

# ART UNBOUND EPISODE 31 TRANSCRIPT



## KATHLEEN ASH-MILBY

This is Art Unbound, a podcast brought to you by the Portland Art Museum and Northwest Film Center. My name is Kathleen Ash-Milby and I'm the Curator of Native American Art at the Portland Art Museum. On a recent episode of the podcast, you may have heard my interview with Diné artist, Will Wilson along with the Denver Art Museum's Andrew W. Mellon Curator of Native Arts, John P. Lukavic. On this episode, John and I are teaming up again to chat with Virgil Ortiz, a Cochiti artist who was known for his early work in ceramics, but is now widely recognized for his work in design, fashion, and video. This episode is part of a series brought to you by FRAME, the French American Museum Exchange in which the Portland and Denver Art Museums are both members. FRAME has a rich history of connecting museums in its network through exhibitions and education programs for over 20 years, and we are appreciative of their support for this podcast. Relevant links can be found in this episode's description, and at [portlandartmuseum.org/podcast](http://portlandartmuseum.org/podcast) where you will also be able to find a full episode transcript. John, thank you for joining me today.

## JOHN P LUKAVIC

Of course. I'm looking forward to this one. I had a great time in the last podcast and you know, Virgil's always fun to talk with.

## KATHLEEN ASH-MILBY

Great. So maybe we can just briefly mention how we know each other. John and I have been colleagues for a while. We've known each other primarily through the Native American Art Studies Association, known as NAASA, and have worked together most recently on a project that is looking at the legacy of the Dakota artist Oscar Howe. Okay, so I think this is a great time to introduce our other guest, Virgil Ortiz. I myself first became aware of Virgil as a student of Native American art in the 1990s, when his work was very closely aligned with Cochiti Pueblo pottery traditions, and it's been thrilling to see his work expand into his bold and daring work as a fashion designer, and more recently into deeply imaginative and futuristic narratives in clay, video, and performance. So because of this, it seemed like a natural choice for me to use an image of his work, Clay Figure from the Tourniquet Series to announce my appointment as the Curator of Native American art at the Portland Art Museum in 2019. Anyone listening to this can find an image of this work in the episode's description on our website. So I want to welcome Virgil, and thank you for speaking with us on the podcast.

## VIRGIL ORTIZ

Thank you guys. I'm happy to be here. Thanks for the opportunity to tell the story. Let's- Let's rock with it.

## KATHLEEN ASH-MILBY

All right. All right. Can we start with the Tourniquet figure? This sassy lady? Can you tell me a little bit more about her and how she fits into your work?

## VIRGIL ORTIZ

Yeah, the influence behind that is when we would go to clubs with friends and hang out and I would always get influenced and check out all the fashion that was going on, a lot of S&M, bondage, leather, rubber was all in the underground nightclub scene. So I was like, Okay, cool. Let me try to capture that in clay because that's what what historic Cochiti Pueblo pottery is about is social commentary. So that was probably- that series is probably made after like a trip to one of the metro cities or maybe Paris or something like that.

## KATHLEEN ASH-MILBY

I think the first time we met in person was when your exhibition Virgil Ortiz: La Renaissance Indigène was in New York at the National Museum of the American Indian in 2006. And this work, this figure was actually dated 2009. So it feels like it sort of grew out of a lot of the works you were doing in that show, and were touching on with these bondage subjects. There was a lot of leather and spikes and it was quite exciting. I think to see this kind of bold work but also kind of you hitting these underground themes, which you really didn't see a lot of, certainly not Native American art at the time.

## VIRGIL ORTIZ

Yeah. I was lucky to be born into a family of potters in Cochiti, so, and then to a lot of people forgot about our historic pottery, the figurative pottery. What was still around was that were the pots with the geometrical designs and the earth elements on him and animals and stuff. But when I was a kid growing up, I completely- I learned all that type of the subject matter and like the pots and learned from my mom and our grandmother Seferina and Laurencita Herrera and it was just kind of funny like how I started as a kid and like around 15 I started to really let my creativeness come in and like to really start looking at I guess I was probably getting it from movies or magazines and stuff and like started to paint all these different types of figures and sooner or later then we found out through Robert Gallegos, a local collector from Albuquerque and a shop owner. So he had been watching me grow up as a kid while he would come on buying trips to the pueblos. And he had noticed my artwork started changing a lot from what I was taught or what was out there at Cochiti. And he had asked my parents like, what? Who's teaching this kid how to- all these subject matter, like the painting change? And they're like, are you just experimenting, and so we're just encouraging him, but turned out, Bob invited us down to a showroom in Albuquerque. My parents and I went there for the first time. We tripped out when we walked into his office, because all of the pieces that I was experimenting on looked exactly like his collection. And he happened to have the largest collection of historic figurative Cochiti pottery and like our mouths hit the ground because they looked exactly like them. My parents yanked me out of the out of the office and just told me remind remember this day, and like, we didn't teach you any of this, but like you, you know, it was just flowing through you and the clay is talking to you. So at that point, I had that resource of Bob Gallegos to check out all of his pieces, and he would explain to me that they were all based on like traveling circus sideshows, operas, via the new railroads that were being laid in New Mexico in our area, so a lot of the subject matter started changing. And it was pretty cool to make that connection. And it was amazing, because they had all these really cool figurative pottery like the circus sideshow, like Siamese twins, tattooed bodies, like all these really cool and I immediately vibed with them. So that's been my, one of my life's missions is to carry on that tradition of social commentary.

