



Ga ni tha, Three Native Women, and the Venice Biennale

By John Paul Rangel

The Venice Biennale is arguably the largest, oldest-continuing, and most prestigious art event in the world. While some Native artists exhibited in national pavilions, others, such as the women of *Ga ni tha*, have carved out their own Indigenous space.

EVERY YEAR, NATIVE ARTISTS in the Northern Hemisphere prepare and travel to major art shows like the Santa Fe Indian Market and the Heard Museum Guild Indian Fair and Market. These fairs have garnered reputations for bringing not only diversity but also excellence in Native North American art. Over the last couple of decades, museums, tribes, and colleges have initiated markets with similar formats that occur throughout the year. These juried art markets provide Native artists the opportunity to exhibit, network, sell their work, and earn a living as a working artist. For many Indigenous artists, these shows are a viable way to represent their art and culture while targeting an audience specifically interested or invested in the production and consumption of Native art. The work generated for these types of exhibitions is often targeted toward the collector.

Art, however, is also produced in the context of the greater art world and represented on a global or international

level. Many issues in this discussion extend beyond the scope of this article, but some address what is being produced for consumption, exhibition format, and identifying as “Native American” or “American Indian” art. What happens when a Native artist exhibits at a national or international level with artists from other countries, other ethnicities, or in another country? How does this affect the production or reception of the work? How is artwork produced by Native artists in conversation, or not, with artists from other hemispheres?

On the far northeast coast of Italy lies Venice, a city surrounded by water and renowned for its influence on the arts, architecture, and literature. Venice is famous for its canals and gondolas, the Piazza San Marco, the Rialto Bridge, and of course centuries of art and impressive architecture around almost every corner. Since 1895, Venice has hosted the Venice Biennale, an international art fair that occurs every two years. Artists from many countries participate and display their

work in two main areas, the Giardini and the Arsenale. This show attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors. While the official Venice Biennale occurs in two specific locations within national pavilions, other official and unofficial exhibition sites span the city. One of these sites featured three Native American artists in *Ga ni tha*, an exhibition to coincide with the opening days of the official Venice Biennale.

Art historian, professor, and curator Nancy Marie Mithlo, PhD (Chiricahua Apache) staged a weeklong exhibition featuring Indigenous artists Marcella Ernest (Bad River Ojibwe), Maria Hupfield (Wasauksing Ojibwe), and Keli Mashburn (Osage) at We Crociferi in the Cannaregio district. The exhibition entitled *Ga ni tha* included photography, performance, and film. Filmmaker Marcella Ernest and photographer Keli Mashburn presented the collaborative photography and film project *Ga.ni.tha*. Joined by Brooklyn-based performance artist Maria Hupfield in her newest work *Jiimaan (Canoe)*, this artistic team brought



OPPOSITE and ABOVE: Marcella Ernest (Bad River Ojibwe) and Keli Mashburn (Osage), *Ga.ni.tha*, 2013, video screenshots.

an Indigenous presence to the world's oldest international arts exposition. Together they represent a new generation of Native women artists working across disciplines referencing the body, land, and culture through action, construction, and symbolic representation.

A Collaborative Film Installation

Mashburn in collaboration with Ernest seeks to transform the classic landscapes and imagery of the American prairie through photography, video, and sound. “The prairie fire exemplifies death and renewal,” says Mashburn. “The tension isn’t so much between earth and sky. The tension is in what happens between them, the cycle of destruction and rebirth.”

The filmmakers call the piece “a performance of sound that weaves language, song, prayer and land with resonance of the Osage.” The two converge on the concept of *ga.ni.tha*, an old Osage word dating hundreds of years whose meaning can signify obliteration and rebirth, chaos, disorder, and apocalypse. Mashburn explains that a symbiotic relationship exists between the land and the Osage, annihilation and new growth, and chaos or disorder and balance. She illustrates this through the metaphor of a prairie fire. Mashburn’s large-format photographs are stark and quiet landscapes—the prairies in Oklahoma, and her home.

Keli Mashburn grew up on a ranch on the Osage Reservation in Northeastern

Oklahoma. She studied philosophy at the University of Tulsa and at the University of Oklahoma before studying photography at the Institute of American Indian Arts. Having developed film in a traditional darkroom beginning in 1998, Mashburn employs various experimental techniques to produce black-and-white photographic prints from 35mm film. Her pieces “explore the ethereal realm between physical place and personal myth.”

Throughout the course of the exhibition, the film is projected on the courtyard wall in the evenings, and the sounds permeate the space with Indigenous presence. The photographs, video, and sound become the installation *Ga.ni.tha*. Mashburn’s photographs appear in the film, which Marcella Ernest uses as a primary medium for contemporary, digital storytelling.

Ernest, an interdisciplinary video artist, received her bachelor of arts degree in Ethnic Studies with a minor in Film Studies from Mills College, and her master’s degree in Indigenous Documentary Research Methodologies and Film Production from the Native Voices program at the University of Washington. Currently, Ernest is completing an interdisciplinary doctoral degree. Through her research of contemporary Native art through Indigenous experimental films, digital music, and video performance, she seeks to understand how members of colonized groups use video for cultural and political expressions of resistance.

