Audio Guide Transcript

ACTION/ABSTRACTION REDEFINED

Modern Native Art

1940s–1970s

June 24–September 3, 2023
Ticketed Exhibition Galleries

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM
STOP 1
Ferring Gallery 212S
Introduction

Speakers

Min Jung Kim
Barbara B. Taylor Director
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Alex Marr
Associate Curator of Native American Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

[Min]
Hello, I’m Min Jung Kim, Barbara B. Taylor Director of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

I am delighted to welcome you to the audio guide for Action/Abstraction Redefined: Modern Native Art, 1940s–1970s. This exhibition highlights groundbreaking paintings, sculptures, textiles, and works on paper by Native American studio artists from the postwar era. Combining styles, media, and methods of International Modernism with motifs and subjects from ancestral Native arts, the works in this exhibition expand the narratives of midcentury abstraction. To tell you more, I would like to introduce Alex Marr, associate curator of Native American art.

[Alex]
Thank you, Min.
Ninety-one works trace the emergence of the contemporary Native American art movement in the postwar era. By the late 1940s some Indigenous artists began to combine abstractions from ancestral art forms with the vocabularies of Modern art. These early explorations opened possible trajectories for Native artists to move beyond an inherited genre of figural painting. However, entrenched economic and aesthetic systems continued to limit Indigenous artistic expression.

In 1962 the founding of the Institute of American Indian Arts marked a turning point. Most paintings, sculptures, textiles, and works on paper in this exhibition were made by students at IAIA. Experimenting directly with materials while studying Native American cultural heritage, students sparked an outpouring of innovation that continues to reverberate today.
As the first ticketed exhibition at the Saint Louis Art Museum to focus on Native American art from the 20th century, this presentation results from a collaboration with the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts at IAIA.

This audio guide features the voices of many artists in the exhibition. We encourage you to experience this guide in any order that you like. You may follow it in numeric sequence or pick and choose. You can locate each featured work by following the floorplan on this webpage or by identifying the audio icon on gallery labels.

Whether you are listening from home or the exhibition galleries, I hope you enjoy this audio guide to *Action/Abstraction Redefined: Modern Native Art, 1940s–1970s.*
My name is Phil Deloria. I’m the Leverett Saltonstall Professor of History at Harvard University and the author of *Becoming Mary Sully: Toward an American Indian Abstract*.

This abstract image of radio host Edwin C. Hill is one of 134 such works made between the late 1920s and the mid-1940s by my great-aunt Susan Deloria, also known as Mary Sully, a name drawn from a family genealogy that traced back to the 19th-century portrait painter Thomas Sully. The more immediate branch of that genealogy was Yankton Dakota.

Sully spent her life in the company of her sister, the Dakota ethnographer Ella Deloria, and I’ve come to think that she created these drawings as a kind of artistic ethnography of her own. Sully commented on American popular culture, drawing abstract images of musicians, actors, politicians, and other assorted characters. Taken together, they capture the feel of the nation itself, the texture of the place in the years surrounding the Great Depression. Taken as individual pieces, they try to capture personality. In the top panel, there’s a gestural play with evocative symbols and icons, then an abstract design pattern in the middle, and in the bottom panel, an Indigenous-inflected translation of the very essence of the person.

Mary Sully took herself seriously as an artist—though not many of those around her shared that view—and these works were almost discarded on several occasions. But they were not . . . and today we can recognize them as a critical moment—an early moment—in American Indian artists’ embrace of abstraction, crafted here in an idiom that spoke out of Great Plains women’s aesthetic traditions and to American Modernism.
In the following excerpt from a 1975 interview, Lloyd “Kiva” New speaks about his successful atelier in Scottsdale and how he began to screen-print textiles.

I’ve always had a feeling with that kind of general approach to art that I could do a fairly creditable job of designing a chair or a handbag or a book or what have you. Well, it turned out, I just got plunged into this thing because of circumstances—happened to be the Navajo kids who came [were] working in leather, so we picked up on leather, and that was it. I ran on to the Cherokee weaving, so we turned to that. And we produced garments, very simple garments, out of those materials that we were able to sell from $500 to $1,500 per garment—which was the equivalent to, I guess, contemporary Paris prices for well-known designers.

So, then I finally tired to an extent of that and moved on to the designing of fabrics and the printing of my own fabrics. So, I set up a huge workshop with 30-yard tables in which I was able to apply my concept of Indian colors, my concept of Indian designs, onto 30 yards of fine silk, English woolens, cottons, all kinds of fabrics. And those we were able to then—either to sell by the yard or made up again in what we called vertical operation because I had my own design staff, my own sewing staff, my own craftpeople, and I did the designing and the business management part of it.
My name is Maxine Toya, and I am from Jemez Pueblo. I’m a retired teacher and an artist.

