

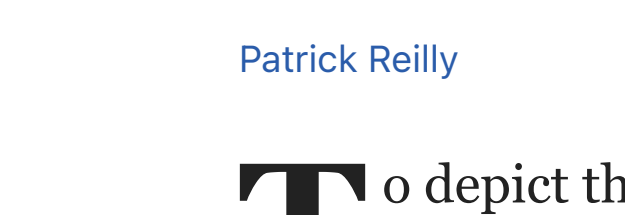
Contemporary Indigenous Voices on display at UM

Patrick Reilly Oct 14, 2019 0



Jason Clark, left, and James Bailey, a professor of art at the University of Montana, stand in the "Contemporary Indigenous Voices" exhibit in the University Center on the UM Campus on Monday afternoon. Everything in the show looks to the future but references the past in indigenous cultures through various styles of art.

TOMMY MARTINO, Missoulian



Patrick Reilly

To depict the ills of modern society, Jason Clark turns to the past.

One of his latest woodblock prints, currently hanging in a University of Montana gallery, depicts a bear fighting a Windigo, a man-eating giant from the oral tradition of Clark's Algonquin culture. The bear, he explained Monday, represents Ojibwe environmental activist Winona LaDuke. The Windigo stands for Big Oil; Clark carved pump jacks onto his chest.

He's one of seven Native American artists whose work is being showcased in UM's "Contemporary Indigenous Voices" exhibit at the University Center. The patterns and images may stretch back generations, Clark told a group of exhibit attendees Monday, but the way they're being used is entirely new.

"As you look around, it's really exciting to see that the work in here is completely contemporary, it's looking toward the future ... and yet you can see the roots of the past, you can see the roots of each culture in each one of these prints."

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The "X-ray" style he uses to depict animals, for instance, is part of the Woodlands school of painting popularized by Canadian Anishabe painter Norval Morriseau in the 1960s. "I'm part of the third generation (of artists) painting in this style."

He made his first print as a student in 1989, and got serious about the craft in the mid-1990s. One of Clark's colleagues, professor Jim Bailey, founded Matrix Press in 1998. He said that over "the last several years, we've been fortunate to print with seven Native artists." After some Montana lawmakers' **recent, unsuccessful push** to have the state formally recognize Indigenous Peoples' Day, Matrix Press decided to spotlight their contributions.

In the exhibit Monday, Clark said "in the last couple of years, there's been more investigation into what contemporary Native art looks like." The gallery show makes clear that it can look like a lot — and speak to a range of contemporary issues.

While the Windigo print is a reddish rectangle, Clark's other environmentally-themed work, "Repeat Offenders," is a symmetrical, black-and-white diamond, with a repeated polar-bear-on-cracking-ice pattern. Sara Siestroom of the Hanis Coos made three neat, 13-by-7 matrices of red whorls, with a thumbprint-sized space in the center of each. Beneath each of these grids was a photo of her hands in different poses — holding red cedar bark, clasped around an imaginary gun, and in the "hands up" position — a reference, Clark said, to the Trayvon Martin shooting. John Hitchcock of the Comanche, who had grown up near Fort Sill in Oklahoma, used a bomb pattern in one of his prints.

Other pieces had a gentler take on U.S. society — or none at all. Melanie Yazzie of the Diné or Navajo tribe had once taken an overt activist stance in her art, but, Clark says, she now "acknowledges these struggles and layers artwork with recuperative images." Joe Fedderson of the Colville tribe used spray paint and placed petroglyph stencils alongside power poles and parking lot lines. Duane Slick of the midwestern Meskwaki created Andy Warhol-like portraits of a coyote, while Oglala Lakota artist Molly Murphy-Adams adapted beadwork patterns of the Mid-Atlantic Lenape tribe to printmaking.

Their subjects and styles may vary, but Clark considers all the featured artists to be masters of their craft. "I am really honored to be part of this show," he said. "A lot of artists that you see here are my 'print heroes.'"

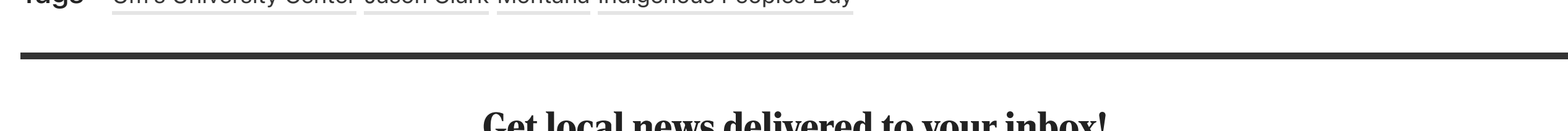
By partnering with Matrix Press, the artists are able to save about \$8,000 to \$10,000 worth of commercial work — and, by keeping half of the printed editions when their residency ends, are able to leave with as much as \$100,000 worth of sellable art. And along the way, they help train the next generation of printmakers. "These were all printed with the help of students," Clark said.

With Windigo and the polar bears now printed, he's looking to another environmentally-themed project, one exploring the possible restoration of the Great Plains' historic bison herds.

He invests himself in each of these images. But unlike with other art forms, he doesn't have to part ways with it when he's done. "With printmaking," he said, "you can make multiples."

The Contemporary Indigenous Voices exhibit will run through Oct. 25 on the third floor of the University Center Gallery.

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 "A lot of the patterns you see have a cultural reference for me," said Marwin Begaye, a Navajo (Diné) artist from New Mexico.

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