## JOHN P LUKAVIC

Can I circle back to something here? So Kathleen first started talking about kind of the references and you know, you mentioned about the clubs and leather scene and all. So I'm going to tell on you a little bit, Virgil. So back around 2013 or so, you and I recorded a video about your work for an exhibition we had been working on. And I asked you, I was trying, I was trying to get you to talk about this. And like you were talking around the issue. We weren't going there and finally came out and said, You know, there's a lot of S&M, leather, sadomasochist kind of references that seem to be in your work. And I was like, Can you talk about that? So I like came out and say it, and you're like, yeah, so when I was younger, I left the Pueblo, I went to some clubs, and it was cool. And that was it.

## VIRGIL ORTIZ

[Laughing] That's all you get.

## JOHN P LUKAVIC

That was all I got at the time. So like, you know, it's thrilling for me to hear you kind of talk more broadly about kind of some of those references. But then ultimately, you know, there is certainly a huge leap between, you know, some of these historical classic designs and forms that you were using, and then ultimately shifting into not only figurative work, but to kind of really taking it in your own direction. You know, certainly that's one of the things that really excited me about your work early on was just how, you know, very iconic, but also very unique that it was.

## VIRGIL ORTIZ

I mean, like, I think the reason why I cut it off was because I wasn't really comfortable or knowing like that people were interested in what I did, or like the places I've been, but, you know, I'm lucky enough to be able to travel the world with the clay. And a lot of- I know a lot of people don't have that opportunity from the Pueblo. So I explained to them through- not only through my words, or through my clay, but just what my experiences were and it was kind of cool to bring that whole experience when we would go on trips and to explain what I seen. So then, again, like a lot of people didn't remember the pieces that were being made in the historic pieces from Cochiti. So they're like, Oh my God, why are you making S&M figures? or What does that have to do with Cochiti Pueblo pottery? But until now, that I have the resources of Robert Gallegos and images and photographs, and I'm able to educate not only Cochiti Pueblo people, but the world of what our ancestors did. So if you think my pieces are risqué, you should see the historic pieces. They've kind of, you know, I mean, that's just my influence. And I want to show the people what the original storytellers were, and like, what they're all based on them where they come from.

## JOHN P LUKAVIC

That's really that's really interesting to me, you know, because I hadn't really made that connection between the, you know, 19th century Cochiti artists who were making figurative pottery that was of what they saw of these opera singers, of these, these circus performers. And that was exactly what you were doing. You know, you were you were observing the world around you and responding to that in clay. Like, to me my understanding of your work, you just said just take another leap that I had never- And we've worked together quite a bit. I just didn't really fully understand that element of the work but it makes so much sense now and makes me- You know, add another level of appreciation for your work.

## VIRGIL ORTIZ

Yeah, I mean, I mean, a lot of people thought I was doing it for shock value. That may have been a little part of it. But it's basically when I had the resource of looking at all these historic pieces like oh my god, they're all you know, they're telling the story. They're capturing time and clay. And it's basically a timeline in artwork. So this is what, like what carries it. I mean, now that as long as I've been doing it, it helps me to really think about subject matter and to record it in clay at the time in clay. So there's a lot of stuff that are now that I'm comfortable talking about with about, like, politics and all, I've never been a political junkie. But now, once this all happened, this tornado that happened to us for the past, what is it like five years, but since it all began, then like that really woke me up. And I was able to really explore that that part of storytelling. And like, I mean, another series was born of that, and it was called the Prediction Pot Series. So back in, like, when it all started in 2016, when, when the campaign was going on, when is like the election went on, the Dakota Access Pipeline was happening. And that was like in November, December, right? And that's when all the protests started happening. So I just got very inspired to record that all in, in clay. So there's, that's when the prediction series was created. So now, which was- I based that basically on my predictions were on common sense of what's going to happen and knowing this person, how he treated the world and other people. And so I started making all these pots, and now they're all becoming reality. And it's kind of cool that I'm able to now release them, and to probably will do a show about them, and to show like the results and like the prediction and then also what, how it turned out. And so it's kind of cool, too.

## KATHLEEN ASH-MILBY

Can you give an example of one of the predictions that came true?

## VIRGIL ORTIZ

Yeah, definitely. Like it was. I knew he was very always on Twitter from the beginning. And he had stated that he would use Twitter as his main contact to the world. And I was like, I right away got this message, because I feel like I'm a conduit. It's not, it's not my artwork. I'm just being a conduit, like, with all the stuff that you see, like, it's, I feel that it's not my talent, and it's only lent to me. So this- the gut feelings that I get from the beginning, I always follow that. And I knew of that about Twitter. So I made this piece and you know, the wife saying "Be best", and that was all based on cyberbullying. It's like, Man, this is like so backwards, because you're, you know, your husband's the biggest one. So sculpting him, I made a bull, a cow. So I gave the cow the iconic hairstyle. And he was always tweeting at the weirdest times, like 3am, 5am. It's like, how are you still awake? Are you just getting getting up? Or what? What's that about, but, and then all the stories about a golden toilet. So I sculpted this cow sitting on a toilet and his pants down. And he's tweeting. And you know, like when people get tattoos, like in the lower back what they call the tramp stamp. So I put the twitter logo on there. So that was my prediction of what would eventually be one of the main facts that would bring him down. So now that we're going through all of this, where we're at today, it was inevitable that everybody would make a whole screenshots and everything and document everything that he has said, So, lo and behold, that came true. So it's just kind of fun to, to follow the predictions that I made when they were in 2016 and realize them in clay. So I think this show is gonna turn out pretty cool once we release a whole collection.

