

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA FAIRBANKS
ART DEPARTMENT

In Honor of

BFA Degree Thesis Exhibition Report

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April 25, 2024

Introduction:

Ever since I could walk, I remember spending weekends with my grandparents attending Native American pow-wows. I was hypnotized by the singing and rhythmic beating of the drums, the vibrant colors of regalia, and the individuality each dancer presented. The pow-wows represented various Native designs, from the regalia connected directly to an individual culture to ones linked to more generalized regional areas such as the North and South. I grew up immersed in the modern traditions of Native American gatherings, at least those more prevalent in the contiguous United States and Canada. These gatherings bring together people from all indigenous Nations to dance and celebrate our shared culture and heritage.

The desire to attend gatherings/celebrations comes with the need to create elaborate garments and beadwork. I began to learn these arts while sitting on the living room floor beside my mother, surrounded by individual plates, each containing a single color of beads she would use in her designs. It is not an art you just pick up and run with at a young age with needles being sharp, so many hours were spent just watching. Learning the how, when, and why of the materials. Other days, I spent looking over my grandfather's shoulder, mesmerized at how he effortlessly took a simple sheet of silver and formed it into beautifully crafted pieces of jewelry; I would also watch him sew skins to create different aspects of our regalias. The origin of my artistic journey started with teachings from my elders and has continued to expand and develop over the years. Without these influential people guiding and pushing me to continue to learn and create traditional art, none of my current work would have been possible.

Objectives:

In Honor of was created to honor my culture and my grandfather, who greatly respected our culture and taught me the traditional arts that inspired me to create this body of work. Through this thesis project, I showcased different aspects of my life by celebrating regalia and the various forms they have taken within my life through the influence of my grandfather. I showcase the knowledge of traditional Native art forms I have gained over the years and those I have acquired within this program. My objective was to create a description of differing aspects of my life through the storyline of regalia. I wanted to celebrate those aspects while honoring my most profound connection to them, my grandfather.

I have created regalia specific to my culture and regalia dedicated to intertribal pow-wows/gatherings. I went on to create what I call *Graduation Regalia*, showing a melding of traditional ways with the more modern aspects of our lives. While continuing with the education of my culture and those who have called my chosen home theirs for millennia, I also decided to create an Alaska Native-inspired parka that combines traditional construction methods with modern materials used within other native cultures. In addition, I have created works influenced by pieces gifted to me by my grandfather. These are the pieces I have created specifically to honor him and his influence in every aspect of my life and this body of work.

Inspirations:

First and foremost, my biggest inspiration has always been my grandfather. Having spent most of my childhood following him around, always asking what he was doing, I was curious about how he created his jewelry, the steps he took, and how each process worked. Of course, as a small child, I was only allowed to sit and watch from a distance, but as I grew older, I was

allowed to observe more, give input on designs, and have my questions answered with more than a quick “because that's how I do it.” His artistic talent within his medium drove me to create the jewelry pieces I have included in this show.



Grandfather's Work, Elmer Crews

Marcus Amerman's beaded portraits have also fascinated me for quite some time. His ability to accurately portray the human figure with what he calls “photo-beadalism” produced a quality I strive to achieve. (United States Artists) His work inspired me to create my beaded panel for *You Are Always By My Side*.



Moonrise Over Little Bighorn
Marcus Amerman
C.1995
Beads on Hide, 31.8cm x 31.8cm
Minneapolis Institute of Art

Although I was unaware of her name or relationship with the art world then, Jodi Archambault inspired me with her Northern traditional regalia at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Even though she is not a working artist, Jodi currently serves as a strategic advisor at Wend Collective. Before that, she was the Special Assistant to the President for Native American Affairs for the White House Domestic Policy Council, Deputy Assistant Secretary to the Assistant-Secretary Indian Affairs at the Department of the Interior, and separately as the White House Associate Director of Intergovernmental Affairs. (Bush Foundation) Her creation of this regalia inspired me to finally bring my work, *Southern Style Buckskin*, to fruition.



