

Northern Paiute Painter and Draftsman

Ben Aleck

Interview by Melissa Melero

PYRAMID LAKE, 40 miles northeast of Reno, Nevada, is home to the Pyramid Lake Paiutes, the ancient cui-ui fish, and the oldest documented petroglyphs in North America. Pyramid Lake is also home to its very own Ben Aleck, a Pyramid Lake Paiute tribal member and a lifelong artist. Proficient in both drawing and painting, Ben creates works inspired by the beautiful landscape of his home and his people, the Paiutes of Northern Nevada. Ben attended the California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC) in San Francisco, California, in the late 1960s during the height of the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and an arts and culture boom in San Francisco. Ben has been at the forefront of Native contemporary art in Nevada for many years. He co-curated and exhibited in *Under One Sky: Nevada's Native American Heritage* at the Nevada State Museum in Carson and recently participated in the contemporary group exhibit *The Way We Live: American Indian Art of the Great Basin and the Sierra Nevada* at the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno. In addition to his endeavors as an artist, Ben also works as the Collections Manager at the Pyramid Lake Museum and Visitors Center, educating the public and future generations about Northern Paiute history, art, and culture.

Born in 1949 in what is now the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony, Ben was one of nine children. His artistic abilities were recognized early, and he refined his drawing skills at public schools in Reno and spent time with



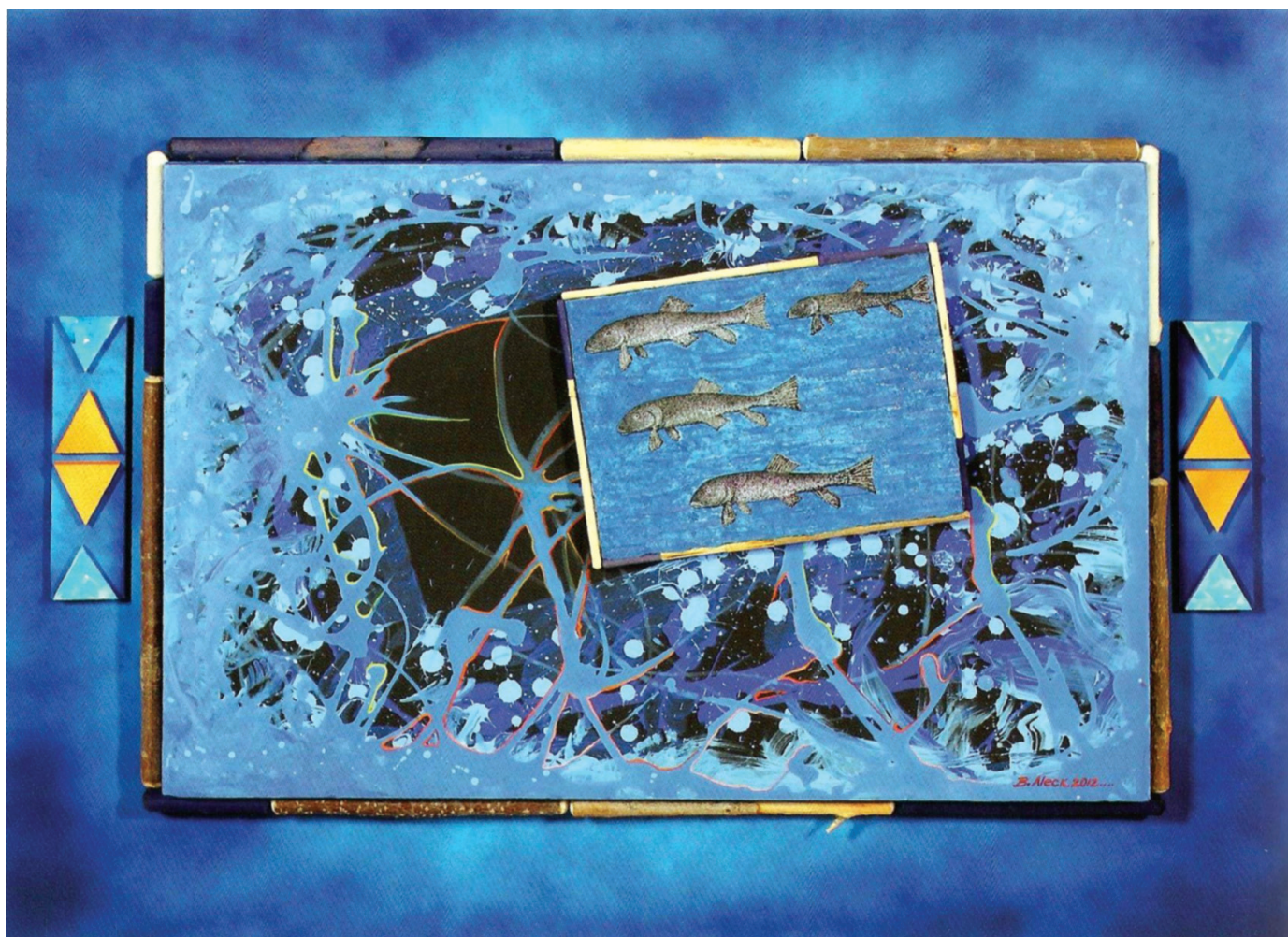
fellow art buddies on the Colony. With key support from art teachers and art contests in the community, he began selling his work locally in order to pay for basketball trips and contribute necessities to his large family.

