

GREAT BASIN NATIVE ARTISTS

Giving Voice to the Land

By Jean Merz-Edwards

*Tsaan napuni, tai sokopin,
tsaan napuni, tai sokopin,
oyo paam paan kematu
tsaa napuni, tai sokopin.*

*Tsaan napuni, tai sokopin,
tsaan napuni, tai sokopin,
Soko tontsiyama, paan kematu
tsaan napuni, tai sokopin.*

*How beautiful is our land,
how beautiful is our land,
forever beside the water, the water,
how beautiful is our land.*

*How beautiful is our land,
how beautiful is our land,
Earth, with flowers on it,
next to the water
how beautiful is our land.*

—“Imaa Hupia” (The Early Morning Song), Shoshone¹

IN SPRING 2014, as a contributing writer for *First American Art Magazine*, Melissa Melero-Moose (Northern Paiute-Modoc) interviewed Ben Aleck (Pyramid Lake Paiute). When the two visited, they discovered they each experienced a sense of isolation in their work. As they conversed, they got an idea. Perhaps countless other artists working throughout the Great Basin region might also benefit from meeting each other. Aleck and Melero-Moose



wondered what would happen if they founded a group where other Great Basin artists could gather and support one another.

The outcome has been limitless growth and opportunity for artists. The fateful meeting resulted in the formation of the Great Basin Native Artists (GBNA),² a collective of Indigenous artists residing in, or originally from, Nevada, California, Southern Oregon, Southern Idaho, or Utah. Four years later, the GBNA maintains an online image gallery and artist directory; announces local, regional, and national exhibition opportunities; holds art and business workshops; keeps a current mailing list; and provides cultural arts education for

the Native and non-Native communities.

GBNA has already proven to be a model for regional artists to connect, share resources, and collectively amplify their public presence. Before discussing this process though, it is important to understand a little more about the region.

A SOURCE OF LIFE

“WHEN I THINK OF THE GREAT BASIN, I imagine endless landscapes of hills that look like resting dinosaurs and chunky, chocolate chip mountains, long, single lane highways, and big open skies,” says GBNA member Topaz Jones (Shoshone-Lummi-Kalapuya-Molalla).

Locked between the Sierra Nevadas and the Rocky Mountains, the Great Basin is comprised of about 400,000 square miles and encompasses about one-tenth of the contiguous United States. It is high-desert country with low annual rainfall. Rivers and streams all end in sinks, marshes, or lakes because there is no natural drainage out of the region.³

When Melero-Moose thinks of the Great Basin, geographical terms do not apply. Rather, she notes the abundance of life. “I think of cattails, willows, pine nuts, junipers, tule reeds, rivers, cottonwood trees. I think of Lake Tahoe and Pyramid Lake. The windy spring.” The contrasting perspectives of Western science and impressions of Indigenous



women whose ancestors are from the land embody differing worldviews.

Recently discovered high mountain campsites dating back 13,500 years have challenged archaeologists’ picture of the region, but they have known that ancient humans made the Great Basin their home. In 1940 at Spirit Cave in Nevada, archaeologists Georgia and Sydney Wheeler encountered a burial for a man wearing moccasins and shrouded in a rabbit-skin blanket and reed mats.

Petroglyphs dating from 10,000 to 14,800 years ago remain in the tufa near Winnemucca Lake on Pyramid Lake Paiute land. These carvings are the oldest known petroglyphs in North America.⁴ Additionally, tule duck decoys—like those Paiute hunters still make and use today—were found in Lovelock Cave in Churchill County, Nevada, and date from about 400 BCE to 100 CE.

While these examples illustrate the unbroken line of artistry by Indigenous peoples of the Great Basin, challenges remain. These challenges show us the necessity of the Great Basin Native Artists collective.

A COMPLICATED PAST

AN HISTORICAL SURVEY of the Great Basin region from an Indigenous perspective would fill the gaps in the present narrative. Currently, the *Handbook of North American Indians Volume 11: Great Basin* is one of the only comprehensive studies of the area.