Woman's Dress and Accessories
Jodi Archambault
C.2005

Tanned and commercial leather, glass and metal beads, cotton, silk, dentalium shell, metal cones, horsehair, plastic, bone, brass bells, porcupine quills, coins, 54 × 60 in.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Description:

Having had such strong influences in my life sparked the beginning of this body of work. The first project I completed was a Choctaw regalia. I created this work to show the beginning



Choctaw Dress and Accessories

of my cultural influence on my life. These dresses connected me to the women that came before me. This piece is the traditional regalia of the Choctaw of Oklahoma and Mississippi bands worn since around the 1700's. The Choctaw were considered one of the five civilized tribes, including the Chickasaw, Muscogee, Seminoles, and Cherokee. Before being removed from their homes during the Trail of Tears, tribal members of these communities started assimilating parts of European culture into their own, including some of the clothing of the time.



Rattlesnake motif

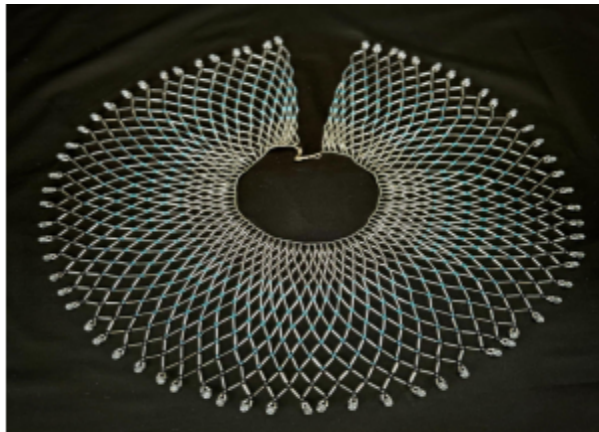
(Oklahoma Historical Society)

The design of the dress shows a strong influence of European women's clothing yet still has traditional decoration, denoting its connection to the Choctaw people. The diamond trim on the skirt, top, sleeves, and apron represents the eastern diamondback rattlesnake for "its powerful venom and dominant place among other creatures." (Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma)

These dresses are traditionally explicitly created for one individual. No patterns are made, and the cotton material is typically torn instead of cut with scissors. I wanted to continue these

practices in the creation of this dress. I used a dress made for me as a teenager as a guide to the needed pieces and created the body and apron in this manner. I chose the deep red dress to emulate my mother's dress when I was young. However, nowadays, these dresses are made in various colors.

For the diamond trim, I created a template and used a ribbon work technique of cutting slits in the fabric, along with folding and ironing, to create the pattern. I was able to hand-sew all the trim in the traditional manner. The beadwork I created for this piece is a more modern aspect of the regalia. Accessories have been added to the traditional dress over the past fifty or so years, but their overall design has mostly stayed the same. For the beadwork and accessories, I created a geometric pattern, using the traditional diamond pattern theme as inspiration to create a more modern design.



Collar

Along with the deep red I chose for the dress, I wanted to continue with deep jewel tones within the beadwork. These are the colors that I gravitate to in my daily life, and they were the best choice to represent myself. The three medallions on the necklace and earrings are a theme seen within Choctaw beadwork. The medallion necklaces are worn along with the collars that are

created using a form of net beading and are associated with Choctaw regalia worn by both men and women.

Hair combs are also an accessory worn by Choctaw women. Traditionally, these combs



Hair Comb

are created out of German Silver, also known as nickel, although in modern times, they are sometimes made of plastic and decorated with rhinestones. Once again, I continued with the diamond pattern on this piece, continuing the theme seen in the beadwork and on the dress's trim.

Pucker-toe moccasins are the final piece to



Pucker Toe Moccasins

complete this regalia. For these, I chose to use a heavier-weighted commercially tanned buckskin. This type of moccasin is typical of Southeastern tribes and is considered a soft-sole style. It does not utilize a thick sole made of rawhide, such as those made in the western plains. These are constructed with one piece of leather, with any adornment added after construction. Once again, I continued the geometric design on the moccasins, bringing the whole piece together.

