, which was put in trust for the Cherokee, became the Qualla Boundary, the only United States reservation to be bought by the tribe itself.

Each of the three federally recognized Cherokee tribes exists as an individual sovereign nation. They all have their own enrollment requirements, tribal governments, and programs. A large portion of all Cherokee live in either modern-day Oklahoma or North Carolina, but there is also a considerable diaspora throughout the United States who maintain their culture.

WEAPON OF RESISTANCE: THE CHEROKEE LANGUAGE

“Indigenous languages reflect a distinct worldview, including what its people value: their culture, cosmology, healing practices, imagination, and humor. When a language ceases to be spoken, more than sounds are lost.

“The Cherokee syllabary, a symbol of Native scholarship and achievement, remains obscure to the general public. Hundreds of indigenous languages are endangered, becoming silent. ‘Silence gives consent.’ By displaying our language we are not being silent, we are not giving consent to remaining in obscurity.”

—Luzene Hill

Cherokee is classified as a southern Iroquoian language and prior to 1820 was only spoken until Sequoyah (c. 1770–1843) created a system of writing, the Cherokee syllabary. While historically there were three dialects of Cherokee, only two are still maintained by modern speakers: Kituwah (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians) and O'tali (Oklahoma Cherokee). The bilingual exhibition title for *Connecting Lines* is written in the Kituwah dialect and the translation was provided by Laura Pinnix (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians).

The use of bilingual exhibition signage within the exhibit can be seen as a strong act of sovereignty and resistance. During policies of assimilation, Native languages were attacked and often outlawed. Native children forcefully removed from their families and placed into government-run boarding schools were forbidden to speak their language. Elders, in an effort to appease a dominant culture, were unable to pass along the language and with it many of the important cultural practices that help shape Native peoples' identities. But in the end, Native languages such as Cherokee survived and are now actively taught and relearned. Like the continuation of the peoples and culture, assimilation failed at exterminating Native language.

CHEROKEE WOMEN AND A LEGACY OF POWER

“Being a Cherokee woman prompts me to acknowledge the importance of the broken, the disconnected, the interrupted, the repaired. I value the enduring strength that comes from the need to make the most of what you have been left with. Disruption by outside forces necessitates strategies for survival. I know about Cherokee culture only in a disconnected way. I have a tight family culture, but not connections to our tribal cultures. What I do know, I have had to seek out in a deliberate, studious way. The fact that both Luzene and I have our ‘official’ tribal memberships through our fathers’ lines when our original clan system was matrilineal speaks volumes about enforced assimilations. The knowledge of my people’s history makes me attuned to the oppression and subjugations that continue in the US and worldwide as dominant powers continue to ride roughshod over the rights of indigenous peoples.”

—Brenda Mallory

Historically, the Cherokee people were a matrilineal society. Clanship into one of the seven clans came from the mother. The women acted as heads of the family and actively participated in tribal government. Women owned the homes and were even able to divorce their husbands, who would have to return to their mothers’ houses. It was through the influence of white settlers and pressure to assimilate that women began taking a more Euro-centric role. But women did not stop being powerful, and as time has passed Cherokee women are once again reclaiming their place as leaders. The election of Wilma Mankiller as principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation from 1985 to 1995 is one great example of this return to a woman-led culture, and under her the Cherokee Nation thrived. Many incredible Cherokee artists are women, and they produce work that is strong, poignant, and resilient. The work of Luzene Hill and Brenda Mallory are no exception. Through the *Connecting Lines* exhibition, they have presented the plight and fortitude of contemporary Native women through their own experiences and self-exploration.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashley Holland (Cherokee Nation) is a first-year art history doctoral student at the University of Oklahoma, Norman, and an independent curator. Her scholarly areas of interest include exploring the intersections of historical and contemporary Native art within the museum as well as the role of colonialism on artistic expression and contemporary acts of counter-response. Holland was previously the assistant curator of contemporary art (2007–2015) and the assistant curator of Native American art (2015–2016) at the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis, Indiana. Her exhibit, *Tsi Tsalagi: I Am Cherokee*, which will examine Cherokee art and artists from a historical and contemporary context, will premiere at the Eiteljorg Museum in 2020.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Brenda Mallory (Cherokee Nation) is a Portland-based artist whose work ranges from individual wall-hangings and sculptures to large-scale installations. She works with mixed media, mining natural and found materials to create multiple forms that are joined with crude hardware or mechanical devices to imply tenuous connections and aberration. She is interested in ideas of interference and disruptions in systems of nature and human cultures. A resident of Portland for many years, Mallory grew up in Oklahoma and is a member of the Cherokee Nation. She has a BA in Linguistics & English from UCLA and a BFA from Pacific Northwest College of Art. Mallory has received awards from the Oregon Arts Commission, Ford Family Foundation, Regional Arts & Culture Council, and Crow's Shadow Institute of the Arts. She was a 2015 Eiteljorg Contemporary Native Artist Fellow, was awarded a 2016 Native Arts and Cultures Foundation Fellowship in Visual Arts, and is a Mentor in the MFA Applied Craft and Design Program at PNCA+OCAC.

Luzene Hill (Eastern Band Cherokee) is a multi-media artist, best known for conceptual installations addressing the issue of violence against women. Her work reflects interdisciplinary scholarship in visual art, women's studies, Native American culture—topics that are integral to her background and personal journey. Through work informed by Pre-Contact culture Hill advocates for indigenous sovereignty—linguistic, cultural and personal sovereignty. These concepts form the basis for her installations, performance, drawings and artist's books. An enrolled member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, Hill lives and works in Atlanta, Georgia. Her awards include the 2016 Native Arts and Cultures Foundation Fellowship in Visual Arts, the 2015 Eiteljorg Museum Fellowship and 2015 First Peoples Fund Fellowship. Hill's work is featured in Susan Power's book, *Art of the Cherokee: Prehistory to the Present* and in Josh MacPhee's book, *Celebrate People's History!: The Poster Book of Resistance and Revolution*.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY NATIVE ART

The Portland Art Museum's Center for Contemporary Native Art is a dedicated gallery for presenting the work and perspectives of contemporary Native artists. Opening in October 2015, the Center hosts two rotating exhibitions each year and features a range of related programming. At the core of the Center's mission is the Museum's commitment to partner with Native artists in co-creating the exhibitions, interpretation, and programming for the space. The Center's exhibitions parallel the institution's larger curatorial vision of intentionally bridging the past and present through integrating more contemporary artwork into the Native American galleries. This approach allows visitors to take away a greater understanding of Native peoples as not only still living but as sophisticated, dynamic, and changing.

The Center for Contemporary Native Art is supported by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and generous gifts from Mr. Mark J. and Dr. Jennifer Miller, Taffy Gould, Anonymous, and Exhibition Series Funders.