Volume editor Warren L. d’Azevedo, the late professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of Nevada, Reno, divided the Great Basin into ethnological groups of the Western Shoshone, Northern Shoshone and Bannock, Eastern Shoshone, Ute, Southern Paiute, Kawaiisu, Owens Valley Paiute, Northern Paiute, and Washoe.⁵

The Handbook of North American Indians uses the “culture area approach” and was undoubtedly impacted by Julian Steward, one of the primary anthropologists who studied the Great Basin in the early to mid-20th century.⁶ Steven J. Crum (Western Shoshone) notes Steward was

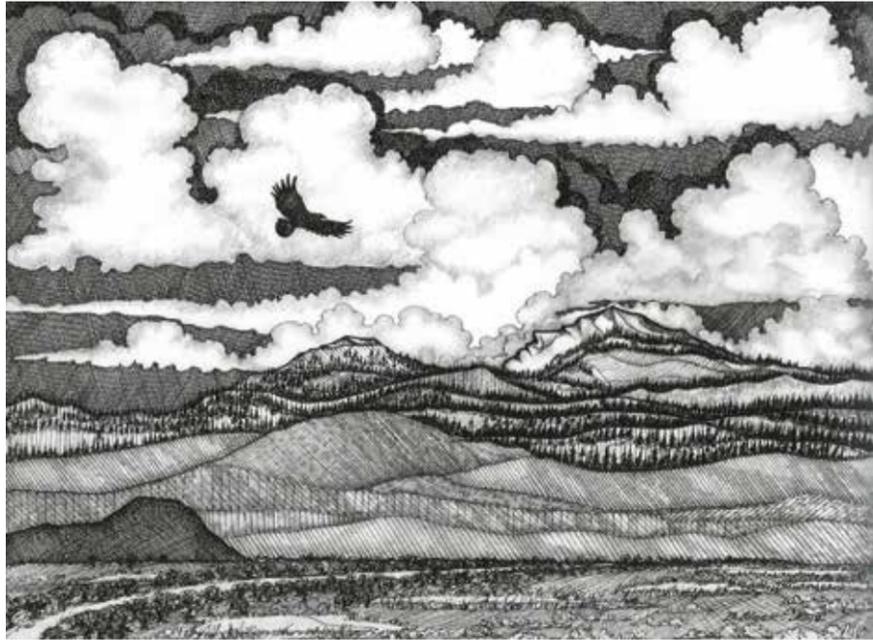
ABOVE, TOP Needle Rocks at Pyramid Lake. Photo: Seabamirum (CC BY 2.0).

ABOVE, BOTTOM Great Basin Native Artist after talk at the Pyramid Lake Museum & Visitors Center, November 2014. Center, Ben Aleck, at right: Melissa Melero-Moose.

OPPOSITE Map showing the Great Basin drainage basin, created by Karl Musser for *The New International Atlas*, Rand McNally, 1993 (CC BY-SA 3.0).

1. Steven J. Crum, *The Road on Which We Came (Po'i Pentun Tammen Kimmappah): A History of the Western Shoshone* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 1994), 4-5. These are the words from a Western Shoshone dance song translated and transcribed by Beverly Crum.
2. Melero-Moose in discussion with the author on May 9, 23, and 27, 2014. See Jean Merz-Edwards, “Melissa Melero: Northern Paiute-Modoc Mixed Media Artist,” *First American Art Magazine* 4 (Fall 2014): 38-43.
3. Warren L. d’Azevedo, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians, Vol 11: Great Basin* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1986), 1, 51-63; Steven J. Crum, *The Road on Which We Came*, 1.

4. L. V. Benson, E. M. Hattori, J. Southon, B. Aleck, “Dating North America’s Oldest Petroglyphs, Winnemucca Lake Subbasin, Nevada,” in *Journal of Archeological Sources* 40, no. 12 (December 2013): 4466-4476.
5. d’Azevedo, *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol 11.
6. Richard O. Clemmer, L. Daniel Myers, and Mary Elizabeth Rudden, ed., *Julian Steward and the Great Basin: The Making of an Anthropologist* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 1999), xvi.



TOP Ben Aleck (Pyramid Lake Paiute), *Mount Rose*, pen and ink on paper. Image courtesy of the artist.

BOTTOM Hungry Valley, Nevada. Photo: Melissa Melero-Moose (Northern Paiute-Modoc).