Wanting to create a piece that reflects my life span transformation to the present, I created a modern regalia. One that represents a wide range of communities and is not directly connected to one particular tribe. The style originates in the traditional clothing of many Southeastern

tribes, which were pre-European in origin and have been revitalized with modern changes. It has been modified throughout the years to represent a dance style seen during pow-wows/gatherings. This style is called Women's Southern Buckskin and is the one I admired so much as a child watching my mother and other women dance the circle, seeing the fringe from their dresses sway as they stepped rhythmically to the drum beat. I always dreamed of the day I could make my own and join them.



Women's Southern Style Buckskin Dress and Accessories

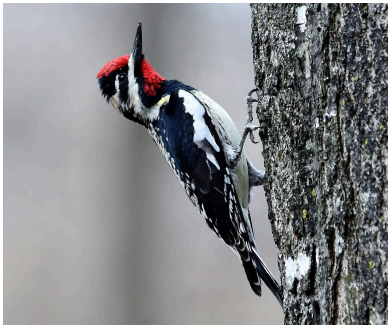
This regalia consists of 12 individual pieces that complete the work. Typically, these dresses and accessories take up to a year to create. By concentrating on this one piece and not working on anything else at the time, I was able to condense that time frame down to eight months.

For the beadwork on this piece, I went with a more contemporary floral design, including a conceptualized version of the Choctaw bird known to bring good news, the Biskinik (Yellow-bellied Sapsucker). The Choctaw name for this bird is one of the first Choctaw words I remember my grandfather teaching me. I also chose to

include buffalo nickels along the trim of the sleeves on this dress. The nickels are included to

remind me of the fond memories I have, receiving them as random gifts from him whenever he would find one in his pocket change.

With the color palette, I initially wanted to continue with the deep red and jewel tones I used in my previous piece. Instead, I decided to expand my use of color. While scrolling online, I found a photo that reminded me of Alaska winters and the beautiful sunrises I would view out my windows in the morning. Ultimately, this inspired the color palette I chose for the Southern Style Buckskin Dress. I wanted to bring in design aspects from my Choctaw culture and influences from my grandfather and combine them with influences from my new home, Alaska.



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (Biskinik)
Macaulay Library



Color Inspiration (Kotajarvi)



Conceptualized version with color inspiration

This dress consists of many different materials. As with the Choctaw Dress, I did not use a pattern to create the final piece. The dress construction comprises a shift as an undergarment to protect the leather, a skirt, and a top. Beads are both sewn directly onto the leather and attached as applique pieces. Individual pieces, such as hair ties and crowns, are backed with the same commercially tanned white buckskin I used to construct the dress. The hair ties include pieces of my first dance regalia, sections of an otter pelt, and abalone shells.

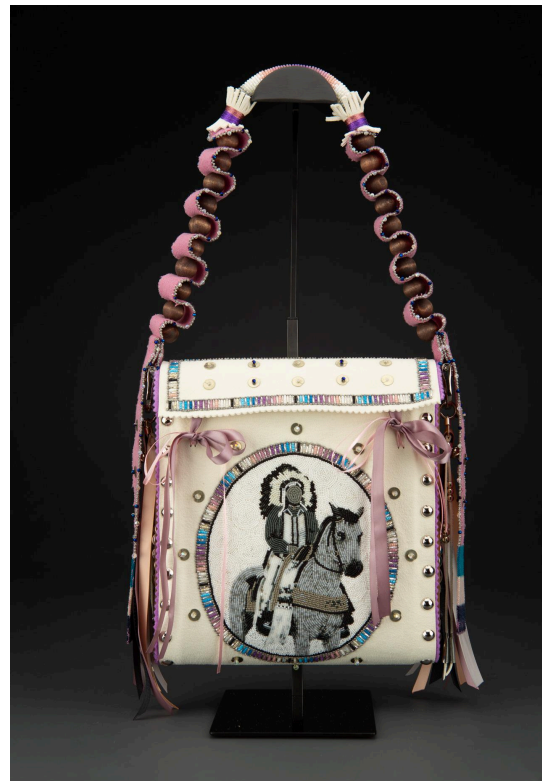
The medallion and breastplate necklaces are constructed using faceted glass beads, bone hair pipe, horse hair, and buffalo nickels. These items are also seen throughout the construction

and are incorporated to tie the piece together cohesively. For the drop on the back of the dress, I chose to use three banded wool trade cloth decorated with a beaded floral applique.

