

*Contemporary Native American  
Women Artists:  
Visual Expressions of  
Feminism, the Environment,  
and Identity*

*Phoebe Farris*

CENTURIES BEFORE EUROPEAN COLONIZERS ARRIVED ON Turtle Island, Native American women were producing art in the form of basketry, pottery, quillwork, weaving, and leather painting. For Native Americans, art, beauty, and spirituality are intertwined, while public life brings together dancing, poetry, and the visual arts, uniting us in an embracing ritual expression. Contemporary Native American women artists continue to explore pre-contact art traditions and styles developed during early colonialism and reservation confinement, along with newer artistic experiments. Our art also often functions as social criticism by using content that expresses alienation from Western culture.

The twentieth- and twenty-first-century Native American women artists featured in this essay work in varied styles and genres, including painting, sculpture, photography, performance art, and filmmaking. We represent a sample of the many Native American women artists who since the 1960s began to define our own styles. As with other aspects of Indian culture, women were in the forefront of this transition. The Institute of the American Indian Arts, founded in 1962, nurtured many of today's significant women artists, such as Linda Lomahaftewa (Hopi/Choctaw), Roxanne Swentzell (Santa Clara Pueblo), and poet and musician Joy Harjo



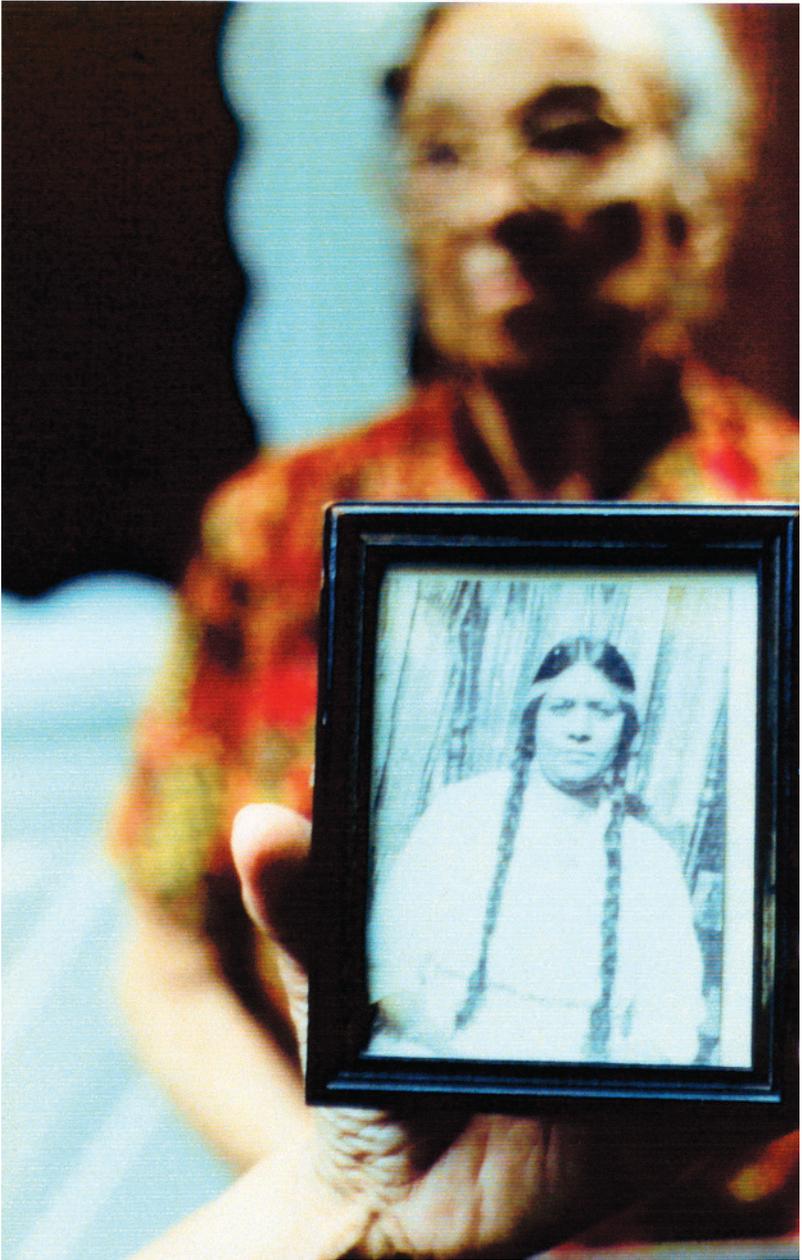
Sienna Farris, Nadema Agard, Kay Walking Stick, and Phoebe Farris. Color photo.

