

# American Indian Art joins Crossroads First Fridays

KC-BASED TRAVOIS FIRM LAUNCHES JURIED EXHIBITION SERIES

BY BRIAN HEARN

One of the best-kept secrets you can discover on First Fridays is housed in a company headquarters at 310 W. 19th Terrace.

In fall 2017, Travois, a Kansas City-based consulting firm focused on promoting housing and economic development in Native American communities, launched an intertribal, international exhibition series dedicated to indigenous artists.

It encompasses drawing, painting, textiles, architecture, jewelry, sculpture and photography, curated by experts in the field. The work engages urgent issues of indigenous cultural preservation and renovation by artists offering solutions in the face of technological, economic and environmental threats — ultimately matters that affect all of us.

What began as a desire to be a good Crossroads neighbor — Travois opening their growing art collection to the public — is now the First Fridays exhibition series. “It was especially important to show modern and contemporary art because we work with such a vibrant living community,” said Travois CEO Elizabeth Bland Glynn.

“Travois’s decision to showcase contemporary Native American artists is a wonderful extension — and expression — of their business practice,” said Bruce Hartman, executive director of the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, where he is building a major collection of contemporary American Indian art. “Additionally, the firm is providing the funding necessary to realize the exhibitions and support the artists as well.”

The Nerman has stepped up to partner with Travois, providing an additional honorarium for Travois artists to come to the JCCC Fine Arts department as visiting artists, Hartman said. “Naturally,” he added, “I’m hoping to potentially purchase some works for our collection also.”

Hartman was part of a top-notch jury convened by Travois that included Native American artists Gina Adams (Ojibwa-Lakota descent), Thomas Farris (Otoe-Missouria, Cherokee), Norman Akers (Osage Nation) and America Meredith (Cherokee Nation): They were



COURTESY OF TRAVOIS

Heiltsuk artist Dean Hunt's painting, "Time Will Tell," is part of the Travois collection.



FROM THE ARTIST

May will feature an exhibit of California-based Porfirio Gutiérrez, who is descended from a long line of Zapotec weavers and textile artists. Pictured is his artwork "Solemnities."







joined by Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art senior curator of American Indian art Gaylord Torrence and art dealers Sherry Leedy and Rachael Cozad.

The firm conducted an open call to contemporary artists throughout the American continent. They sought out quality artwork first, and the jurors brought what Farris described as “a thorough and spirited debate” to the process. They focused on a specific mission: “to support and promote American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian artists through juried exhibition.”

Travois envisioned the First Fridays exhibition series as a prominent new platform in Kansas City to stimulate exposure, sales and commissions for indigenous artists. Selected artists would receive a \$2,500 honorarium and be invited to present an artist talk at the First Friday opening.

As the jury considered applications from their open call, Travois casually began presenting shows last fall, beginning with an artist who keynoted their annual conference: Matika Wilbur (Swinomish and Tulalip Tribes).

Wilbur is a photographer and social documentarian who has been on a multi-year quest to photograph all 562 federally recognized tribes in the United States. So far, she's covered thousands of miles, from Alaska to Cape Cod, and visited more than 300 sovereign tribal nations. Her humanistic approach to Project 562 reveals “the diversity, vibrancy and realness of Indian Country.” Through expressive portraiture, oral histories, films and a blog, Wilbur seeks to “refresh the national conversation about contemporary Native America.”

Her Travois two-month photography exhibition, “Seeds of Culture: The Portraits and Stories of Native American Women,” and companion artist talk, “Changing the Way We See Native America: Dismantling Native American Stereotypes” set the stage for the outstanding artists selected by the exhibition jury for 2018.

#### THE SERIES BEGINS

March 2018 marked the beginning of the new juried exhibition series. Chris T. Cornelius (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin), a multidisciplinary artist, architect, designer

and professor, presented “Domiciles.” Cornelius applied his precise draftsmanship to an imaginative reexamination of the American Indian occupation of Alcatraz Island from 1969 to 1971. In revisiting the activist intentions of the occupiers, Cornelius's work asks, “What if they got what they wanted?” His layered topographic drawings map the infamous prison site, with an architectural vision for the proposed spiritual center, ecology center and museum.

His “Domicile” series of architectural drawings features futuristic dwellings corresponding to the Oneida moon calendar. The vertical, geometric structures supported by slender legs with various organic roof antennae — stems, slabs, cones, wings, leaves — reach skyward. They are scaled as much to large mammals, like bears and deer, as they are to humans. Cornelius fabricated some of his conceptual dwellings into small inventive sculptures that were also displayed.

Next up for the May exhibition is “Rituals” by Porfirio Gutiérrez, descended from a long line of Zapotec weavers and textile artists from the village of Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, Mexico. Now based in California, Gutiérrez



FROM THE ARTIST

Chris Cornelius (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin) inaugurated the Travois First Fridays exhibition series in March, with his exhibit, “Domiciles.”

integrates the ancient tradition of Zapotec culture with contemporary themes as an indigenous artist and educator living in urban America.

In “Rituals” the artist displays his weavings on slanted pedestals that allow you to look into the intricate patterns contrasting fiber colors with rich natural dyes in red and black. Behind them on the wall are life-size



FROM THE ARTIST

In “Radio Free Alcatraz: Territories,” Cornelius applied his precise draftsmanship to an imaginative reexamination of the American Indian occupation of Alcatraz Island from 1969 to 1971.





