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Exploring Native Graphic Design: Damian Jim

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Damian Jim

ARTIST AND DESIGNER

 Damian Jim (Diné) is known for his vigorously abstracted digital and mixed media works using Navajo iconography. Jim was born in 1973 in Shiprock, New Mexico, and currently lives and works in Phoenix. He earned a bachelor of arts degree in computer information systems and an associate of arts degree in graphic design. Jim used his interdisciplinary education to compose a breadth of designs incorporating Navajo imagery woven into rugs and baskets by master Diné artists. In 2012, he cofounded Ziindi, a zine to highlight early-career Indigenous artists. Jim cofounded 1Spot Gallery in downtown Phoenix, an alternative art space that ran from 2012 to 2016. I spoke with Jim about his art and design practice.

Where does your interest in making art begin?

Art is integral in my life in terms of free therapy. I’ve always had a natural curiosity about various topics in my life, and usually when I didn’t know how to do something, I read up on the subject and learned how to do the task. Because of this, I knew capturing the beauty of the physical world in a painting was a challenge I would learn to master. To this day, I’m still learning, always searching for new information and new techniques that will enhance my art, but along the way I see art from all over the world—the images that people use, the colors, and the message, three properties of art that allow every piece to be unique. Yet, you can find similarities across continents. Art is a universal form of expression, just like music, designing, writing, and other forms of creation that allow you to show the world a different kind of beauty.

How does your background in information technologies inform your art and design practice?

I was always interested in technology. When I was young, I wanted to become an engineer. I was always tinkering with my toys or taking my bike apart to put it back together. And I was there for the first video games, the first computers, and typing exercises on a keyboard in high school. In graphic design school, I learned to animate and to work on the Macintosh computer. I was lucky I learned a “new form of communication” early in my career. HTML 1.0 was barely out there. My PowerBook G3 allowed me to start my own server for hosting websites and to run my own graphic design studio on the side. The technology changed at a fast pace, and I knew I had to go back to school to stay informed.

Media has changed our reality from being the center of the known world to a connected world that allows us to communicate across continents easily. We ingest so many forms of media today that it has become second nature to us. Interface technology has become an extension of our senses. We no longer view the world through our eyes but choose to place a filter over our reality. The technologies hinder while at the same time enable us to create a new reality. Using a tool as convenient as the iPad or an iPhone to paint and draw new ideas allows me to create new works that consume the same amount of time a physical painting can take. Rome wasn’t built without the help of a few fingerprinters.

My graphic design experience prepared me for the other inspiration behind my art: advertising. Mainstream marketing is another extension of the iconography of the land. We cannot live, much less navigate the landscape without visual markers hiding beneath the advertisement that surrounds us in the cities. Movies and music are filled with product placements, while the Internet is one ad-based tracking system, and supermarkets track our brand selection and target us with coupons accordingly.

All of these user stories are used to keep us on a well-formed narrative, not too far to the left and not too far to the right, and yet despite all the information overload—the smothering of your intellect and thought—we can create new narratives that show alternate realities. We can form complex habits and a lifestyle that reside outside the common buyer profile that is tacked on to us.

Your paintings incorporate Navajo iconography. How do you approach these cultural frameworks through your work?

True appreciation of my culture and the language started the process for me. I always fully understood Navajo but never had the opportunity to [communicate] with fluent speakers. This is mostly because I live in the city, but I grew up in a dirt hogans as a baby and had the privilege of being the grandson of a talented rug weaver on my dad’s side, Mary Jim, as well as a grandfather who was a medicine man on my mom’s side, Slim Curtis. But it wasn’t until I started working for Twin Rocks
Trading Post in Bluff, Utah, that I came to realize that our culture, through reading and researching the complex philosophy and religious practices that make up our world, was beautiful.

Medicine men have the ability to remember long hours of recitation of verses and songs, and remember intricate sandpaintings that take hours to create, only to return the colored sand back to the earth. A medicine man knows the story behind each ceremony and the ailment meant to be cured in the process and to have the whole ceremonial rite happen with the task-mindedness of a project manager.

At first I simply thought of the sandpaintings as mere artifacts of the ceremony, but through process and living with the Navajo way of life, I began to see that reverence should be placed on these depictions of the deities. I began handing any paintings I had created of those deities out for free instead of selling them. Before I would get to that step, though, I was creating narratives of these ceremonies, pivotal moments frozen on canvas: a painting dedicated to Massacre Cave with a complex geometric background and Spider Woman crosses containing deity portraits; the dance of the wind people in a scene from the Wind Way; the creation of First Man and First Woman, or the death of the giant in the Hero Twins epic. The ideas flowed into Navajo baskets, rugs, jewelry, and sculptures. I had unfettered access to a library full of design, architectural, ethnological books, as well as access to master artists and their artwork.

Studying computer information systems was a means to rewrite the narrative. The designs were generated on the computer. The ability to present, capture, and even manipulate the data was important to help me realize the impact of contemporary art forms that included digital media. I created my soul-eater characters back in 1992 in Adobe Illustrator; creating designs using a visual interface was natural to me. I created and manipulated ideas in Adobe Photoshop in the late '90s. For the digital painting *Brothers*, I used the digital design as a reference to paint the canvas. My painting of corn deities, *The Circle of Life*, was also created in Adobe Illustrator and printed using a silk-screening process.