## KATHLEEN ASH-MILBY

Sure. Yeah. I mean, I think that's a great transition to talk more about what's happening today, and how your work is intersecting with these recent movements to remove or destroy monuments of historical figures. And, you know, a lot of the discussion has been focused on the Black Lives Matter movement and monuments specifically related to Confederate, quote, unquote, heroes. But, you know, this came to New Mexico, and there's definitely been controversy over the years. For instance, the Entrada, as part of the Annual Fiesta in Santa Fe that was recently ended. And then there was a statue in downtown Albuquerque that became the source of conflict and someone got shot. So how do you feel like your work is in dialogue with what's happening in terms of reflecting on our histories?

## VIRGIL ORTIZ

What I feel I'm here to do is like one is to make sure that the art of creating Cochiti Pueblo pottery using traditional methods and materials stay alive because it's a dying art form. Make sure that stays alive and then also to educate the world about the 1680 Pueblo Revolt. So that ties me exactly to all of these demonstrations and protests and what's going going on today. And it's like, you know, to comment and stuff like that and watch what's going to happen, it's just very, it's hurtful to everybody. But people need to know exactly why Indigenous people are upset. And Black Lives Matters because it's like, we're treated very differently. And it's like nobody even knows about the 1680 Pueblo Revolt. So all the shows, everything I do revolves around those two subjects. So once when I do a show, like in say, in Paris, or Prague, or Amsterdam, right, all of the Europeans know exactly what I'm talking about, about the Pueblo Revolt. They know our history. But when I do a show here in the States, like in a metro city, say, Los Angeles or New York, they have no idea what I'm talking about. They are like, what is the Pueblo Revolt? So then I, that's my chance to educate them about it. And it's kind of embarrassing that Europeans know more about our history than Americans do. And when I do a show where- closely where it happened in Santa Fe, it's sad to like you know, to tell you the truth that hardly nobody knows about it still. So, you know, I just feel that I've been given a voice and this talent has been lent to me. So I'm using that to really connect that whole storytelling and like make it a- I tell this whole story of the Revolt when it happened in 1680. And also, I created another version of it, which is happening simultaneously in 2180 in a future time dimension, so that- I love sci-fi, storytelling and movies and all the characters that it brings, so that allows me to create new characters, but also tell the story of the Revolt. So no matter what I do in my artwork, it always brings people back to educating them about what happened to our people. It's not told in schools, it's not in our textbooks, you know, it's not taught anywhere. It's been swept under the carpet because the genocide that happened to the Pueblo people, and you know, that's what I'm going to use my voice for, is to educate everybody about that.

## KATHLEEN ASH-MILBY

So assume our audience, for the most part, doesn't actually know about the Pueblo Revolt. Can you give us like a little synopsis of what the story has been told historically? And then what your perspective is in reinterpreting it?

## VIRGIL ORTIZ

Yeah, well, like our language, it's, it's passed down through word of mouth. And a lot has not been written about the Pueblo Revolt. But basically what happened is like the- when the invaders first came, they were in search to riches and gold. And their main point was to convert all the people that they found, the Indigenous people, to Christianity, and you know, we welcomed them with open arms because they were almost all kicking over because of the long trip that they had made. But our people nursed him back to life. Once they started becoming okay and more of them started coming in, then they started enslaving the the Pueblo people, building churches in each Pueblo, trying to convert them to Christianity, trying to stop our religious, our ceremonies, our way of life. And at a certain point, it's, you know, there was blood spilled and rapes that went on so the public people had enough of it, so they like asked them to leave and they wouldn't leave and they said, Okay, we're gonna have to make a plan and it was Popay that out of Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo that- he was a medicine man, and he had made this, he devised a plan of the Pueblo Revolt and how to join all the Pueblos and back then there was more Pueblos than what is left today is 19 Pueblos in New Mexico. But they all joined together, and he, Popay had sent runners from the northern Pueblos to the southern Pueblos. And they all were carrying knotted cords, or yucca, or leather, and they had stopped at each Pueblo, and they dropped off a knotted cord to each of the heads of the Pueblos. And they asked them to untie a knot every morning. When the last knot was untied, and that's when they were all to push out all the invaders. So that's how they planned the Pueblo Revolt, it's the first American revolution that took place. Nobody calls it that because of the genocide that happened. But you know, now is the time that we have to learn about it and educate everybody of what happened. So that's a roundabout way of explaining that.

## JOHN P LUKAVIC

So you and I worked together on an exhibition in 2015, called Revolt 1680 at 2180: Virgil Ortiz, go figure getting your name in there. One of the things that really was interesting to me was like you had mentioned about how the events of 1680 were happening simultaneously as the events in 2180. So one of the the fascinating parts of the exhibition to me was understanding this concept of kind of layered time, rather than linear time. And about how in your storyline how Indigenous knowledge is, they are time travelers, these elders, Ancient Ones who travel from the past to the present to the future, and, you know, bring knowledge from the future back to the past and bring knowledge from the past back to the future. And that was, you know, something that's really kind of lasted with me is this idea of the transmission of Indigenous knowledge through generations. And also with trying to see time differently, you know about how people's worldviews and understandings of what's going on in the world are affected by that. And then thinking also about, you know, when it comes to, you know, tearing down monuments, or even the water protectors up at Standing Rock, thinking about history and about how, using your understanding of history to inform your own actions and the actions around you. You know, there's just- there's something- it seems like there's something there. Could you talk a little bit about maybe some of how the 1680 story fits with the 2180? And this concept of, like, layered time?