COURTESY OF TRAVOIS

Travois commissioned acclaimed painter Kevin Red Star (Crow) to create “Going Home,” a portrait of the artist’s daughter on horseback pulling a travois with a bundle of belongings.

silhouettes engaged in rituals of daily life. The figures provide a human context for how textiles are woven into a community.

Monthly exhibitions continue later this summer, when Gina Herrera (Pueblo of Tesuque) presents “A Fanciful Escapade” in August — large found object sculptures whose slender, twisted forms take on distinctive, funky personalities. Luanne Redeye of the Seneca Nation of Indians and Hawk Clan will exhibit oil genre paintings of family and community with mixed media design work in “Remedy/Reconcile/Rebuild,” scheduled for October.

Dakota Mace, Diné (Navajo) is a textile artist translating “the language of Diné weavings through the understanding of the fine art world.” Her exhibition “Kéyah (Land)” features abstract forms like the

equal-armed cross that relate directly to our ever-present relationship to nature and cosmology. Nelda Schrupp, (Pheasant Rump Nakota First Nation) a multitasking jeweler and sculptor based in Saskatchewan, Canada, will exhibit wall hangings and necklaces in a show called “ME.”

Additional artists are yet to be confirmed. Though the exhibition series is still in its pilot year, Travois expects it to continue.

#### FROM COLLECTING TO EXHIBITING

Invented by North American Plains Indian tribes, travois historically meant a weight-bearing sled used to move belongings. Its simple A-frame design was easily pulled by a person or more often, domesticated dogs. Later, after European contact, the horse became the conveyer of choice. The travois was far superior to wheeled

vehicles traveling across the vast prairie grasslands. For Travois founder, David Bland, the word captured the spirit of the company’s work, inspiring the motto that continues to guide it: “You know where you want to go; let us pull some of the weight for you.”

In 2010 Travois established its new headquarters just east of Broadway in the Crossroads Arts District. Little did the staff know what would happen to their neighborhood at the beginning of every month. Like many non-art businesses new to the Crossroads, the fast-growing First Fridays were a curiosity, a nuisance, or an opportunity.

As CEO Elizabeth Bland Glynn explained, art was already in their company DNA. “Whenever you travel to Indian Country you see art production. And any community you work with, you want to get to know more about their arts and culture. We began seeking it out — looking for artistic colleagues. Tribal business incubators, for example, always involve the arts.”

Travois commissioned acclaimed painter Kevin Red Star (Crow) to create a work that is the cornerstone of its art collection. David Bland cited Red Star as his favorite Native American artist.

“Going Home” depicts the artist’s daughter riding sidesaddle in a buckskin dress over grassy hills. Her horse pulls a travois with a bundle of belongings. A small child and pet dog are nestled in behind, along for the ride. Beyond the horizon, a mountain range gives way to an immense, painterly sky. You can almost hear the wind swirling as the travois slides over the grass. The placid picture unites its figure of maternal strength with a harmonious landscape, a place experienced as home.

The relationships Travois formed with artists often involve more than just patronage. The firm invited Kevin Red Star to be the keynote speaker at its 10th annual conference on housing and economic development with a special focus on art in Indian Country.

Gradually, as Travois acquired or was



gifted artwork by artists from the many tribal nations they worked with, its new office space became a natural place for exhibiting its collection. In addition to paintings, works of basketry, pottery, photography — even a canoe — expanded the collection. Vice president eva kathleen schulte helped the company realize that its art collection was worth sharing. The staff began documenting the artwork and promoting the artists in the collection through a company blog.

2012 marked another milestone — the commission of a wall-sized mural for a communal workspace inside Travois headquarters. Ryan RedCorn (Osage) and Bobby Wilson (Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota) created the site-specific image of a leaping, stylized wolf above the Osage words for “my home.” Against the sky blue and white patterned background, the horizon line slants upward with tipis receding into the distance. The mural dynamically evokes the firm’s mission to create homes, not houses, for its clients.

When Wendy Red Star, an accomplished multimedia artist (Kevin’s niece), had a 2016 solo exhibition at Kansas City’s Haw Contemporary, Travois hosted an artist talk and dinner for her. Several of her humorous yet piquant self-portraits now hang in the boardroom. She consulted with Travois about how to make its exhibition series worthwhile to participating artists — pay them and respect them.

Remember those tipis that stood on the ground of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art during their landmark traveling exhibition “The Plains Indians: Earth and Sky”? Last year, Travois brought RedCorn and Wilson back to design and paint one of those tipis donated by the Museum. The American Indian College Fund helped facilitate its donation to the Cankdeska Cikana Community College in Fort Totten, North Dakota.

With a solid collection in place, growing art appreciation among the staff, and a widening network of native artists, Travois

was prepared to enter the First Friday fray with their juried exhibition series.

Travois recognizes contemporary artists as important voices within indigenous communities. Artists communicate the complexities of modern existence just as they honor and transport traditions into the 21st century. Artists are entrepreneurs and innovators, visionaries and visual storytellers.

Why devote so many resources to promoting indigenous art and artists? Elizabeth Bland Glynn answered, “Every little bit helps advance the conversation about sharing the fabric of our culture.” □

**Travois is located at 310 W. 19th Terrace in the Crossroads Arts District. Preregistration is encouraged for First Fridays events. Visit [travois.com](http://travois.com) for more information.**



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