Artist and professor

C. Maxx Stevens

examines her method of
visual storytelling

**SEEING ONE’S CREATIVE PROCESS**

**MY ART IS ShAPED BY WHO I AM AS AN INDIGENOUS PERSON**—a member of the Seminole and Muscogee Nations, and a Native woman living in contemporary society. I constantly work to remain true to my cultural heritage and my sense of self. Memories and issues from my personal experience and specifically my life within the Native American culture are always my starting point. From there, I weave together many disparate parts, creating a stream of wordplays, installations, sculptures, prints, and digital media.
We each have a good side, a bad side, a past, and a future, and we learn to embrace these elements in order to live. I use these dualistic combinations, as well as memories, my cultural landscape, and my personal history to develop the concepts for my art. My focus has evolved from examining the ways contemporary events and political issues have influenced many traditions in the Native culture. This examination raises many questions for me about who I am as a person.

How I develop my conceptual focus leads, organically, to how I determine the materials and technologies for my work. My working process begins with free-form writing. Then I associate these concepts with objects or technologies using a site-specific location to create an installation that hopefully resonates with viewers. I use space and materials together to create my visual stories. Because objects can “speak” in the same way that people speak, the materials I choose are important to the work. I am a very quiet person and need these objects to be my voice.

My work is sometimes cryptic to the viewer. As a sculptor, I use various processes and do not allow myself to be limited by material boundaries. I believe the work should be fluid and of the “now”—in the same way that stories are always different, depending on who tells them and when. What I find interesting and what keeps me working is seeing how people connect to my artwork.

Installation art is my main focus and with each piece I spend months addressing all aspects of the work: time, space, materials, location, and audience. Detail and subtlety

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of material are the most important, as certain materials and images have a more direct relationship to my culture. For example, I have used braided horsehair symbolically to represent my tribal matriarchal system, the braid representing lineage. Similarly, the crow represents the messenger and the observer, and signifies a warning.

Self-portraiture has a long history in the arts, and this has been a recurring subject in my work since the 1970s. I have presented myself in many different ways by juxtaposing materials and images to give the viewer hints about myself. Found objects surround handmade objects to build relationships that I want my portraits to reveal. The birdcage is symbolic of my feelings of containment, both physically and emotionally, and I have used it in a series of sculptures, as well as in paintings, drawings, and prints.

In the Native culture, storytellers hold an important place in the continuation of history and traditions. My father, who was a great storyteller, created a vast memory base for my siblings and me to draw on and learn from. When we gather together, we always tell these stories and we enjoy remembering him. It is this foundation that influences and aids my role as a visual storyteller. I strongly believe I need these memories to be remembered, and my culture needs them remembered too. The need to tell stories over and over

flows from the fact that oral history is part of our make-up as a culture and community. It is through storytelling and humor that we are able to connect and relate to each other, and even if there are many differences in the Native community, we continue to connect in a cultural way.

By nature I am community-oriented, and in selecting venues for my work I look for shows that are part of the Native community. Working with other Native artists or exhibiting in a Native venue gives me a sense of reconnection with the people of my culture. My voice as a Native artist finds a depth and a sense of place as I interact with a Native American audience and find my place among other works of art that deal with many of the issues I see as important.

The diet of most Native peoples has been negatively impacted by government programs that dole out processed foods loaded with salt, fat, and sugar, creating a generation of people with heart disease, high blood pressure, and most notably, diabetes. Recently, I addressed the epidemic of diabetes in my work, as a commentary on how food that Native peoples eat today is having a negative impact on the future of the community and culture. This health issue is important because diabetes has become widespread in the Native nations. More personally, it has been a factor in the health and eventual death of many of my tribal members, my family, and friends. The Seminole Diabetes Clinic predicts that one of every six Native people will develop


diabetes. My family history and firsthand experience tell me the actual number is higher. Today, Native people are reeducating themselves and are changing how they eat in order to prevent this disease. But change does not come easily. Not only do economic conditions within the community make it difficult to make changes in diet, but these changes in eating habits are not second nature to our people. The foods that have become “traditional” do not sustain the genetics of Native peoples.

My work as a contemporary Native artist tries to create a sacred place for the ideas and questions of life. How do we as indigenous people perceive who we are, and how are we influenced and changed by those perceptions?

As an artist, my work is in a constant state of flux. My limited memory of events that occurred in the early part of my life, and my need to remember them is, at least in part, what drives me to put my work “out there.” They are the occurrences I hang onto and they inspire me. Yet, I often wonder if there is truth in what I remember or if it is actually someone else’s memory that I am appropriating, and this realization puts me in a constant state of questioning.

**C. Maxx Stevens** is an artist and Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Colorado, Boulder. She is an enrolled member of the Seminole Tribe of Oklahoma. See her newest installation in the Native American Voices exhibition, opening in March 2014.