Oglala Lakota Painter Keith Braveheart

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.
ORIGINATED from the time of birth, Keith BraveHeart grew up in Kyle, South Dakota, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. His interest in art and visual culture developed in high school. He recalls watching his grandmother sewing Lakota star quilts. BraveHeart earned a bachelor’s degree from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe and a master’s degree in fine arts focused on painting from the University of South Dakota (USD).

For more than a decade, BraveHeart has mentored Indigenous youth in the arts. At the Oscar Howe Summer Art Institute at USD, he has helped to encourage the next generations of promising artists. Currently BraveHeart teaches art at the Oglala Lakota College in Kyle, where he advocates for the importance of art in everyday life. In 2018 he was one of 29 Lakota artists featured in Takoue, an exhibition curated by the Center for American Indian Research and Native Studies that reflected upon the Wounded Knee Massacre. In February of this year, BraveHeart was appointed to the South Dakota Arts Council.

MRS: How did your early years on the Pine Ridge Reservation shape your artistic foundation, and how did you develop your interest in Indigenous art? How can we improve arts education for youth?

KB: Throughout my youth, I went back and forth between New Mexico and South Dakota. I have always had two homes—my mother is Santo Domingo and Isleta Pueblo, and my father is Oglala Lakota—but I have lived the majority of my life with my father’s family, the Brave Hearts. My experiences growing up were a manifestation of the Lakota philosophy, Mitákuye Oyáti (all are related). Being a “relative” is an ideology that distinguishes a perspective of belonging. Critical relationships with my family, community, and nation enriched my confidence as an individual. I understand that my existence is connected to others, therefore, any individualism that I may exhibit is supported by a collective synergy. Our Lakota concept of “relatives” extends beyond human-to-human [connections], to also include nature, elements, energies, and the metaphysical. Growing up, these understandings were not fully apparent, but were always present. I know that my inherited ties to a complex, cultural platform provide the significations I consider to be profound in Lakota aesthetics, but they are also what influence my interests in art. I am thankful to have witnessed and been a part of a lifestyle that I have seen change over the past decades. I am also hopeful that my involvement in our Lakota culture led by a desire for art will resonate with any following generations. In appreciation for my cultural foundation, I am dedicated to my life as an artist.

MRS: How were your high school experiences transformative in your arts education? How can we improve arts education for youth?

KB: Throughout my youth, I would constantly draw…[and enjoyed] drawing a painted mustang running through the Badlands or felt excitement in putting the Joker against Batman. As I grew into a teenager, I found pleasure in drawing portraits of 2Pac or other rappers for my friends and relatives.

In my youth, I never desired to be an artist. I drew because it made me happy, I think every child feels that. I believe that same authenticity is visible in Indigenous expressions, and that sincerity is what develops a dynamic artist.

Most of my schooling was on the rez, which unfortunately meant that it wasn’t really until high school that I was afforded a true opportunity—although limited—to explore any principles of art. Appreciative as I was for a full period of drawing, I was mostly confined to minimal still-life practice and largely uninformed of any greater art context. I recognized distinct separation between what my Lakota relatives were doing (sewing star quilts) and what I was doing (observational drawing). I can remember references to the Mona Lisa or Picasso’s name in popular culture, but I was still in the dark as to their significance. I was isolated from an “art world” and most definitely distant from any ideas of a contemporary Native art sphere within that art world. I was oblivious, and at that time, unaware of a generous opportunity awaiting me.

Throughout high school, I would get nominated to attend the Oscar Howe Summer Art Institute (OHSAI) at the University of South Dakota—an intensive, two-week art program for high school students, particularly Native American students from the Northern Plains region. Naive to what this opportunity represented, year after year I discarded my nominations. Finally, right before graduation, I made the decision to follow through and made the trip out to Vermillion, South Dakota, in 2001. The OHSAI was established by the groundbreaking Dakota artist, Oscar Howe. Considered one of the grandfathers of a modern Indian art movement, Howe was also professor of art at USD and founded his institute in the 1960s as a way to support fundamental artistic development in tribal youth. Under Howe’s guidance, an amazing group of talents emerged to claim prolific status. Notable students included Arthur Amiotte, Donald Monteleone, Herman Red Elk, and Robert Penn. In the 1990s, Howe’s protégé Robert Penn would carry forward his mentor’s legacy and operate the OHSAI, and in the 2000s it would then be coordinated by Lakota artist Gerald Cournoyer. Under Cournoyer in 2001, I entered in.

I had no idea of what to expect beyond drawing. The institute was a formal arts study to develop technical...
proficiency and knowledge of Native American art (with focus on modern to contemporary). The experience changed my life, and through it I developed a clear vision for my future. I consider that opportunity crucial and very much the start of my academic pursuits, because while attending OHSAI I also learned of the Institute of American Indian Arts. So, immediately following my first summer at OHSAI, I applied to and was accepted into IAIA. I would return back to the OHSAI every summer for over a decade, rising from a student assistant to eventually program coordinator.

Looking at arts education for our youth, exciting opportunities are always within reach. I am drawn to cultural perspectives that rely on critical thought and active listening. Within such cultural perspectives, we find welcoming methods for outreach and frameworks that often reflect family and community foundations. Fostering trust rebuilds confidence in our youth to pursue those natural urgencies and counter any attempts to possibly “break” from organic expressions. I think of how we—those associated with and invested in the arts—provide adequate voice and encouragement to our youth and how being reminded of a relative perspective may reinforce strategies. Maybe we seriously look into “coloring outside the lines” or place praise upon our students that “although you may wake up on the reservation, you are most capable of greatness!” When I think of how an internal light turned on for me when I attended the OHSAI, I know it is because the sharing of influence and passing of generational knowledge was humble and sincere, especially by those who were providing it.