I’m very influenced by my culture. So, I use that a lot. But when I come to something like this, I’m looking at someone, someone who inspired me, perhaps there at the school, and probably wanted to try something along those lines of what I liked about that person’s work. And one person that I admired also, during my painting semester was Dan Namingha. And he inspired me in a lot of ways in my painting. Even today when I paint, I think about Dan. And those things that inspire you at that time—amazing how they’re still with you. And you think about them, and you want to keep doing it and keep evolving. This is what this is, for me at that time, is I was beginning to evolve because I was still very fixed as a Pueblo student when I first got there. But over the years, as I spent more time with other students from other tribes, and I was beginning to get influenced and inspired. So that might have happened that way with this piece.
In the following audio excerpt Alfred Young Man speaks about his painting *Indian Blanket*.

And I would branch off constantly from what I was doing. I wouldn’t just stick with one image—I would explore other things, try to broaden my horizon. And this was an Indian blanket. I never realized I painted it so large. I surmise that Indians wear blankets. They put blankets on their couches, on their beds, in your cars, and I thought I’d just paint one. Who painted a blanket before?
Yeah, my name is Neil Parsons, and I’m enrolled Blackfeet.

And I was one of the earlier faculty members at IAIA. Lloyd New came out to Montana to my ranch, to interview me to come to work there at IAIA. And so, I did, and I had a wonderful experience there. I decided to teach there because I’d always been interested in my Native American heritage, in art. And here was a chance to go and experience some Native students and artists from other Indian locations, Native American locations in the United States. And so, it was, it was a good opportunity, and I jumped at it. It was amazing. It was an amazing experience.

I was drawn to hard-edged abstraction, which sort of sprang out of Plains Indian beadwork. How was I introduced to Abstract Expressionism? Yes, that’s a good question, because I was introduced to Abstract Expressionism where I went to school here in Montana State University in Bozeman—at that time it was Montana State College. And most of my instructors there were very much into the New York school and the New York Abstract Expressionist movement. My work has always been, as we can see by both of those paintings, has always been horizontally inspired, and I think that horizontal inspiration comes from having been brought up on the plains because the plains are horizontal. [Laughs] Even before 1950 there was abstraction, and there always has been abstraction in Plains Indian art. And teaching at IAIA, it only added fuel to the fire. [Laughs] Pretty much, you know?
My name is Anita Fields. I'm Osage and Muscogee. I was born in Hominy, Oklahoma, on the Osage Reservation. I am a textile artist and ceramist.

When I was a child, the kind of cultural arts, or community arts, that I was exposed to, I believe came in the form of attending social gatherings, Osage social gatherings—you know, ceremonies, things within our community that were just every, you know—celebrations. And so, this is where people would wear our traditional clothing. And so, being exposed to traditional patterns, colors, design at the Institute of American Indian Arts, we were really encouraged to look at our histories, to look at our individual tribal histories, to look at where we came from.

It was really exciting to be able to be with young people. We were from different communities and different tribes but moving along with each other in this journey of understanding where you come from and how to start putting that together in terms of expression, in terms of creativity, in terms of making paintings, pottery, sewing, printmaking, photography. And experimentation was highly encouraged. This idea of abstract really played a lot into my work at that time. And still does. I mean, sometimes I'm very surprised that when I look at just the beginnings, some of my work, how still—I'm still playing with those ideas. They still come up in terms of function and form.

I also think it's really interesting that the colors I used in that woodblock are colors that I'm still pretty attached to today. Especially in terms of the clay woodblock. We start, I think, we started out with linoleum woodblock, again, a progression of techniques. Yeah, and I remember trying to, having to figure out how I was layering the different colors now that each, that would be a different block.
My name is Earl Eder. I'm Lakota from Montana. I was raised in a little farm community, Poplar, Montana.

I think painting was my best because I put all the effort into it. And I asked Mr. McGrath onetime—I was kind of stumped. And he said: “Well, just pick out a piece of a beadwork, a section of it, and then blow it up, and then you will see, you’ll find something there as you look at it more.” And I was kind of stumped at the time, and he just said, “Go ahead—just blow it up.” And it came out really well. Then after that, I started reading about the winter count and hide paintings. And then I really got into it. It's just, it was almost an obsession. So, I know the kids today, they said, there's nothing to paint or nothing like that. But as an Indian, you have a lot of cultural background—you have beadwork, you have hide paintings, you have all kinds of stuff.

Most of us came to the institute and we were painting small, small stuff, you know, 8 by 10. And our instructor said, “Well, just paint larger, and it might even set you free and see what you can do.” So, we were doing larger canvases and just trial and error. All these people were thrown into a cauldron, and they all had talent at that time. And maybe it was just kind of a hit-and-miss thing, but boy, at the time, everybody was chipping in, and it was such a great time.
My name is Linda Lomahافتewa. I'm originally from Arizona. I'm Hopi and Choctaw.