OPPOSITE, TOP Great Basin Native Artists exhibition at the Pyramid Lake Museum & Visitors Center, Nixon, Nevada, 2014.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM Melissa Melero-Moose (Northern Paiute-Modoc) with her mixed media artwork at the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, Santa Fe..

that Steward failed to recognize the rich “inner life” of the Great Basin Indigenous people rooted in a “deep attachment to the land.”⁸

RECIRCULATION IN THE ART WORLD

THIS LACK OF UNDERSTANDING extends to the art of the Great Basin Native Americans and accounts in part for the challenges Great Basin Native artists now face. Historian Ned Blackhawk (Western Shoshone) suggests that colonial power relationships allowed Steward’s work to be the authority among anthropologists on interpreting Native American cultures.⁹ Crum explains that Steward “saw the Pueblos of the Southwest as the ‘highest form of Native American,’” in part because of their artistry, social organization, and agriculture methods. In a 1936 Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) report, Steward suggested Navajo weaving, Hopi pottery, and other Indian arts be introduced to Indigenous people in the Great Basin.¹⁰

Steward’s antiquated notions still circulate in the region, even in the art world. Painter and printmaker Topaz Jones, who currently lives in Santa Fe, explains the “major difference” for artists between the two regions, Great Basin and the Southwest, is namely the ability to make a living. When she lived in the Great Basin, Jones designed T-shirts and entered poster contests. Since moving to the Southwest, her paintings are exhibited in museums and galleries. Her work procures a more money, she connects with people in the art world “24/7 every weekend” if she chooses, and the selection of shows to enter her paintings and prints are much greater.¹¹ Jones participates in the GBNA because she wants to see artistic opportunities available in the Great Basin.

“one of the most influential anthropologists of modern times,” but gave the public an inaccurate and insulting “mental image of the Great Basin people,” as “some of the simplest people on earth” who “lacked elaborate social or political organizations such as bands or clans.”⁷ Crum concludes

7. Steven J. Crum, “Julian Steward’s Vision of the Great Basin: A Critique and Response,” in *Julian Steward and the Great Basin: The Making of an Anthropologist*, ed. Richard O. Clemmer, L. Daniel Myers, and Mary Elizabeth Rudden (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 1999), 117–18.
8. *Ibid.*, 117, 123, 125. For Crum’s discussion about how other scholars, such as Catherine Fowler and the late Omer Stewart, have challenged Steward’s conclusions, see pages 118–9.
9. Ned Blackhawk, “Julian Steward and the Politics of Representation,” in *Julian Steward and the Great Basin: The Making of an Anthropologist*, ed. Richard O. Clemmer, L. Daniel Myers, and Mary Elizabeth Rudden (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 1999), 203–18.
10. Crum, “Julian Steward’s Vision of the Great Basin,” 122.
11. Topaz Jones in discussion with the author, March 21, 2018; Topaz Jones, email message to author, April 1, 2018; “Topaz Jones,” Great Basin Native Artists, web.

GREAT BASIN ARTISTS GROUP MODEL: NATIVE ART IS THE MEDICINE

THE CHALLENGES the literature captures and Jones experiences, Melero-Moose articulates: “There are very few places that display and celebrate Great Basin culture and artworks.... Sometimes it feels like our Native American history was completely erased.”¹²

When Melero-Moose and Aleck founded GBNA, they had only a few members and a small list of artists for the exhibition, *The Way We Live: American Indian Art of the Great Basin and the Sierra Nevada* at the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno in 2012 and 2013.

From there, Melero-Moose says, “We put a website together with some of the artists from the exhibition and created a small directory. We started having many small regional exhibitions, and the group began to grow in numbers and in popularity. Over the next three years, we reached out to the Native community through craft fairs, powwows, cultural events, and word of mouth, and we began to grow a comprehensive list of artisans and fine artists.” Today, around 25 members gather regularly. Three members, currently incarcerated, joined the group and communicate from afar.

The GBNA collective continues to grow from a stable base. The group exhibits several times a year at such venues as the Santa Fe Indian Market, Heard Fair, Maidu Museum, Stewart Indian Boarding School, and the Autry Museum. GBNA also provides consistent art business education. Melero-Moose is developing a curriculum and a how-to guide for communities starting art groups, which will eventually be available gratis on the GBNA website and in the directory.

This year, Melero-Moose becomes the inaugural Peter S. Pool Fellow at the Nevada Museum of Art Center for Art + Environment, where she will research the center’s archives and the museum’s collections as she develops the Great

12. Quotes and other information from Melissa Melero-Moose are from conversations and emails with the author on February 23, 2018, various dates in March 2018, and April 14, 2018.





