

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT: Identi-Tees

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Standing present in a white t-shirt against a white background, I move my hand towards the camera, beginning the process of picking up and putting on t-shirt after t-shirt after t-shirt, like layers of skin. Each layer added to my body makes it more difficult for me to breathe, until I feel physically unable to put on one more shirt. My Cherokee heritage is not a commodity that I am able to try on and remove at will. I am a registered member of the Cherokee Nation, and I have always been interested in what Cherokee culture means to my family and therefore myself, since I grew up in mainstream American society. Also, the fact that my physical appearance does not immediately indicate my Native ancestry, according to stereotypical assumptions of what a Native American is supposed to look like, makes it easy and difficult to exist in my own skin.

Images from my childhood informed my understanding that looking Indian was visualized a specific way. Throughout my adolescence, in order to show myself as Native, I would wear t-shirts that were printed with representations and imagery of Native Americans. In *Identi-Tees*, I try to understand this practice by conducting visual anthropological research on myself, questioning my modes of thinking and behavior, which are influenced by the popular media and photography. I use the camera to collect as much objective information as possible with the hope of gleaning insight into my own subjectivity. My primary research question in making this video is, “How does the act of using a t-shirt as a medium serve as a marker in the continued expression of Indigenous identity?” The “marketing and making” of an identity may be closely entwined: “commercial representations may shape people’s cultural identities as well as affect notions of belonging and cultural citizenship in public life”.¹ Much of my work, up to this point, had been about a broad range of issues regarding Native American identity, but had not addressed my own family. I found myself reticent to make works that dealt directly with my family, not wanting to be labeled an academic “navel gazer.” In *Identi-Tees*, I clearly confront both.

I use performance, an indigenous mode of knowledge production, to question the camera’s power over representation and the dissemination of knowledge. “The body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body”.² Instead of trying to escape or subvert the surveillance of the ‘imperial gaze,’ a concept introduced by E. Ann Kaplan that asserts and centers a white Western male perspective, I confront its historical use and shift this power by posing and confronting the camera lens and indirectly confronting the

audience through the camera's one-point perspective, by carefully controlling the viewer's gaze.

I am interested in the tension created by my literal navel gazing, which requires that the viewer choose between watching my face or the imagery on the t-shirts, all while I move in silence. On the wall of Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds' *Most Serene Republics* exhibition, he writes of *The Legacy of Show Indians*:

The warriors had no rebuttal while in Italy or Europe and were viewed as silent. They had no voice while they were there to speak back about their circumstance as "Show Indians." It is a human right to have a voice and be heard. So often our Native American heritage is represented by silent faces, stoic in their repression.³

I use video to confront this act of subjugation demonstrating my own active resistance in silence. My movements and deliberate silence are meant to create a contemplative space to provoke agency in the viewer. Rupturing the steady stream of Native American representations are t-shirts I created that read "Oh, now I can tell, I see it in your cheekbones," "So, what percentage are you,?" and "Does alcoholism run in your family?" With these T-shirts, I question why one certain phrase is socially acceptable, while another is not them into the present. However, in my performance including these phrases I enter into a process of healing by addressing the subject of generational trauma that exists in my mind and body, so that that it does not consume me.

In Diana Taylor's article, "Dancing with the Zapatista's," she writes about vulnerability "not as a condition or state of being, but rather as a *doing* and a relationship of power," which "has been structurally imposed and economically organized from colonial times until the present"⁴. I experience and resist this vulnerability by choosing my body as my medium of expression to tell my personal narrative, making visible my internal struggle. Exposing myself, I reveal invisible psychological and emotional states—both positive and negative. I challenge a world that projects onto me stereotyped images that are either romanticized, hostile, or hurtful of how a Native American person should look and dress. While I am free to remove the T-shirts at any time, the accumulated images and text remain written on my body, on camera, and in my psyche. Through the act of putting on and then removing the T-shirts in front of the camera, I question these representations of Native American stereotypes. By sharing my personal experience in a way that deals with the real pain and suffering but that does not alienate or blame the viewer, I ask the audience to question their views of reality by sharing the questioning of my own.

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Plate 1. Marcie Rose Brewer, *Bloodroot Basket*, 2016, inkjet pigment print, 40" x 40".



Plate 2. Marcie Rose Brewer, *Feather Cape*, 2015, sculpture with commercial onion bag, plastic bags.



Plate 3. Marcie Rose Brewer, *Homeland Security*, 2014, video still.



Plate 4. Marcie Rose Brewer, *Now I Can See*, 2014, video still.

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Plate 5. Marcie Rose Brewer, *Indian Prince\$\$*, 2014, video still.