Coming to Santa Fe, IAIA, everything was all, it was all focused on the arts and cultural—using our cultural background. The Abstract movement at that time, the teachers would show us examples, like slides, and talk about them in classes. And that was our exposure to Abstract Expressionism.

So this piece, *The Quiet Land, the Warm Land*, during the time that we were in the painting class, we all painted in oils. At this time, I was doing a lot of landscape painting in the abstract form. It was about trying to remember what it was like out in Arizona, and it's not that much different from New Mexico, but the desert is a little bit different. And so, it was just like trying to remember, I guess, thoughts and feelings that I had of the landscape. So that's what this piece was about.

Again, just experimenting with a lot of the drip method techniques. We used a lot of turpentine, which is highly toxic, that you're not supposed to use, but you know, we all did it, so . . . Again, thinking about landscape and what it's like to be out in this kind of landscape. It is a quiet time and a peaceful time that you can just be with yourself. I would have to say that that connection of how the landscape looks, again, because these are dark colors in this painting. It looks to me kind of like a nighttime, nightscape painting.
The following audio excerpt features Mike Zillioux, who discusses his painting *The Day Jackson Pollack Became a Christian*.

What I remember is, even before it started, I went to a man who’s passed now. His name was Carl Sosi. He made our frames. And then we stretched the canvas on them. And he made it. He said he wanted it to be imposing. And to this day I look at it—it’s still imposing, that piece. The size of it—it’s not square. But when I started it, it’s kind of tongue-in-cheek, because a lot of people think it’s a drip. But if you look at it with your eyes kind of closed, it’s not the drip. There’s a series of what I want to call it, like, shadow people that are based in there that you wouldn’t see unless I told you. There, everybody thinks it’s a drip, but I didn’t drip a lot. I put those in there. And then I didn’t fear putting a buckskin cross in there because what it talked about was that Jackson Pollack became a Christian, and I put the buckskin cross in there for Native Americans, and then I drew some paint on there and put it on there as well as additional processes, and I think there are dots up on the top. But the color itself has real richness, a real organic feel. That’s what I wanted, was that richness. But that piece is a real strong piece. They say it’s salt in there. I thought it was sand, but I don’t remember. But it has a very organic shape to it, and that’s how I wanted it done. If you look at it, it’s not just over and over and over. It’s very stylized, and the richness stands out even to this day.
STOP 11
1960s Exhibitions
Gallery 242C
Life Within

Speakers

Alex Marr
Associate Curator of Native American Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

Phyllis Fife
Artist
Muscogee (Creek)

[Alex]
In this commentary Phyllis Fife talks about her painting Life Within.

[Phyllis]
I was in a studio that was shared with Dave Montana and Earl Eder, and I thought they were really advanced. Their artwork was way more mature than anything that I attempted to do. I remember when I started, I was probably—I really wanted privacy to apply paint to the canvas. And because I had no experience, I didn't have experience using good art materials. I experimented a lot, and this is what I remember. And as I, you know, of course, you had exposure to what other students were doing. And that was a big influence on me too. I mean, I think, whether it's conscious or not, I think that happens.
In the following audio excerpt artist Kay WalkingStick shares her thoughts on her work *Personal Icon*.

Painting has often been a search and discovery activity for me. I was searching for meaning in 1975. Searching for a way to address my thoughts and feelings about being an Indian and about being a woman in a male-dominated art world. I was also looking for a way to paint that was uniquely mine, yet still alluding to the contemporary art scene. I was trying to bring everything together—for myself. I focused upon a shape, a simple arc, which is a portion of a circle, a festoon, the negative shape around a stretched fabric, a hide, or the top of a tepee. In *Personal Icon* the negative shapes around the large central motif are arcs. The simplicity and universality of this shape spoke to me, and I have used it in various ways for many years.

The painting is made with a variety of layers of paint. The first layer on the raw canvas is ink poured over the entire stretch of the canvas. Then a layer of gesso on the areas I wished to paint further. Next, a layer of acrylic paint augmented with saponified wax to make the plastic appear more organic. Finally, I made a very thin line from corner to corner of the large stained central figure to secure this central shape. All these layers resulted in a simple painting that has a complex manufacture. The wide border of stained ink in the painting is livelier than the central area and seems to come forward even though it is physically the first layer of paint. The central area implies a landscape or skyscape, or perhaps simply a hide shape.
In the end, what the viewer ultimately sees is out of my control. But I believe in the power of painting to convey ideas—big ideas. I would hope this painting reminds you of what you have seen and experienced in our natural world and that the simplest words or images can have great weight in our lives.