Ernest incorporates concepts of memory, identity formation, citizenship,

gender, and family in her work through layers of sound and images. For *Ga.ni.tha*, Ernest creates a dynamic and rhythmic presentation of Mashburn’s photography by interlacing it with dance footage combined with various environmental sounds and Osage Elonska songs. This film is Ernest’s interpretation of the concept inherent in the word *ga.ni.tha* as she signifies the connection of Osage language, culture, tradition, and memory with the land.

Live Performance Art

Sculpture and performance-based artist Maria Hupfield’s contribution to this exhibition is a site-specific work entitled *Jiimaan*, a 20-minute live performance with a nine-foot canoe she handmade with industrial felt. “I use the canoe as a vehicle and metaphor to create new connections to memory, the body, and movement,” says Hupfield. “All areas of the public space are activated from the performer’s body, to surface, altering the site as extended social space of resilience and personal empowerment.” In the days prior to the exhibition, Hupfield created her felt canoe in the form of an Anishinaabe birch-bark, hunting canoe specifically for the performance. Over the three days, she performed with it in the center of the courtyard—next to, around, and on top of a Venetian well, at dusk. She integrated various objects such as bottled water, a freestanding microphone, gold-and-white, elbow-length evening gloves embellished with Venetian fringe, a colorful ribbon necklace with jingles, a

wine glass, a blue tarp with orange tape patterns, red tights, gold sneakers, and a string of ribbons. By the end of the performance, Hupfield creates a relationship to the canoe in different ways and states, “How one sees the object evolves over time and changes based on how I am using it. That speaks to perceptions or assumptions around material culture, material culture outside ourselves; how meaning isn’t always fixed and can be activated together through shared experience.”

While some of the elements can be seen as culturally specific, Anishinaabe references, including Anishinaabe language and song, Hupfield wants aspects of her performances to be accessible and views her work as relevant and relatable across cultures to a broad audience. Central to her work, she also uses sound, movement, and interaction with the audience to activate space in her performances. Hupfield says the canoe changed and became different things: “a body, my body, a big fish, history, culture. Sometimes I had to jump over it, carry it, drape it over my head, suspend it over the well, or sit it on the edge.” She sees the object and the performance as unexpected poetry to be experienced from several points of entry, not only for her, but also for the audience.

In keeping with the organizing theme for the show, Hupfield says,

*I relate to the Osage concept of *ga.ni.tha* through water vessels; jiimaan is the Anishinaabemowin word for ‘canoe.’ Being from the Great Lakes region and home of 30,000 islands, it is common practice to use a canoe to embody balance, relate physically to place, recall old memories, and forge new ones.*

Currently based in Brooklyn, Maria Hupfield is originally from Canada and a member of Wasauksing First Nation, Ontario. She received a 2013 Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant and 2014 AIM residency at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Her performance *Contain That Force: 7 Solo Acts* was presented by the SAW Video Media Arts Centre in Ottawa for the exhibition *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art*. She performed *All Is Moving* in

response to the paintings of Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Sqelix’u-Métis-Shoshone) at Accola Griefen Gallery in Chelsea, New York. She is represented by Galerie Hugues Charbonneau in Montreal.

Earlier Native Presences in Venice

While Ernest and Mashburn have collaborated previously, this is the first time these three women have exhibited together. Curator Nancy Marie Mithlo, who has been a driving force in creating



Nancy Mithlo. Photo: Keli Mashburn (Osage).

a contemporary Native art presence during the Venice Biennale since 1999, created this landmark opportunity for these artists. Mithlo has worked with many accomplished Native artists in these curated shows that happen during the biennale: Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Sqelix’u-Métis-Shoshone), Harry Fonseca (Nisenan Maidu, 1946-2006), Bob Haozous (Chiricahua Apache), Frank LaPena (Nomtipom Maidu-Wintu), Kay WalkingStick (Cherokee Nation), Mateo Romero (Cochiti), Richard Ray Whitman (Yuchi-Muscogee), Shelley Niro (Mohawk), Lori Blondeau (Cree-Saulteaux), Tom Jones (Ho-Chunk), Andrea Carlson (Ojibwe), John Hitchcock (Comanche), Emily Arthur (Eastern Band Cherokee descent), Melanie Yazzie (Navajo), Marwin Begaye (Navajo), C.

Maxx Stevens (Seminole-Muscogee), and Dyani White Hawk (Sicangu Lakota).

“The exhibitions I have helped to lead are largely independent. However, we did have official biennale sanction in 1999, 2001, and 2003,” explains Mithlo. “The University of Venice and the City of Venice hosted us from 2007 to 2013. Our initiatives are known by the Indigenous protocols of being long-term, mutually meaningful, reciprocal, and with mentorship. We recognize that many of the people of Venice consider themselves to be Indigenous and our work with our Venetian colleagues is intended to be exemplary of Indigenous research methodologies.”