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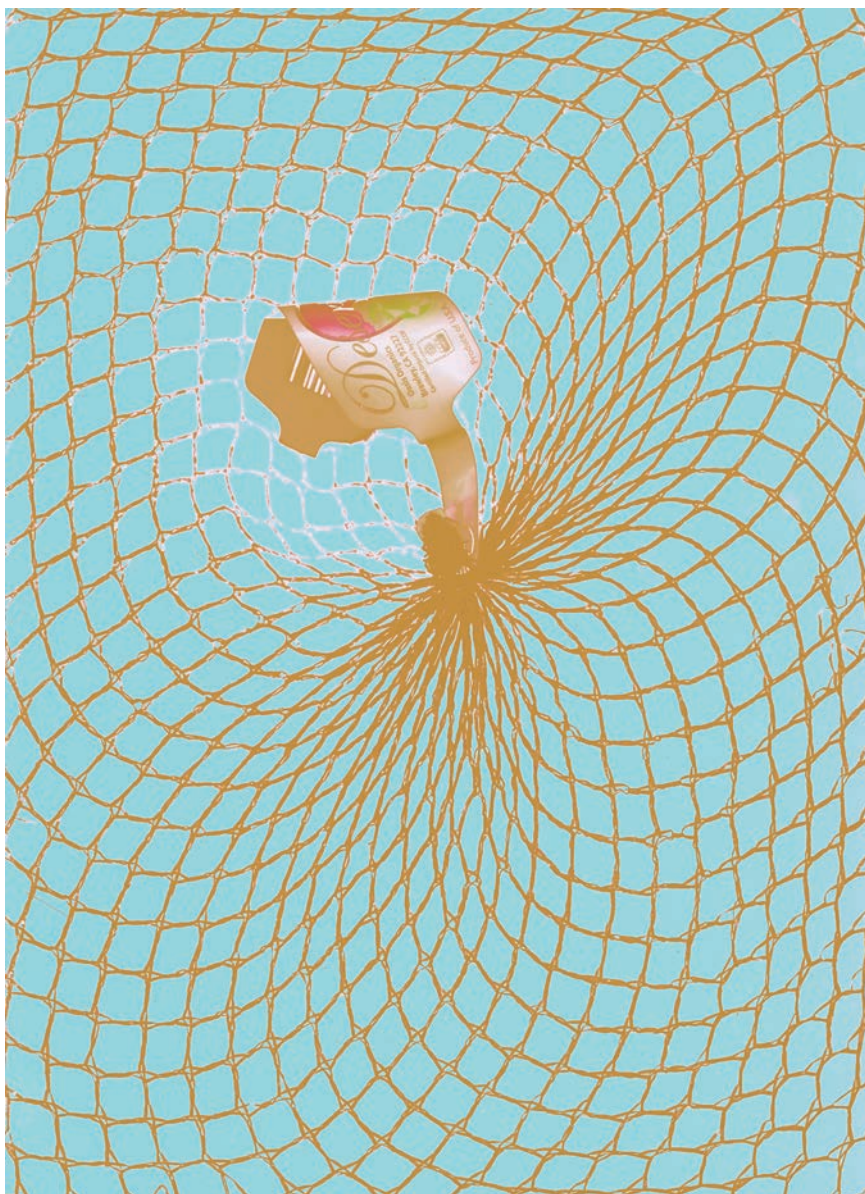


Plate 6. Marcie Rose Brewer, *Organic Dreamcatcher*, 2015, inkjet pigment print, 40" x 60".

MARCIE ROSE BREWER is an M.F.A. candidate in photography at the University of New Mexico. Her work engages with conversations surrounding decolonization, indigeneity, and (re)-claiming identity. She utilizes modes of knowledge production that challenge the visual constructions of representation and identity, as well as the dissemination of knowledge. Brewer navigates through these issues via performance, an indigenous mode of knowledge production, in order to challenge both herself and the viewer. Her work was recently featured in the Corollary Acts exhibit at I.D.E.A., Colorado College's interdisciplinary experimental arts space. Brewer's M.F.A. thesis exhibition will be at the University of New Mexico College of Fine Arts' CFA Downtown Studio in March of 2017.

NOTES

¹ Comaroff, John L., and Jean Comaroff. 2009. *Ethnicity, Inc.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

² Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison.* New York: Pantheon Books.

³ This story was cited from one of the walls of Hock E Aye Vi (Edgar Heap of Birds)'s exhibition held at three different parts of Venice, Most Serene Republics, June 6 - September 30, 2007. This exhibition was organized by the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian as a collateral project of the 52nd International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale.

⁴ Taylor, Diana. *Dancing with the Zapatistas: Twenty Years Later.* Ed. By Diana Taylor and Lorie Novak. <http://scalar.usc.edu/anvc/dancing-with-the-zapatistas/index>