TOP Linda Eben Jones (Northern Paiute-Modoc) beading at home. Photo: Cat Allison.

BOTTOM Linda Eben Jones (Northern Paiute-Modoc), *Hummingbird Bag*, canvas, deerhide, glass seed beads, thread. Image courtesy of the artist.

OPPOSITE, TOP Karma Henry (Fort Independence Paiute), *Pagwi*, 2017, aerosol paint, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 24 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM Karma Henry (Fort Independence Paiute) in her studio.

Basin Native Artist Research and Directory Project. This free resource will expand upon the original GBNA directory and will include a comprehensive file for each artist—past, present, and emerging in all media—replete with artist statements, images, biographies, artist résumés, and inventory lists.

Melero-Moose’s research for GBNA also includes traveling to Native communities and events in the region and collecting oral histories. She is expanding on existing research of the California Basket Conference, California Tribal Conference, and Nevada’s Indian Territory Tribal Tourism Conference, while she attends events in Eastern California and Nevada tribal communities.

Looking forward, Melero-Moose says, “Our larger vision for the group is to get Great Basin Native art and education out into the region, country, and world to motivate our Great Basin tribes to come together and build our own cultural center that our Native and non-Native communities so desperately need. I see this place being a way to interact with our community, share our culture and arts, and educate the public.” Art is the key to “the revitalization of our culture. ... This is the time!”

LINDA EBEN-JONES (NORTHERN PAIUTE-MODOC)

WHILE COMPILING the artist’s directory, Melero-Moose added her mother’s name to the list. Like many elders in the area, Eben-Jones at first resisted the idea of being an artist and felt that creating beadwork, jewelry, dance regalia, and Paiute dolls is not art—is it? Melero-Moose exclaimed, “Mom, you are an artist!”

Born in 1948 in Schurz, Nevada, Eben-Jones attended the Stewart Indian School in Carson City, Nevada, from 1963 to 1966.¹³ Under the BIA’s relocation program, she moved to the San Francisco Bay Area after graduation. Eben-Jones recalls, “I was just an innocent little girl from Reno. I’d never been over the mountain before.... My [times in the] sixties were very enlightening.” She studied business

¹³ Linda Eben-Jones, in discussion with the author, March 19, 2018.

at a local college and then worked in personnel management for the federal government. In 1974, when Melissa was born, they moved back home to Reno.

These early experiences that now inform her art culminated in the 1980s when Eben-Jones began making dance regalia for her daughter and grandson. Without patterns to model, Eben-Jones sketches original ideas. Melero-Moose adds, “My mom is an amazing illustrator. We have these great little books of her designs filled with little Indian people at powwows.” Eben-Jones constructs the clothing from her designs and adds beadwork.

Although she has been creating dance regalia for decades, Eben-Jones considers herself a late bloomer as an artist. “I’ve had a lot of experience working around artists. I know many artists, have admired and collected their works, but I never considered myself an artist.” She says, “As a collective, Indian people in the Great Basin have really been ignored and they haven’t really had a lot of publicity, and they are just as talented in every way as any artist. GBNA and FAAM really inspired me ... to see that I am an artist.”

Inspiration comes from other places as well. According to her artist’s statement on the GBNA website, Eben-Jones’s mother, brothers, nieces, nephews, and sister merit the title of artist as well. Eben-Jones remembers, “One day I was looking at a book from 1954 of a collection of beaded baskets at the Smithsonian, and I realized [it was the work of] one of my niece’s grandmas,” Eben-Jones recalls. “I was shocked when I saw it because it was Esther Davis. She’s Paiute from Pyramid Lake.”

Now embracing her identity as an artist, Eben-Jones says, “I call myself a ‘golden age dancer,’ and I am becoming a sketch artist. I’m also a writer and the family historian. I’m writing a collection of stories and a book for my family, which is the Great Basin people. In the last two years, I’ve been in two exhibits with the GBNA.” She continues with a hint of foreshadowing, “Before I retired, I started to do research on the Stewart Indian School. There has never been a book written.”



KARMA HENRY (FORT INDEPENDENCE PAIUTE)

AFTER A TEN-YEAR CAREER in the field of medicine, multimedia artist Karma Henry followed her passion for art and earned a bachelor’s degree in painting at California State University in Northridge and then a master of fine arts degree from Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles. Today, Henry paints to convey her Native worldview. On her website, she states, “Paiute lore and family stories” provide the basis for the work she conjures. She then “builds on these ideas integrating petroglyphs, topographic maps, historical photographs,





TOP Topaz Jones (Shoshone-Lummi-Kalapuya-Molalla), *Once Upon a Time*, acrylic on canvas, private collection.