## VIRGIL ORTIZ

Yeah, so how all this fits together, and how that really all opened up how to tell the story of the revolt, I was heavily influenced by sci-fi movies like Star Wars and Star Trek and all the TV series, right? And now, what's all that is out there that brings everybody together, it's like Black Panther, the Avengers, you know, all Wonder Woman. Everybody loves superheroes. So without recreating the wheel, so I was like, Okay, cool. I'm gonna write a movie script about the Pueblo Revolt. And I've been working on this for the past few decades, my team and I have been- and it always develops, every, every year I meet new people, new people in the movie industry, figuring out how that works. So it just kind of develops daily basically, but using the storytelling of the Revolt, and I'm not an academic person. And there's not a lot written about the Pueblo Revolt. So then I have to figure out how to tell the story and get the next generation interested, as well as my generation because they I, most people have seen the original, my age, the

original Star Wars movie, and how much it made an impact in our lives. So then, that's when I started deciding to bring in the futuristic side of it happening simultaneously telling the same story. So that way, I could create these really cool characters, and I created 19 characters, groups of characters that represent the 19 Pueblos that are left in New Mexico today. So there's like, and every year since you know, the past two decades, every other show, I would release a new character, and a new little booklet that went with a show or either exhibition at a museum, and then like release a new character. So the whole way, I've been copywriting and registering all these characters. And we're slowly releasing the movie script to the public. So people that do pay attention and follow what I'm doing at different shows, they collect these booklets. And in the end, it's going to all come together and tell the whole story and just introduce, bring it in the sci-fi aspect of storytelling really helped me to get the attention of you know, all what everybody's doing right now is online, Facebook, Instagram, all of these social networks. So if you don't have something that looks cool, you're basically not going to get any interest from anybody. So yeah, that's why it's like, okay, cool, I get to make these really cool Indigenous people warriors and characters, and just really get them into the reading more about it. And also to get a history and lesson without knowing. And that's, first of all, I have a huge family with all my nieces and nephews and they were kind of helping me like when I would release characters to them. And now they were interested, and they picked up on it really quick. So now, remember when I'd seen the first Star Wars movie in Santa Fe, it was right into Market time when we had seen the movie, and we must have seen it like, whatever how many times it plays in a day. So my cousin, my family, and I - my cousins would go check out the movie. And you know, by the end of that Indian Market was over, I knew exactly all the characters where they came from, how they dress, what kind of ships they were driving, all their narrative, everything they net, and I was like, Whoa, and I was like, only I think seven years old, I think when that happened, and it made such a huge impact on me. And I was like, Okay, cool. Let me do the same thing with these characters, but also give them superhero abilities and just make him look cool and give Indigenous people, Pueblo people, superheroes to look up to.

So once I get the attention, it's been working really well, because all the different podcasts like this, or lectures on Zoom, or going to work with universities that- it's a lot easier to have these superhero characters there and explain what they are and what they do. And they absorb all that information. And it's really amazing to work with different universities that have like Southwest studies or just history in general. They've never heard about it. There's nothing written about it. So when we get together, they develop a curriculum about the 1680 Pueblo Revolt, and it's awesome because they're able to amplify it and like tell the next person about the Revolt. So we're just slowly working at it, but the end is a feature film. And you know all the merchandising, and it's just the journey along the way, there's so many doors that have opened up and a lot of dreams that are coming true, my team gets bigger and bigger. And we all work together for one purpose is to educate the world about the Revolt.

### **KATHLEEN ASH-MILBY**

So I really like this idea where you're building this narrative with episodes and these booklets that illustrate and build this landscape and define these characters. And it's going to conclude in a feature length film?

### **VIRGIL ORTIZ**

Yeah, yeah, like I forgot to mention earlier what John had mentioned was that, like, in the future, I created these characters called the Aeronauts. And what their main purpose in the storyline is that they come back from the future to the past to the present what we're living right now. And their job is to collect artifacts and shards and pots and designs and our language and our way of life, and then take them back to the future, and they store them, protect them, and wait for us to catch up to that timeline. So when we get to that specific time in 2180, we still have all of our ceremonies, our songs, our stories, our history still intact, our artwork, because the artwork and the Pueblo people do are just, I mean, it's as equally as important as our language. Our languages or ceremony. So which comes back to like, you know, their timelines and their recorded history. So it they all need to work together. So it's, it's kind of cool to be able to create this world in the future, like John, you're talking about and how it all comes together. And people are like, what do you what are you doing with like, aliens? Or what do you what is this mean? But then like, I was like, okay, so we had to sit down. And, you know, like, now it's really handy to have Zoom sessions, because I'm able to use video or still images to explain because I, my art practice have expanded into so many different mediums. So if I'm talking

about something and trying to explain to them, they're like, What are you talking about? This is insane. Until then, I'm able to show them exactly what I'm talking about when I have videos when I have, you know, just out of necessity, all these mediums were born. And if you see, the museum shows in the Denver Art Museum, John was one of the first ones that I did that was we incorporated my photography and digital art into. So that was that was kind of funny how it was hard to do that at first. Remember, we had resistance about it, but I was like, come on, like I just want to incorporate and really encapsulate everybody in the whole world of the storytelling. So once we tried it, everybody loved it. So that was- that worked out perfect for us, John. And you could say more about that.