(Muskogee Creek). Nadema Agard, Kay Walking Stick, and I appear in this photograph, taken by Sienna Farris, from the exhibit I curated called “Native American Artists/Scholars: Speaking for Ourselves in the Twenty-First Century.” The exhibit took place in January-February 2003 at the American Indian Community House Gallery in New York.

Native American and other women artists of color have expanded the scope of politically significant art in the contemporary United States. Working in a myriad of media and styles, we fuse past and current history, oppose racism and sexism, and deconstruct stereotypical mainstream representations of our identities as women and as persons of color. Many of us bravely refuse to compromise our work for prestige or financial reward. Whether working for grassroots arts organizations, creating public murals, or working within the establishment as art educators or museum professionals, the Native American women artists profiled in this essay and in my book, *Women Artists of Color: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook to Twentieth-Century Artists in the Americas*, have maintained our community ties and sometimes involved ourselves in national and international coalitions with other people of color: “Native American women artists and intellectuals are in the process of developing new definitions of Native American art and heritage. Native American women have always been an integral part of the creative vision, and we continue to contribute to Indian aesthetics independently, in collaboration with other women, and in tandem with Native American men.”<sup>2</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Nadema Agard, “Artist Statement,” in *Women Artists of Color: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook to Twentieth-Century Artists in the Americas*, ed. Phoebe Farris (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1999), 7-8.
2. Farris, *Women Artists of Color*, 3.



Phoebe Farris, *Before Assimilation*, 2000. Color Photo.  
© Phoebe Farris. Courtesy of Phoebe Farris.



Nadema Agard, *The Virgin of Guadalupe is the Corn Mother*, 1992.

Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 42 x 60 inches.

© Nadema Agard. Courtesy of the artist.



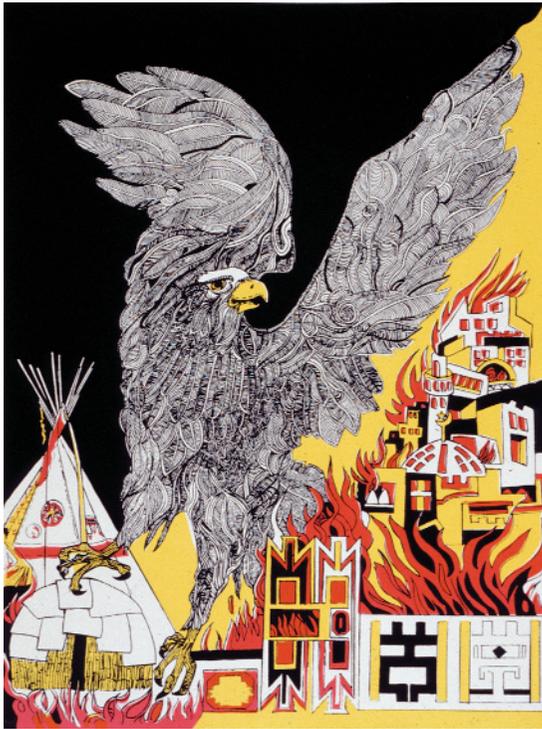
Carm Little Turtle, *Earthman Thinking about Dancing with Woman from Other Tribe*, 1991. Painted black and white photo.

© Carm Little Turtle. Courtesy of the artist.

Carm Little Turtle, *She Was Used to Abiding by Her Own Decisions*, 1989.

Black and white sepia with oil paint.

© Carm Little Turtle. Courtesy of the artist.





ABOVE

Phoebe Farris, *The Hunter Sisters-Shinnecock Reservation*, New York, 1994.

Color photo. © Phoebe Farris. Courtesy of the artist.

OPPOSITE

Rose Powhatan, *Soweto/So -We- Too*, 1980s. Silk screen print.

© Rose Powhatan. Courtesy of the artist.

Rose Powhatan, *Still Here*, 1992. Silk screen print.

© Rose Powhatan. Courtesy of the artist.



Kay Walking Stick, *The Abyss*, 1989.

Oil and acrylic on canvas, 91.4 x 182.8 x 9.1 cm. © Kay Walking Stick. Courtesy of the artist.



Kay Walking Stick, *Where Are the Generations?* 1991.  
Copper, wax, oil, and acrylic on canvas, 28 x 50 inches. © Kay Walking Stick. Courtesy of the artist.



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Trade Canoe (Gifts for Trading Land with White People)*, 1992.  
Oil and mixed media, 152.4 x 431.8 cm. © Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. Courtesy of the artist.

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief*, 2000.  
Oil and mixed media on canvas. © Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. Courtesy of the artist.