The belt is constructed using strap leather and nickel conchos. I have attached a white buckskin beaded pouch and knife sheath with twisted leather fringe, tin cones, horse hair, and vintage metal sequence. These adornments are also used on the hightop, hard-sole, and beaded moccasins that finish the regalia.



High-top Boot Moccasins



Dance Bag, *You Are Always by My Side*

I created a dance bag, *You Are Always by My Side*, to accompany this piece. Traditionally, dance bags are simple pieces of fabric or leather sewn together with a cloth or beaded handle with either leather or ribbon fringe and matching beadwork. However, I wanted to stay with the non-traditional theme of the dress and go a little out of the box. I incorporated different materials I used while in the BFA program and decided to go with wood side pieces as a structural

component of the bag. I also created more of a functional “purse” than the traditional dance bag would be. The handle is constructed using a wrapped beaded section, wooden balls, wire, and a beaded edge three-banded wool trade cloth to tie the piece in with the dress. On the side wooden pieces, I included an interpretation of a traditional Choctaw design symbolizing a coiled snake,



Elmer "Dutch" Crews



Bag detail

again tying it back to my culture. For the beadwork aspect of the bag, I wanted to have a more prominent beaded piece to adorn the front. I chose to honor my grandfather by beading a black-and-white portrait of him. I decided to use this photo of him that was taken on one of the many television shows and movies he worked on. I believe this one was from the mini-series *Lonesome Dove*. My inspiration for this was the work by Marcus Amerman, *Moonrise Over Little Bighorn*, which I spoke of previously.

I named this subsequent work *Graduation Regalia*. I have created a work incorporating modern items worn for graduation ceremonies. I made this work to represent the completion of this stage of my artistic journey. With this piece, I returned to the jewel-toned colors I typically use within my work, combining them with modern floral designs within the beadwork I did on

the graduation cap. I've also made a necklace of bone hair pipe and faceted glass beads, topped by stamped silver necklace caps. Southern-style dancers wear this style of necklace that connects back to my buckskin regalia. The final component of this piece is a multicolored ribbon skirt. These skirts are a modern aspect of Native clothing and have come to the forefront of Native women's apparel in recent years. They are created to represent womanhood, identity, and resilience. This piece combines traditional Native art, modern designs, and clothing with the current ceremonial aesthetics of Native students.



Graduation Cap



Graduation Regalia

With my final piece of clothing, *Tundra Warmth*, I wanted to create a piece using my skills related to regalia design and the knowledge I have gained while living and learning within the communities here in Alaska. I wanted to create an homage to the traditional regalia worn by several different Native communities within Alaska. I created a parka using the traditional method of not using a modern pattern but taking measurements directly from the person it is

being made for. This technique is very similar to how my other pieces are created, and I became familiar with it quite quickly. Not wanting to replicate a traditional parka, I let the construction techniques guide me in an inspired parka. I chose to use Pendelton wool, which reminded me of the Pendelton blankets my grandfather used to wrap me in while sitting around the dance circle



Inspired Parka, *Tundra Warmth*

in the evenings. However, I decided to go with the traditional fox ruff around the hood but extended it to wrap over to the shoulder, giving it a modern flair. I chose to continue the theme of Pendelton blankets with the use of blankets I received from my grandparents over the years as a base for my work within the gallery space.