### JOHN P LUKAVIC

Yeah. Your exhibition at DAM, not only did we have your, there was over 30, maybe 32 ceramic works in the show. But then the walls were completely wrapped about 12 feet high and all around the entire gallery, creating an immersive environment for the work. But then also at the front, there is also the kind of that fashion figure you had a mannequin that was dressed in clothing that's kind of ripped from these, these characters that you had created. But it really created an immersive environment in which visitors were able to enter into this space and not just see your art, but see your art kind of in context and create a mindset in which to see the art with this element of history, but also with this, like kind of futuristic look to it.

### KATHLEEN ASH-MILBY

And you know, one of the things that is great about your work is that you're working in an area that a lot of people are talking about, which is Indigenous Futurism. And a lot of times when people talk about futurism, there's a reference back to Afrofuturism, which, you know, is something that's been explored in different media as well. I thought a really interesting project that happened recently Was your work with Nona Hendryx.

### VIRGIL ORTIZ

Gitchie, gitchie, ya-ya, ya-ya

### KATHLEEN ASH-MILBY

Can you tell us more about that?

### VIRGIL ORTIZ

Well, she's, she's an iconic woman. She was in a band Labelle. That was you know, sang Lady Marmalade. So it was amazing to meet her and I met her during the Indian Market in Santa Fe. Her and her handler, were in town. And for that Indian Market, we had some of our artwork on the Indian Market magazine. So she told her peeps, like oh, take me to this person that's making those type of artwork so, she came to King Galleries. We were doing a show there in Santa Fe, and that's how we first met so we're talking about discussing, and I tripped out because like, you know, I'm old enough to remember her hits and like how she was always like, dressed up like the first Grace Jones right. She was up all about Afrofuturism. And like she was always dressed like very futuristic with really cool garments and fashion and just her hairdos, like the face paint, everything and like we're no way, I'm meeting this like iconic person that did that did those and it like fit right into what I was doing with Indigenous Futurism. When I first started releasing Indigenous Futurism, like more than two decades ago, people were again were tripping out, you know, like, What are you doing? What are you doing? So then it just eventually they found out of how it all comes together. But to work with Nona Hendryx, like we did two shows together. One of them was at the Kennedy Center. And it was for the opening of the new wing called the REACH over there. And that was that happened, like right after in the market in like September, and while she was here at Indian Market, she had asked me like, I need a outfit to wear for the opening of the new REACH wing. And I was like, what are we talking about? I was like, no way. I would like you know, they had hired me to come there and do a presentation and a lecture as well for this, the REACH wing. So it happened that we were going to be there at the same time. So our schedules matched up perfectly matched up so I was here like, okay, said, Okay, so what are you going to do? She goes, well I have to do a float for the, for the parade that's going to open it. And she said, I'm the futuristic part of it. It's the last float, it's all silver. Everything's chromed out. So she goes, is there any way that I could look like an Aeronaut? And the Aeronauts, I designed them to be all black because

I shot them at White Sands and I wanted to be as contrasty as I could. She said, I want this but can you do it in all chrome? I was like, Oh, hell yeah, that'd be really cool. So then from after Indian Market was over, like, only had about a week and a half to create everything. So I did my sketch really quick. And I was like, Okay, can you move in this? Can you perform in this? She was like, Oh, that's perfect. And she was willing to do anything and I was like, that's like the perfect opportunity to me to create the best garment that I could come up with in a week and a half. And I said, Okay, first let's start with shoes. Can you wear like high heeled shoes? Can you do stilettos? And she's like, how- she was like she laughed and said like, she goes Don't you know me? This is funny because she could wear anything that she wants. And like, you know, she used to wear like, super high heels. So I said, Okay, cool. So we picked out her shoes, we ordered them they were in her size they are and they're all they were thigh high chrome boots. And like stilettos, like six inch stilettos. I was like are you sure you can wear this? She goes I can do anything. I said cool. So then I built the costume around that the shoes, the boots. And then here comes the her corset. It was started- I had, I don't know how many sequins we worked with. But my team and I were stitching everything together really quick. We had to FedEx them overnight for her to make sure that everything fit. We flew to DC a week early so that we were able to capture everything on film because like when we're talking about the design of her garments, then we decided that we were going to do a small documentary on it. So I brought my team in that was gonna help me film. Some of them came in from Tempe. Some of them came in from LA, we all met in DC. And it was just amazing to bring the crew together. And all of us like they documented it when I was when we've had the first try on in a hotel room. Everything fit perfectly which thank God for that. And but it was just funny.

We went the day of the opening of the parade, we went to soundcheck, we're getting her dressed and everything fit perfect. She went- she got on that super shiny chromed out float. There was- and she did her thing. And she was you know, she was dropping it, she was doing squats and doing high kicks in these six inch thigh-highs and super energetic. And that's her style. So I flipped out to be able to hear the power of her voice. And when she- when she was on the loud speakers and she was singing, it was just amazing to see the Aeronaut come alive, a new version of it all chromed out. And she was on the float singing at NDC in front of the Kennedy Center. And it was amazing to do that. But that led up eventually to the MET in New York. So that was an amazing opportunity to collaborate with her on that. And this time it was going to be her whole band, which was like 15 people to perform in the temple of Dendur, is the big Egyptian section of the MET. And we had did a pre visit to go check it out. And when we got there, the director and some of the curators had also met with us and they said, okay, we've see what you did at different universities. You did like workshops, you did lectures to the public. We just have this new Diker collection that was donated. John, I think that's right, Diker Collection.

## JOHN P LUKAVIC

Yeah.