After 16 years, Mithlo has collaborated and forged relationships with Italian institutions, curators, and academics, while also mentoring a number of emerging Native artists and scholars. These initiatives provide Native artists with the opportunity to contextualize contemporary Native art within global contemporary art.

Indigenous presence at the Venice Biennale has a long history. The first appearance of Native Americans at the biennale was in 1932, when the US pavilion hosted artists Ma Pe Wi (Zia), Santiago Cruz (Ohkay Owingeh), Oqwa Pi (San Ildefonso), Tonita Peña (San Ildefonso), Awa Tsireh (San Ildefonso), Julian Martinez (San Ildefonso), Pen Yo Pin (Tesuque), Tse Ye Mu (San Ildefonso), Otis Polelonema (Hopi), and Fred Kabotie (Hopi). The Kiowa Five also exhibited that year at a separate location. Native scholar and curator Gerald McMaster (Plains Cree) curated Edward Poitras (Métis) in the Canadian pavilion in 1995. In 2005, Rebecca Belmore (Ojibwe) exhibited at the Canadian pavilion. The Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian sponsored two exhibitions of Native American artists featuring James Luna (Luiseño) in 2005 and Edgar Heap of Birds (Southern Cheyenne) in 2007. Later this year, Imago Mundi’s *Contemporary North American Indigenous Art* exhibit will show at a collateral event in Venice.

While official, national representation is significant, Mithlo states, “It is



Maria Hupfield (Wasauksing Ojibwe), *Jimaan*, 2015, performance art. Photo: John Paul Rangel (Mestizo).

critical to highlight the Indigenous-led initiatives and to discern between representation at national pavilions, in the biennale-curated events in the Arsenale, collateral pavilions, private galleries, and independent venues.” These Indigenous-led initiatives provide the artists the ability to represent their artwork on their own terms without conventional restraints of adhering to national or institutional guidelines or restrictions. The *Ga ni tha* artists independently garnered institutional funding but did not directly represent any particular institution or organization. The *Ga ni tha* exhibit is made possible by support from the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation, the Osage Nation Foundation, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Autry Museum, Occidental College, and We Crociferi.

Reflections on the Exhibit

The *Ga ni tha* exhibition created a unique opportunity for these three Native artists to showcase their work at an international venue. Mithlo conveyed that the intention with bringing Native artists to the Venice Biennale over the last 16 years involves developing a space for “self-legitimacy and empowerment” while encouraging “communication between artists about art and their role as artists within communities.”

Maria Hupfield says, “Having the opportunity to create and exhibit work outside of my traditional territories, in another continent alongside other artists of the same age who are also Native and female, is a first and a real dream come

true. When we weren’t working on the show, there was always so much to talk about.”

Marcella Ernest reflected on being able to experience the biennale and says,

Many of the shows I attended were deconstructing the meanings and values of society ... I think very intentionally, the Marxist preoccupation with deconstructing hegemony was present in all of the shows and artists representing. Visiting the other shows and spending time with the installations were very intellectual experiences, whereas the works were overwhelmingly saturated in critiques of capitalist societies. Such a critique completely motivated me to bring my art to a more political level in a more fearless and critical way.



Keli Mashburn (Osage) with her photography installation. Photo: John Paul Rangel (Mestizo).

Keli Mashburn was very happy for her work to reach a larger audience and that *ga.ni.tha*, although an old Osage word, had universal concepts that people could relate to through their own experience. Mashburn remarks,

It's such a big deal, adding Indigenous voices to the global conversation at the biennale. I feel like finally we are emerging from this dark place where we coexist with fantastical caricatures of what non-Natives believe a Native is or should be. This emergence allows something as simple as self-expression to transcend into something more like a challenge, or opportunity, to counteract the negative effects of such gross misrepresentations. Dr. Mithlo has worked tirelessly for almost two decades to curate Native visions by Native artists for this particular platform, the result being a more dynamic glimpse into the realities that unify us all.

This exhibit culminated in two symposia that gave the artists the chance to contextualize their work and their roles as artists within their communities. The first included the three *Ga ni tha* artists who spoke about their work individually and their participation in the exhibition. The second symposium was an introduction for two Hawaiian artists, Kapulani Landgraf and Kaili Chun, who will exhibit during the 2017 Venice Biennale.

While the *Ga ni tha* artists were each working from their own cultural specificity, their work reflected universal themes also present in many of the other exhibitions in the biennale and around the city. These themes included attention to material circumstances, memory, chaos, disorder, symbolism, metaphor, the absence/presence paradigm, and erasure, to name a few. As Ernest commented, many of the exhibitions across the city had strong political themes or were tied

to cultural specificity. The biennale is a celebration of international contemporary art and cultural expression. It was remarkable that, on a global art-making level, people are expressing the same concerns with preserving culture, tradition, memory, and resisting oppression. It was great to see representation from Indigenous North America among these shows. *Ga ni tha* is an exhibition of film, photography, and performance by three young, highly talented Native women artists who have made their mark on the international art scene.

Curator website:
nancymariemithlo.com

Artists' websites:
marcellakwe.com
mariahupfield.wordpress.com
kelimashburn.com