My final three works are Native jewelry inspired by Navajo silversmiths and works created by my grandfather. These works were created to honor him and the knowledge of this astonishing art that he passed down to me. They are the culmination of his

influence and the ultimate adulation of his teachings. The first piece I created was a necklace constructed of individually created silver beads, graduating in size from smallest starting at 1/2" in diameter to 1 1/4" for the largest in the center. Two hand-cut and polished pieces of chrysocolla were bezel set and flanked on each side of the necklace, and another was mounted in a setting on the latch component. This piece is quite significant in weight, and the learning curve in creating the individual beads was considerate but worth it.



Pearls Abound, Front



Pearls Abound, Detail

The second piece is inspired by the belts I used to see my mother wear when I was a child. This style belt is called a concho belt and is a style the Navajo began making in the mid-1800s with influence from the Spanish. This style belt was trendy in the 1960s-1970's within the mainstream aesthetics of accessories. (Garland's) Constructed from a 21 gauge silver sheet, hand stamped, chased, with a centered bezel mounted zebra jasper stone and traditional copper Navajo style belt connection on the reverse side. I included six square conchos and seven smaller "butterfly" conchos, creating a modern finish to this piece.



Memories of Mom, Concho Belt

My final piece, *Silver Juliet Blossom*, is a ring inspired by the jewelry my grandfather would create. Consisting of nine hand-cut and polished Juliet's Crown cabochons bezel set on a piece of 22 gauge sheet silver and mounted on a wide shank to balance the sizable area of the mounting. I embellished this ring with twisted square stock silver wire and varying-sized solid silver balls. I finished this piece with a liver of sulfur, creating a black background that emphasizes the gold and silver within the Juliet's Crown.



Juliet's Blossom, Ring

Gallery Set Up:

While the nature of my work is a few works comprising multiple smaller pieces, I was concerned that my work would not fill the gallery enough to be visually appealing. To combat this problem, I proposed using a curtain/fabric to condense the space and create an entrance to draw you into a more intimate space to view my work. Not only did this remedy my spatial issues, but it also created the feeling of a sacred space in which to view the pieces. With that, I also lifted the work off the floor with risers that I covered with the Pendelton blanket mentioned

previously. The choice of including the Pendelton blankets helped not only fill the space more but was yet another connection to my grandfather and helped connect the pieces.

Upon entering the gallery, you are met with the show sign and stand with the artist's statement, sign-in book, and QR to contact the artist. As you are guided to the right following the fabric wall, I have placed *Tundra Warmth* as the first piece viewed as you enter the space, leading you to the left to continue into the remaining gallery area. As you enter the main viewing area, I placed my Choctaw dress and moccasins on the right, with *Memories of Mom* on the back wall. In the center of the room, on another platform, I placed the *Southern-style buckskin dress and Accessories* due to it needing a 360° viewing area. I placed *Graduation Regalia* along the left wall, aligning it with the other dresses. Finally, I placed *Pearls Abound* and *Juliet's Blossom* on a pedestal along the left side and fabric wall. I feel this filled the space nicely without overcrowding each piece and leaving plenty of room for people's movement throughout the space. I also included a sound composition by having the White Fish Bay Drum group play in the background. My grandfather used to enjoy listening to this group and has a strong connection with the regalia in this show. In the end, I was pleased with the layout and flow of the gallery.

Conclusion:

My love and inspiration for this work originated from traditional Choctaw regalia and jewelry pieces inspired by my grandfather, his connection to art, and the Native traditions of my new home, Alaska. The pieces tell a story of a journey of time through my different identities. The clothing and accessories that externally portray those differing aspects of that journey, my journey, and the journey I have traveled throughout my time in this program.

My goal with this body of work was not only to honor those before me who helped teach me the traditional ways of creating our art but also those before them who made it all possible to begin with. To help promote that momentum by inspiring current and future artists to create beautiful works and once again proving to the art world that Native Arts are just as meaningful, creative, and desirable as conventional art. I feel that I have met this goal with these pieces and that I have achieved above that which I had initially set out to do. My work has grown and improved through my time here, and I plan to continue that growth after my time here is complete.

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