

http://www.montanakaimin.com/arts_and_culture/um-visiting-artist-links-art-to-the-history-of-indigenous-lands/article_4dd47000-c0e1-11ec-85c4-f7315bd35fe3.html

FEATURED | SPONSORED

UM visiting artist links art to the history of Indigenous lands

Haley Yarborough / Montana Kaimin

Apr 21, 2022



Printmaking artist Corwin Clairmont, 74, works from the fine art building on April 12, developing transparent layers of images and sketches of notable Missoula landmarks before transferring them onto photo silk screens for printing. Born in St. Ignatius and a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Clairmont was invited last week to work with UM art students as part of MATRIX Press's Visiting Artist Program.

Antonio Ibarra / Montana Kaimin

Folded in Corwin Clairmont's wallet is a miniature copy of the 1855 Treaty of Hellgate — a treaty that ceded a large number of Indigenous territories to the United States government. When Clairmont, who is a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, returned to Montana from a Los Angeles art institute in 1984, he wanted to re-immense himself in tribal culture and thought the treaty was a good place to start.

So he copied it, shrunk it down, printed it and folded it up into the size of a credit card, calling it his "gold card." Now 74-year-old Clairmont is linking the treaty to his artwork to tell the stories and history of the Salish, Kootenai and Kalispell people's Indigenous lands.

"A lot of the time you don't know the stories of the land," Clairmont said. "But art gives you a starting point as a reference to something, to tell that story."

This past week, Clairmont visited the University of Montana to share his artwork and knowledge with UM art students as part of MATRIX Press' Visiting Artist Program. His work focused on random locations throughout Missoula, where Clairmont and four other members of the MATRIX press used transparent screens and markers to trace and draw notable landmarks of specific locations. These places included the Missoula County Courthouse, Bonner Park and sections of the Clark Fork River.

The end product was stencils of these landmarks transposed onto colorful paper. The artwork included QR codes linked to a description of the locations, their history and documents about them. It also included the Treaty of Hellgate and acknowledged that Missoula is on the Indigenous land of the Salish, Kootenai and Kalispell people.

“All of these pieces are a part of our homeland,” Clairmont said. “This used to be an important gathering for us. Right here on campus was where we’d set up our teepees and harvest the Bitterroot. All of the configurations, the landscapes, those are all tied into our stories.”

Clairmont grew up on the Flathead reservation, where he first fostered his love for art by drawing on the walls of his house at 3 years old. He applied to the University of Montana in the '60s and graduated with his undergraduate before attending San Fernando State University and graduating from California State University with a Master of Arts.

Clairmont spent the next 14 years in the Los Angeles art scene and worked as the printmaking department head at what’s now Otis College of Art and Design. As a teacher, Clairmont met students from all across the world. He said he loved to see the way students incorporated their different cultures into their art, just as he does with his screen prints and other mixed media.

Now back at UM, he said he’s thankful to be teaching again. Over the course of his five-day stay, Clairmont and art students created 10 variations of 100 prints. Half of the prints will stay with Clairmont, and the rest will stay at the University with MATRIX, where some will be donated to the Missoula Art Museum.

Founded by James Bailey, MATRIX has been involved in UM’s art scene for more than 20 years. The organization brings in international and national artists, who are chosen based on student recommendations, art style and budget.

Bailey said he’s known Clairmont for a long time. He said MATRIX focuses on bringing Indigenous artists from the region to visit the University. Hailing from Ronan, Montana, Clairmont is a short car ride away and visits the University frequently.



James Bailey peels a colorful monotype layer doused in shades of green and blue as part of the printmaking process of Clairmont's work at the fine art building on April 12. Bailey volunteered to work last week with MATRIX Press during its Visiting Artist Program on campus.

Antonio Ibarra / Montana Kaimin

“He’s been really great with students,”

Bailey said. “They’ve been printmaking, mixing colors and engaging in all these different ways, through all these different mediums.”

In addition to his prints based on locations in Missoula, Clairmont also produced what he calls a “shadow image,” featuring silhouettes of four different figures: a bear, an eagle, a coyote and half a human making a peace sign.

Each figure represents a form of societal or cultural relevance. The coyote, for example, is part of the Salish traditional seasonal cycle, where its stories are only told in the winter when snow is on the ground.

While each figure tells a different story, all fall under the same theme — the shadows of people and animals who lived on the land for thousands of years.

“One significance of the shadow is it’s not really tangible; you can’t pick it up or touch it, but it’s still there,” Clairmont said. “It’s a reminder to me of all our past tribal people. You can’t see them, but they’re here and have been here for thousands of years.”

Haley Yarborough