## VIRGIL ORTIZ

That okay. And they had donated this collection to the MET, and they put it in the main part of the MET indigenous collection. So it was amazing to see that in the main building of the MET. And they said, How could you incorporate this brand new show into what you're doing with Nona? And right away it clicked in my head that I could do a workshop about- because I sat to finish a lot of the costuming for all the band members and I said I could do a workshop to do like foam fabrication, like to do masks and everything for the performers. And you know, take a certain- look at all the different artifacts that they had there and take design elements from the historic pieces and then incorporate them on to the masks and the costuming and eventually the performers of wear them while performing at the Temple of Dendur. So that worked out perfect. So they said, Okay, well, can you do workshops and, and lectures here too, as well? I was like, Okay, cool. So it just kind of developed into a bigger show than what it was. I mean, it was big enough to begin with to be able to interact with the MET and my mind was blown because of that. I was like, thankful for it. But it just kept on going, and the more people I met, and then when I got there, went there again a week early, and I was able to do workshops and talk about the pieces that were in the Diker Collection, more people came and they took the workshops to build masks for the performers, they got to meet the performers, and Nona Hendryx. So it was really, really an awesome thing when we're able to try the costuming on them with

the students and the public that came to the workshop. And then the night of the performance, they all wore the garments and masks and they got to see it again in the final exhibition. But that was just amazing to do that. So that things like that just keep on growing. And then another part of it, which is still gonna happen at the Montclair Art Museum, we're gonna do another panel discussion with Nona Hendryx and this other artist by the name of Mike Marino, and he's a special effects artist, makeup designer, he works in all the major movies and like we're working, we're gonna work on some of the costuming and the facial like prosthetics, like what I'm getting into now to you know, build, because normally I would like body paints, and it'll take hours to do it. But now if I have my hands on prosthetics and all, that I could, you know, build all the pre makeup designs for these characters. And Mike Marino is really like the head of what he does. So he's just a badass basically. So to be able to work with somebody like that, and then bring some more characters to life for this new lecture and onstage talking with Nona. So it just kind of it all, you know, it all just weaves together. So that's just kind of cool how it all works out in the end.

## JOHN P LUKAVIC

Virgil, can we circle back to one idea? One other thing that I've seen in your work is you've started to really expand your network beyond Cochiti, beyond Native people to incorporate- I remember the night that we opened your exhibition at DAM, you had met Ben Jackel who is another contemporary artist who had a- had some work in a show that was opening the same night as yours. And I know at that same time you were really active on social media with, was it Periscope? Where you were doing kind of live streaming of things? And I watched how you started to network with other ceramicists all across the country, and started to do some collaboration work with them. Where this is leading is, you know, with the pandemic that recently hit, I saw on social media again, that you had started doing a ceramics residency and actually quarantined at this residency with a whole series of other artists. Could you talk a little bit about that experience kind of being completely just shut off from the world at a time when really nothing was happening, but with these other these other ceramicists, and like, what was that dynamic like? You know, were you learning from one another? Were you teaching each other? Were you- And ultimately, how do you think your practice has grown since then?

## VIRGIL ORTIZ

Yeah, it was amazing to meet Ben Jackel during our show at DAM. That was by Kent Logan, right? So that was really awesome to meet this dude. And like growing up in Cochiti, with always been working with traditional methods materials, my attention was always focused on that. And I never really looked at anything contemporary clay until the social networks started to come on up here. And Periscope was a special app that we started to use as a little high fire ceramics community that were non-Indigenous. So that kind of caught my eye before Facebook Live or Instagram Live, were there- Periscope was there. So what we would do is just to dedicate hours, certain time slots for different ceramic artists and bring everybody and live broadcast from our studios. So it was amazing to be able to show them how my process was and then also to watch what they were doing. So going back to what you said about teaching each other, their minds were blown because I have to go dig my own clay but I was like what you can just go to a store and buy your clay and like you open it it's ready to go? This is insane. So like all these different textures, all these colors like you know like the glazes are amazing. Like you're gonna get all different colors, where I was used to just using the traditional colors of red, white, and black. And you know that is historic and that's timeless and I love it but then also to learn about all these different types of clays that were available, and like how other people and all the tools blew my mind, like I was used to using my finger or popsicle sticks, or, you know, gourds that we used of our, you know, how we are taught to use, but then they had all these different types of tools that I had no idea what they're talking about the names, terminology for anything, and it was just kind of funny when everybody laughs at me or it's kind of fun because they will say like, what what cone did you fire your traditional work to? And I was like, I had no idea what a cone was. I was like ice cream cones? A snow cone? I don't know what you're talking about. So. So then, like working with these people, they're like, what's the temperature the cone records? I was like, oh, like, I have no idea. I've never, I know now like working with different artists like the parameters and all these different types of thermometers to see how hot it is. But really, I've never tested the traditional way, because it's, I don't want to mess with it. I just want to keep it exactly what how I was taught. So I was teaching at ASU and in residency there while the pandemic hit. And I was working with a lot of the senior students in ceramics and arts and it was really sad to see how disappointed