## *About the Artists*

### PHOEBE FARRIS (POWHANTAN)

Since the late-1980s most of my art exhibits and slide presentations deal with my documentation of contemporary Native American culture east of the Mississippi River and in the Caribbean. I have traveled to powwows and other cultural events, interacting with relatives, friends, and the public at the Rankokus Powhatan-Renape reservation in New Jersey, the Pamunkey and Mattaponi reservations in Virginia, the Chickahominy Tribal Cultural Center in Virginia, the Haliwa-Saponi Cultural Center in North Carolina, Pembroke State University in North Carolina (founded and operated by the Lumbee tribe until taken over by the state), the Shinnecock Reservation in Long Island, the Piscataway campground in Maryland, and the Houma Cultural Center in Louisiana. My photographs show people dressed in both powwow regalia and everyday clothing to reveal the diversity prevalent among eastern tribes. Some contemporary Native Americans resemble our early ancestors, whereas others show the results of recent influences. The regalia in the photographs blend Plains Indian Pan-Indian styles and more tribally specific clothing. The Hunter sisters are wearing a combination of Woodland-style clothing and Plains. The dress with the silver cones is called a zingle dress because of the sound it makes when dancing. The other dress, made of buckskin, is worn by women from various tribes. The skin could be from a deer or other animal, depending on the available animals. Phoebe Lyles wears contemporary Euro-American clothing with Native American jewelry. My photographs also document reconstructed colonial Native American villages on the Pamunkey reservation and the Rankokus Powhatan-Renape Reservation (1994-the present). These photographs show traditional homes built with willow branches, tree bark, and shrubbery. The photographs of structures grouped in a wooded setting have a timeless quality, with only the color photography to remind the viewer that these are modern images. Many of these images can be viewed on the Web site, [www.transcendence.ws](http://www.transcendence.ws).

I have also photographed people of native ancestry in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Mexico. Not recognizing externally imposed national boundaries, I refer to all of the Americas as "Indian Country." My artistic expression and

that of my extended family, many of whom are also artists, have been influenced by our Powhatan-Pamunkey heritage and also our African-American, Caribbean, and Asian heritages and our collections of Pamunkey pottery, Japanese Raku pottery, and traditionally designed rugs from Asia and the Middle East. We were multicultural before it became a commodified fad and politically correct.

NADEMA AGARD (LAKOTA/POWHATAN/CHEROKEE)

Nadema Agard is an artist, educator, author, performance artist, comedienne, repatriation consultant, and most recently a community services outreach specialist for the National Museum of the American Indian. As a syncretist with a Pan-Indian view of native art, religion, and culture, she incorporates symbolism from a variety of native cosmologies—the southwest, the Plains, the Southeast, the Northeast, the Great Lakes Woodlands, and Mesoamerica. In the early 1990s many of her paintings, transformational boxes, and installations honored the belief systems of Mesoamerica, that is, the syncretism of the Aztec and Catholic religions now practiced by Mexican Indians, Mexican mestizos, and U.S. Chicanos. Her mixed media acrylic and canvas, “The Virgin of Guadalupe Is the Corn Mother” (1992) addresses the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe as also Tonatzin, the Aztec Mother of God. Agard describes this piece as demonstrating the power of tribal art as a “vehicle for cultural and political resistance and a spiritual grounding for a world that has become unbalanced.” An artist and scholar with what she calls a “multivision,”<sup>1</sup> Agard hopes that her work will promote balance and respect for all religions and cultures.

CARM LITTLE TURTLE (APACHE/TARAHUMARA)

Strongly interested in women’s rights in marriage and reproduction, Carm Little Turtle uses photography, often humorously, to explore personal relationships between women and men. In her handpainted sepia-toned “Earthman” series of photographs, she joins her husband, Ed Singer, and other relatives as characters in a variety of staged scenes. For example, in “Earthman Thinking about Dancing with Woman from Another Tribe” (1991), Earthman is symbolic of Everyman. Seated with his back to the woman, he cups his face in his hand and rests his elbow on his

knee. He is looking downward, deep in thought and so ignoring the sexy, voluptuous woman right next to him. The woman's body is cropped to the waist. The viewer sees a red parasol covering her stomach and a pair of legs covered in skin-tight, leopard-spotted dance leotards. Her spike-heeled shoes stand precariously on the edge of a cliff, as her man thinks of other women instead of appreciating his own partner.