All this rich history and culture allowed me to go beyond the design, while graphic design taught me the right processes and techniques to achieve the effect, and the computer allowed me to blend it all until I created my voice, art that is mine.

**Do you have a philosophy that dictates your aesthetic process?**
MECHANICA II

Damian Jim (Dine), Mechanica II, digital iPad painting on birch, 1/1. Image courtesy of the artist.

Lately, I’ve been visualizing layers in paintings. The process is fascinating in that a different process must be followed to ensure the completed painting looks as good as my current skill set will allow. The masters were good at manipulating light on canvas and visualizing statues without any tools other than math. Today, you can use different media, tools, and materials to produce innovative work, but you have to have a good base to build on, and that comes down to the time and work required. Knowledge and time dedicated to each idea ensures a smooth process flow in creating the art, just like solving a problem logically.

As an artist and designer, you have to negotiate between two different yet interrelated worlds. How did you enter into graphic design and why?

A representative from Al Collins [Graphic Design School] visited my art class in Flagstaff, and since it was my senior year, I was looking for a vocation after graduation. After looking at the benefits of graphic design, I signed up and graduated with the knowledge to launch my own design studio. Besides creating visual solutions for my clients, I built websites and produced printed media. Our world lives and functions with graphic design and visual interfaces, and we can customize the font, the color, the flavor. The process of creating that customization fascinates me.

It’s clear some of your works draw on the Rorschach test, the psychiatric system of analysis that uses inkblot motifs. I’m curious to know if there is a subconscious, surrealist element to your practice?

My influences are Salvador Dali and Robert Williams, and I’m interested in creating different toned colors to affect experiences while viewing a painting. The fantastic represented by a border-town life, that big dream that comes in many variations, each a little vignette describing an idea.

Master Navajo weavers use your designs in current baskets and rugs. Can you tell me about how you came to this opportunity, and what it taught you about weaving techniques?

It was a pure and simple case of being in the right place at the right time. Even today I’m amazed by how I was able to get a job in southeastern Utah doing graphic design full time. My family members are all hard workers, so my grandmother thought I needed some motivation to look for a job by driving me up to Blanding, Utah, and placing my résumé at the local employment office. By happenstance, Barry Simpson, who ran the Blue Mountain Trading Post in Blanding, had placed an ad for a graphic designer that same week. The hiring process took two days, since both Blue Mountain and Twin Rocks Trading Post are family businesses, and the brothers, Barry and Steve Simpson, wanted to make sure I would be a good fit.

The job required a good working knowledge of the trading post, the artists behind the art, techniques used for every piece of art in the post, and the amount of work and time that goes into harvesting, gathering, weaving, or soldering. The finished product is always worth the price of the final art piece. This allowed me to see the value of hard work and quality workmanship, both attributes that I apply to my work. Nothing goes out the door without my having given all my knowledge, creativity, and skill in creating it. The most important aspect I learned from
the whole process is that sometimes the most simple-looking art has complex origins.

What is 1Spot Gallery and how did it come about?

1Spot Gallery was an all-Indigenous contemporary gallery in downtown Phoenix. The gallery was part of a longtime collaboration with my Puerto Rican friend Michelle Ivette Ponce. We met back in 2010 and quickly became good friends. She introduced me to this little anarchist gallery, Conspire, where there was plenty of lowbrow, surrealist, street, and graffiti art. Murals were everywhere, and there was this chill vibe to the whole place and to the whole Roosevelt Row area. Eventually, with other artists, we created a new space, Indie Arthouse, which lasted about a year. After that we started looking at promoting Native arts in the Roosevelt Row Arts District. Our temporary solution was to create a zine called Ziindi to invigorate the scene and promote some of these talented artists in Phoenix. By this time I was working a good job, so I was able to finance the whole venture. We created a pop-up gallery for the first issue's release, as well as a market and performances. The Navajo Nation heard about the venture and worked with us to create the amazing, first all-women's show at the Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, Arizona.

I was looking through Craigslist for a new place to live and saw a small space available on Roosevelt Row. And after consulting Michelle, I asked if the space was still available. That space was taken; however, the adjoining space was available. We opened 1Spot in December 2012 and quickly became known for innovative art and artists.

What influences you and your work?

In my 20s, I became disillusioned by all the negativity toward Native Americans in the cities and struggled with the hatred and discrimination against Natives on the reservation. I gained a deeper perspective on the whole saga of displacement and the perseverance of Indigenous tribes worldwide. From this, I started researching Diné history, which opened up my eyes to the truth hidden from our tribe and the general population. These stories and my own painful youth led me to start exploring physical and mental tools for control, and how those factors led to our youth becoming disconnected and disillusioned. I decided to start campaigning and teaching about our past and how all this fits in with the current environmental crises and our rights to live in an unpolluted reservation without having to give all our resources away to keep contaminating the world. If the narrative I can present makes you research, look, listen, or actively start participating, I consider myself successful in challenging mindsets.

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