they were and how freaked out they were because all of their senior thesis projects and their sales were going to be affected by everybody, you know, we couldn't gather nothing. So all of the time and energy, all their money that they spent was completely blown up in the air. So it was like, oh, they're freaking out, like, how are we gonna do this? How are we gonna graduate? And I was like, man, like we, you know, this is a perfect example of, you know, life comes at you, so you have to roll with it. And as an artist, if you're planning to live your life as an artist, you have to roll with it. Yeah, figure it out and just go so. So that's just one of life's- what will happen when you're when stuff like this happens. So a lot of them didn't know, they didn't have their websites built. They weren't online selling yet. So it was a perfect opportunity for me to show them how I operate with photography and like get an online presentation, how to sell them online. And to really give that- turn that into a lesson, right? So then everybody went online, and I didn't have access to them in person to like work with them, how we show- how I work with my clay, the building and every part of ceramics. It's kind of like you have to be there in person to teach the student well how do you do it. So we had to figure out how to do that. But so then I was working with them to- how to to get their websites going. So then they started doing their shows and it was successful, so they, they overcame that and that was awesome to see. But now we didn't have any students there and the head of ASU said okay, like, you don't have to be here anymore. But we might come back. We don't know how long it's gonna last and now we know how long it lasts, right? So it was just like, Okay, well what I do? So my friend out of Phoenix, had to ask me, um, Peter Held and we had worked together at DAM with, you know, he was one of the writers for the catalog, but he had- well, he knew I was going to be stationed at ASU for a while. So he said, I want you to meet the new folks that run the Reitz Ranch, it was close to Sedona. I don't even know the actual town where it's at, but it's like, almost two hours out of Phoenix, north. So what I said, Okay, I think I have all the time in the world. Let's go check it out. So we drove up there together. And when we got to the Reitz Ranch, the new owners were- had greeted us and they had already had shut down to the public, the members, so Reitz Ranch was completely- there was nobody there except their their, their resident artist, Grayson Fair. And so he had met me and I had brought my friend Augusta Smith with me. And he's one of the students that I had known for about a year that was at ASU and he was a senior now. So his presentation was gonna be like, at the end of April, so he was totally screwed by it. And I said, Okay, can we like develop something into like, something tells me my gut feeling like the conduit messages are coming. And so I was like, you're supposed to come with us to the Reitz Ranch. And he said, Okay, I have nothing to do. So he went on his professor Sammy Chung, out of ASU. And he had said, he said, if you could rewrite your thesis, you know, in a week, and if you guys figure out something what to do, then we could change your whole thesis. So Augusta said, Okay, let's do this.

So when we got to Reitz Ranch, the owners, Cheryl and her husband, Teddy had invited us to stay there and she said, like, there's nobody- there's gonna be nobody around, so you guys would be here by yourself and with Grayson, and that's it. So they invited us to stay there. So we accepted. So Augusta had rewrote his thesis to to kind of combine of like ancient Asian techniques of high fire ceramic- I mean, atmospheric firing, right like with wood firing and soda fire in the Anagama kiln. And Grayson also knew how to- he taught classes with raku firing, and I hadn't done any of that. So then I was going to bring my knowledge of ancient Pueblo pottery creation and combine it with the Asian type techniques. So that's what Augusta wrote his thesis on. And his professor said, that's perfect, you could do that. So we got an Airbnb. And that's our little residency started there. And like I was there through July. And that was like the midway through March is when we started, that's when everybody like, closed down, right? We went and I was able to work in the iconic Reitz Ranch. And it was such an experience because his type of work was completely opposite of what I'm doing, like all of our surfaces are smooth and sandpaper and had rag polish, and we decorate the pieces by painting the designs on it. But the work that was made at Reitz Ranch was all very texturized and thick, and like, you know, holes punched in it, finger prints left everywhere, and like, you know, they left all the design work to the atmospheric firing, what it was gonna leave on it. So I said my prayers, introduced myself, before I went into building I said, this is what I'm here for, you know, like, help me understand what you're- the type of work that you did. And Don Reitz, like, iconic person, and he had, I think he had passed away in 2015. So I felt vibes in there right away. So I said, Okay, so we bought all these different types of clays that Don would use. So then, I started working, sculpting really thick, which blew my mind, because Cochiti Pueblo pottery is always like about a quarter inch a little bit over a quarter inch thick, they all have to be uniform, because of the firing technique that we use, it burns really quick, fast, so it looks expand and contract and it has to be the same thickness so it won't blow up. But then wood firing are and the

anagama, a piece could be like three feet thick, solid, and it just blew my mind that this is how that type of clay would work and that type of firing. So then it was funny because I would build a bust and then like stab it and tear it apart. And just really, you know, cuz like all of the pieces that were at the Reitz Ranch for us to handal and to pick up and old pieces of the Don's were all over the Ranch, right. So I had that all those resources and just to it turned out like where I picked to sit in his studio, that's exactly where his table was at, so the all these different little magical things started happening. And then my- I had to drop all my thoughts of how I was used to working with traditional stuff, and then just kind of go into that world. And by the time Augusta was making a lot of his pieces. So we did it we started doing a collaboration there of utilitarian where like all the different the mugs and sippers and the cups, and we're going to soda fire them and wood fire them. And it was just amazing to learn that type of technique where you just let the glaze run, let it design itself. So and that's exactly what worked out with his whole thesis of like combining those two types of how to work with clay. So we you know, firing the wood train over there was amazing because like it's such a different technique and like how hot it got and it just made everything look ancient, like it was just like dug out of the ground. So that fit into my storytelling. So that went perfectly with it.