I can say with compassion that it is the sad reality it is most tribal schools are underexposed to art. This obstacle cannot stand as a defeat, because art is persistently shaping our settings, and we can understand that if we challenge the ways we think about art. When we look to our communities, we can find them extremely rich in educational opportunities, and maybe we can begin to recognize art as key to robust possibilities for diverse developments.

MRS: The importance of being taught by one’s family and community cannot be overstated. How has this idea influenced you?

KB: I agree that there is value to gaining knowledge from our relatives. In my youth I would observe the everyday life practices of my relatives. Those observations of family and community assembled a value system for me. Guidance, instruction, and discipline based on cultural foundation informed my identity as an artist way before I ever conceived ambition for a degree or career.

My greatest influence is my Unci (grandmother), I remember watching and listening to her as she sewed her star quilts. I was not merely fascinated with her process or dedication or even beautiful objects, I was attracted to the transcendent energy I felt as she created. Although she had never attended any school, I watched her create with methodical ease. Often accompanying her, as we grandchildren usually did, I saw how she exhibited her works to the community at wakes or giveaways. Her work always carried humble intent to be given away. Although primarily a Lakota speaker, I could remember times I heard her articulate critique in review of her own work or critically analyze the work of others—mainly her daughters or nieces. When any one of us from my expansive family would reach an achievement, such as graduation, she would gift us a star quilt, refined in craftsmanship and particular in color scheme … She was always thinking about her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. My grandmother never called herself an artist, but community members addressed her as such. I am uplifted when I hear of her unmatched skill to wospi (pick wild berries), or how today no one can make buffalo berry wospi (berry pudding) as she did.

My grandmother was my first influence and I have learned so much about art through her, but honestly, I could speak equally about any of my relatives and each of their arts forms. As Lakota, when we view a relative, we don’t stop at bloodlines. Our concept of community represents a sophisticated viewpoint.

MRS: What is your philosophy toward teaching art?

KB: Since I have such a profound love for art and my Lakota culture, it is my responsibility to pass that love onward. I will forever be thankful for the moments that define my life as an artist, and always acknowledge those who were generous with their time. My philosophy of teaching art reflects a cultural perspective of continuum: it is simply my time to hold certain topics, and I must be attentive to those approaching their time. Working with students is a gift, I am constantly engaged with the ever-changing world and I am able to listen to the voices who inspire tomorrow’s art.

MRS: Your paintings often combine Indigenous iconography with elements of pop culture. Take, for example, Winuhca Waits On Wicahca (2014), which depicts a Lakota Elder reading People magazine’s “Sexiest Man Alive” issue. Can you talk about your subject matter and how you arrive at the meanings of your paintings?

KB: The Oscar Howe Summer Art Institute and IAIA allowed me to see what contemporary Native art could look like. A painting did not only have to be one way—the notions of marketable “Indian” art. In my opinion, the most compelling works depicted our tribal nations as they exist today, maybe as people who enjoy reading People magazine’s “Sexiest Man Alive” issue. Indians read magazines, right?

I decided very early that if I was going to paint to satisfy myself first, I had to paint in elements that reminded me and any viewers that we Lakota are People of today.

MRS: I was struck the first time I saw your painting Remembered Landscape #1 (2011). It is an interpretation of a photograph of Spotted Elk (Mniconjou Lakota, ca. 1826–1890) lying dead in the snow after the Wounded Knee Massacre. Your selection of colors, brushwork, and approach to form push the work into near abstraction, yet the ghost
As a Lakota, the memory of Wounded Knee is part of your DNA.

KB: Growing up, I was familiar with the iconic image of Chief Big Foot from the posed photograph after the massacre at Wounded Knee. Living on the Pine Ridge Reservation, you are always familiar with the location of Wounded Knee and the memorial site. As a Lakota, the memory of Wounded Knee is part of your DNA.

When I was at IAIA, I remember being so impressed and inspired by the works from the 1960s. In those works, I saw postmodern approaches that spoke to historical memories that our grandparents saw. We were ingrained in our landscape and it was very simplified with great use of color and space. That is what informed my approach to placement of the figure and palette. For me, the piece was first about home, thought of as a cold landscape, and then it was about making sure I remembered home. I loved my time in Santa Fe but would encounter little reminders of my real home, and those reminders pushed me in my artwork.

MRS: Other portraits such as Blue Remembering Woman (2017) and Chasing Yellow (2017), with sprawling flat forms that play with colorful patterns, have T. C. Cannon influences.

KB: I feel historical traumas are a part of who we are today. They are hurtful wounds but part of our stories regardless. Artists have a huge ability to facilitate dialogue and healing. When we create, we create with the voices and sometimes spirits of others. These moments challenge an artist’s values.

MRS: Is there an ethic to painting historical trauma?

KB: My primary influences are the cultural significances that surrounded me every day as a Lakota. I have always been engaged with the world around me. I can remember all us kids playing outside almost all day long. Although our playgrounds were the Badlands and creeks that surrounded my grandmother’s home, we were ingrained in our landscape and we could imagine ourselves into reinterpretations of popular movie scenarios, or sometimes we would re-create the Battle of Greasy Grass (Little Big Horn). We were grounded in popular culture and our Lakota identity.

To me, the Lakota were not only seldom-seen photos of historic ancestors. To me, the Lakota were my cousins playing freeze-tag, my uncles and their friends playing 21, my rummaging aunts, and my generous community of artists.

All of that influences my art, but I also have deep appreciation for the many artists and movements throughout the world and throughout history. As a painter, I don’t believe there is anything that I can’t find influential.

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