BOTTOM Topaz Jones (Shoshone-Lummi-Kalapuya-Molalla) in Santa Fe. Photo: Dan McCoy (Muscogee-Potawatomi).

Great Basin Native Artists because I'm a part of that group, and one of the original mission statements of the group is we're alive, we're still here; Native people are still here." In recent years, Henry served as vice chairman of her tribe, the Fort Independence Indian Community of Paiute Indians. "It was interesting to meet some other artists who were in my area I never got a chance to meet before."¹⁴ Through these connections, Henry strengthens her voice and speaks clearly through her art.

TOPAZ JONES (SHOSHONE-LUMMI-KALAPUYA-MOLALLA)

"MY MOTHER is from the Great Basin and my father is from the Pacific Northwest," says painter and printmaker Topaz Jones. She was born in Portland, Oregon, and lived there until she was about nine years old. Her family moved to Idaho, then to Oregon again, with extended time in Washington during her teenage years.

"Growing up I traveled back and forth, like a modern-day nomad, with many places I call home."

At the age of 17, Jones enrolled at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, where she earned her associate of fine arts degree, after which she moved to the Northwest for a few years. She eventually returned to familial roots and settled on the Duck Valley Indian Reservation at the border of Idaho and Nevada.

To free her inner "suffocating" artist, Jones returned to Santa Fe in 2008 and earned her bachelor of fine arts degree in 2011, met her true love, brought two souls into the world, and continues to create art relentlessly.

The theme of place in her work situates Jones squarely within the GBNA. Of her creations, the artist shares, "I reflect on my upbringing through art. In my paintings, I use iconic imagery with my own symbolism and intertwine landscapes that create

alternative realities I call dreamscapes. Although, I never limit myself to one style or theme, I create different bodies of works in a variety of disciplines, such as painting, sculpture, printmaking, drawing, beading, and weaving."

Jones met Melero-Moose when they both were living in Santa Fe, and through the GBNA group, the two continue to collaborate remotely on projects such as show exhibitions.

"I enjoy being a part of the GBNA group because I can maintain a presence and a connection with my family and home through my artwork," Jones says. In her works exhibited with GBNA, Jones extends her central theme of place to the specific location of the Great Basin. Jones articulates, "When I think of the Great Basin, I'm filled with a longing that is deeply rooted in my upbringing and migratory ancestry."

Specific explorations of the Great Basin through art intersect with the history of place. In 1848, when a non-Native first found gold in Coloma, California, European-Americans had not settled the Great Basin region in large numbers. In fact, California was still part of Mexico. Over the next seven years, in what we now call the Gold Rush, prospectors infested the area as they trampled the natural flora and fauna with their horses and livestock and harvested the land through mining practices that still haunt the region. In addition to addressing the land issues that resulted from this point in history, Jones understands the negative effects of nuclear testing on the Shoshone lands by the United States government.

According to Jones, these land issues ground her research and her work. As a contract illustrator and Shoshone language and cultural consultant for a publisher that makes educational books for children, she just completed her first short story. *Tami Becomes a Bowman* is "about a Shoshone boy coming of age and seeing white pioneers for the first time." The GBNA plays a pivotal role in the connection between Jones and her dream job. She relates the circumstances under which it found her: "I



was referred to this publisher by a very close and dear friend. The publisher needed a Shoshone consultant. They saw my artwork and profile on the GBNA website and offered me a job."

CONCLUSION: TAKING ROOT

FROM A SHARED VISION between two artists in 2014, GBNA has taken root. The group continues to grow as it moves past a complicated history and asserts the significant role of the art and culture of the Indigenous people of the Great Basin.

The GBNA also serves as a model for other places interested in achieving similar results. For those thinking of implementing a regional art collective, Melero-Moose exclaims, "You can do it, too! We started with me and one other artist complaining about how there are no opportunities in our town. I guess you can talk about what you want to do forever but nothing will ever get done until you just *do it!*"



TOP Great Basin Native Artists at the Maidu Museum & Historic Site, Roseville, California.

BOTTOM Great Basin Native Artists logo.

14. Karma Henry, in discussion with the author, March 18, 2018.