So it all just kind of- the puzzles were all there. And we just had to put it together and make it work and that was such an amazing treat. And it- it worked out where I did a continuing collaboration with Augusta Smith and then also with Grayson Fair, so we did a whole line of raku fire and figurative pottery. So it's and then of course like the friendship was there. So now we're all together and like hopefully we get to do another firing soon. That will- all the pieces that we've been working on and like using high fire clay and looking at the size of Don Reitz' work very inspired me because I've always wanted to get to a human size figure of my characters in clay. So that like when you have it installed in a gallery or an exhibition, museum like you're met at the entrance of it like with a clay piece that big, the power of that really excited me so I will you know bought like a thousand pounds of clay. So I started sculpting and now that I knew that you don't have to make the the infrastructures and all this like a quarter inch thick, then I started making like, you know, three inches like an inch thick, whatever and like the pieces turned out massive. So then you have to let them dry forever. So there's- I have pieces over there waiting to be fired. So I'm excited to have finished some of them that are online right now. And those were the first pieces that I made at Reitz Ranch. So those are very special to all of us that worked on it. And excited to release the next show of all the pieces that will be fired.

### **KATHLEEN ASH-MILBY**

Well, thank you for sharing all of that with us. Virgil, I think you have such a singular vision that comes through in your work, but it's been great to hear about how collaboration and working with other artists and supporting your work in the community, and arts in the community is so much of what you do and who you are.

### **VIRGIL ORTIZ**

Yeah, it's I mean, during the pandemic, again, I mean, hopefully, we're able to reconnect again in person without the distancing. And it was like, really hard to see all the students not be able to handle that. But me as an artist doing it my whole life I was, I'm used to social distancing and living in isolation, you know, in my, in my clay cave is what we call it. So that didn't bother me, I just missed like movies and restaurants and all but to be able to collaborate with people that taught me a lot, too, as well. And I got a lot out of it. And, you know, more collaborations are in the work now with this other person named Chris Casey out of Albuquerque, and he does a different type of- he does ceramics as well, but he does like, just a completely different using different methods. So then that will be coming out probably, maybe in a month or two. So you'll see like carving on it. And yeah, it's like, it's just a different type from atmospheric firing. So we're excited about that. But yes, like all the definitely, like artists leaning on each other, and like helping us each get through the pandemic, whether it be through Zoom meetings, or working with, with people, hopefully, I can't wait to collaborate again. So it just, it we learn from each other. And you know, I'm always open for that. And it's healing for us. And, you know, we share each other's of how we think and how we live. And we learned so much from that. And it's important to reach out to anybody, especially if everybody's having a hard time going through COVID and isolation, like, you know, if you're having a hard time there, just know that there's people there that you can reach out to your family, you know, everybody has a cell phone, you get FaceTime. And, you know, we'll get through this together. So we just have to be there for each other to support one another.

## KATHLEEN ASH-MILBY

Well said, thank you so much for joining me, John and Virgil. Before we do end this session, John, is there anything you have going on at the Denver Art Museum that you'd like our listeners to know about?

## JOHN P LUKAVIC

Yes, coming in May, we're opening a show called Each/Other: Marie Watt and Cannupa Hanska Luger, which focuses on the two artists' artistic practice using collaboration. So it really kind of riffing off some of the ideas that we're talking about here. The exhibition just explores not only how people can collaborate together and learn from one another, but also looking beyond the actual object that's created and looking at the process that it was that was made used to make it. But also going even beyond that, you know, thinking about, you know, if you're talking about a textile, you know, there's wool involved in the wool come from sheep, and the sheep grows on a land. So it's, it's getting to you to realize that no matter what kind of art you're making, you are collaborating with the land, with the animals, with others, with you know, the knowledge that you have, you know, your ancestors who shared knowledge with you, and you're also collaborating in some ways with future generations of people who will be inspired by your work. So that's really what we're focusing on. And then later this Fall, we'll be reopening the reinstalled Indigenous Arts of North America galleries as part of the complete renovation we did to one of our buildings at the Denver Art Museum. So we welcome everyone to come Denver, either between May and August to see this exhibition, which will then travel to other venues around the country. And then in this Fall, starting in this Fall, come in to see our new galleries. So we're excited to have everyone and Virgil's work will be certainly incorporated and featured there.

## KATHLEEN ASH-MILBY

Well, thanks so much, Virgil for your time. It's really exciting to hear about what you have coming up. Is there anything else you want to tell our audiences before we wrap?

## VIRGIL ORTIZ

Yeah, definitely. Like I mean, like we mentioned earlier about all the different mediums I work in, so like more, the seasons like with the hoodies are going to be released soon. So there's different types of things that will be available on the website. And you can see a bunch of the different projects that we're working on, the future products that will be coming out on the website or Instagram, usually we operate out of Instagram, mostly. So I just want to tell everybody not to lose faith, like we're almost through this and we just have to help one another. Don't be afraid of trying anything. Don't be intimidated. Don't intimidate yourself, drop all the imaginary hurdles that are out there. Set your goals as high as you can. Because once you reach that goal you wish you would have set it higher. So you just, just don't be afraid of trying and just learn as much as you can, take care of one another.

## KATHLEEN ASH-MILBY

Thanks so much, Virgil.

Thank you for listening to Art Unbound. Be sure to subscribe to the podcast so you can be alerted when the next episode is released. I'd like to thank John Lukavic and Virgil Ortiz for joining me in our conversation. I'd also like to thank FRAME, the French American Museum Exchange, for providing funds to make this series possible. Thanks also to Mark Orton for providing music for this episode. And Jon Richardson, our Producer here at the Portland Art Museum. Be sure to visit [portlandartmuseum.org](http://portlandartmuseum.org) and [nwfilm.org](http://nwfilm.org) to learn about our exhibitions, learning and community partnership programs, film center opportunities, ways to support our organization, and more.