JAUNE QUICK-TO-SEE SMITH (ENROLLED FLATHEAD SALISH,  
MEMBER OF THE CONFEDERATED SALISH AND  
KOOTENAI NATION)

As an artist, curator, lecturer, and political activist, Jaune Quick-To-See Smith is a role model for many Native American and other engaged artists. She challenges misconceptions about indigenous culture and uses her art, public art, lectures, workshops, curating, and writing to enlighten the mainstream. Smith has been a visiting artist at universities across the United States, Europe, and China for over thirty years. She also is a featured speaker at art education conferences for her lectures on "systems thinking" and for developing curriculum that is inclusive of all peoples. She has continued for thirty years to organize and curate touring exhibits of Native Art throughout the United States and Europe. Additionally, Smith strives for new levels of non-toxic printmaking and teaches workshops at universities across the country. Her paintings sometimes incorporate glyphs or collage in the background of large iconic figures such as traditional Flathead women's dresses, canoes, horses, items of imagery important to her tribe, as well as pop icons (such as U.S. maps and flags). Her narrative paintings always convey humor with a prominent political message that consistently addresses issues of respect for nature, animals, and humankind. Smith refuses to use art materials that pollute the environment, take excessive storage space, or are costly to ship. Her large painting, "Trade Canoe (Gifts for Trading Land with White People)," features Asian-made trinkets such as tomahawks, beaded belts, and feather headdresses hanging on a chain above the Flathead Salish canoe. Here she presents a protest against using American Indian tribes as mascots for sports teams such as the Atlanta Braves, the Washington Redskins, and the Cleveland Indians; but it is a protest filled with humor as she offers to trade these "gifts,"

which white people are so enamored with, for land that reflects the invasion of her reservation by white people less than one hundred years ago.

#### KAY WALKING STICK (CHEROKEE)

Kay Walking Stick has achieved national and international success through her art as well as her thought-provoking writings and lectures. A prolific painter since the mid-1970s, in the 1980s she achieved fame for her abstract, surreal landscapes in a diptych format. The two portions of these diptychs are connected, yet still have some mystery surrounding their relationship. One side is more realistic, with recognizable mountains, water, and terrain, whereas the other is more abstract. The diptychs also represent Walking Stick's heritage, unifying the two sides of living in an Indian and non-Indian world. In addition to paint, she fills her surfaces with dirt, metal shavings, pottery shards, small rocks, and wax that is cut and gouged to reveal the layers below the surface. In the 1990s she introduced copper into her work to represent the economic urges underlying the rape of the earth. "Where Are the Generations?" (1991) is a haunting landscape that has many layers and both concrete and metaphysical resonances. The right side of the canvas is a rugged, mountainous desert landscape. On the left side a small receding circle is centered on the canvas. The circle portrays a landscape with cloud formations on the horizon and murky waters. Almost hidden in these clouds is printed: "In 1492 we were 30 million. Now we are 2 million. Where are the children? Where are the generations? Never born." This painting is typical of Walking Stick's works in reflecting both her Western-trained art background and an indigenous political message.

#### ROSE POWHATAN (PAMUNKEY)

Rose Powhatan is an enrolled member of the Pamunkey Indian Nation, once the leading tribe in the Powhatan Confederacy, which included Virginia, Washington, D.C., and parts of Maryland and North Carolina; the Pamunkey Reservation in King William County, Virginia, is the oldest reservation in the United States. Powhatan's aesthetic techniques vary, but her constant themes are respect for indigenous culture and commitment to presenting her tribe and the Powhatan Confederacy positively

and reverently. To authenticate her work, she researches traditional Eastern Woodlands indigenous designs. Her art displays a decided sense of place and proclaims who she is, where she is from, and what she is about. With her husband, artist Michael Auld, she created “Totems to Powhatan,” a 1988 installation that was exhibited for one year at the Vienna, Virginia, metro station. She finds cultural expressions that transcend national boundaries and include Australian Aborigines, New Zealand Maoris, Dominican Caribs, and North American indigenous peoples. She believes that respect for traditional cultural values binds all indigenous peoples together in their art. Her punningly titled silk screen print “Soweto/So-We-Too” expresses this sense of global connections among native and other oppressed peoples such as displaced Palestinians living in refugee camps, Native Americans in government-imposed reservations, and South Africans confined to “homelands” during Apartheid. Each group is represented by cultural symbols related to their traditional housing and the colors in the print; red, black, yellow, and white symbolize the four sacred Native American colors, used to represent the four directions and the four “races” of humanity.

#### HELEN HARDIN (SANTA CLARA PUEBLO)

The late Helen Hardin successfully combined the imagery, composition, and color common among traditional Indian painters with more modern geometric abstractions. She was also influenced by the sense of detail and cultural heritage displayed in the work of her mother, the renowned artist Pablita Velarde. In 1975, Hardin was the only woman artist in a Public Broadcasting System film series about Native American artists. By 1976, her role as a leader in contemporary Native American art was being recognized as her work grew in depth and complexity. Through the 1970s and into the 1980s she worked on a series of images of Kachinas—Pueblo intermediaries responsible for rain, corn, and fecundity—portrayed as cloud people and as her spiritual forebearers. During the early 1980s she embarked on a series of works with themes relating to women. “Medicine Woman” (1981) was executed as both a painting and a four-color etching (see cover art). In 1984, Hardin died from breast cancer, leaving uncompleted her final work, “Last Dance of the Mimbres.”