In 1968 after graduating high school, Ben thought he was headed to Vietnam, like so many other young men being drafted around him. Due to losing his brother in the war already, Ben received a draft deferment to attend college. The Upward Bound program of the University of Nevada, Reno, presented him with the opportunity to attend art school. The Upward Bound program provided college preparation and support for first-generation and low-income high school graduates.

At the time, when young men were

getting drafted and going to Vietnam right out of school, Ben's art teacher and supporters urged him to pursue art school. Ben had his choice of art schools, from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to the Chicago Art Institute in Chicago, Illinois, but ultimately he decided to stay closer to home and attended California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, California.

At this time in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the San Francisco Bay Area was, as Ben says, "booming with creative people" active in music and art to the changing atmosphere of the Civil Rights Movement. "There were a lot of Natives in the city at that time," Aleck says. Some were there for school, but most were placed in the Bay Area by the US Bureau of Indian Affairs Urban Relocation Program active in the 1950s.



ABOVE: *Kooyooe Panunadu (Pyramid Lake)*, 2012, mixed media: painting, willow twigs. Image courtesy of the artist.
 OPPOSITE: photo of Ben Aleck by Gabriel Lopez Shaw (Pyramid Lake Paiute).

In 1952, the federal government initiated the Urban Indian Relocation Program. It was designed to entice reservation dwellers to seven major urban cities where the jobs supposedly were plentiful. Relocation offices were set up in Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Jose, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Cleveland and Dallas. Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) employees were supposed to orient new arrivals and manage financial and job training programs for them. Other BIA officials recruited prospective "Relocates" from many of the reservations around the country. Over the years, it's estimated that as many as 750,000 Native Americans migrated to the cities between 1950 and 1980. Some came through the Relocation Program. Others came on their own.¹

Other Natives had gathered in the San Francisco Bay Area to join the Indians of All Tribes (IAT), which ultimately led to the Indian Occupation of Alcatraz in 1969 through 1971, and later to join the American Indian Movement (AIM). Ben participated in the Indian Occupation

of Alcatraz and rallies held by the American Indian Movement.

Inspired by the atmosphere of civil rights activism, Ben started to integrate political and cultural commentary and images into his work. One of his student works, titled *The War Machine*, portrays a horrifying image of a child soldier holding two heads like trophies, similar to a familiar Vietnam photograph he saw in a magazine at the time, layered into an image of a one dollar bill and machine gun bullet casings. Ben's work, while in the Bay Area, fluctuated from the political symbolic realism that reflected the country's current events to cultural imagery and figurative work.

Ben graduated from CCAC in 1972 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting and was on his way to graduate school at Mills College in Oakland, California, when he decided to go back home to Nevada for a change. Making a living took over for Ben as he stayed in Reno, was married, and started working in education and other

1. "Assimilation, Relocation, Genocide: The Urban Relocation Program," *Indian Country Diaries*, PBS, last modified 2006, accessed December 6, 2013.



Untitled, pencil on illustration board. Image courtesy of the artist.

various professional jobs on the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony. Over the years, Ben has combined his talent as a draftsman, oil painter, and mixed media artist, with working in his community in education and giving back by getting involved with the current Upward Bound program that led him to attend college.

In 2000, Ben was hired by the Pyramid Lake Museum and Visitors Center, located in Nixon, Nevada. Currently serving as the Collections Manager, he organizes and protects the rare and unique pieces of Paiute culture housed in the museum.

The Pyramid Lake Museum has received much recognition lately, since the nearby petroglyphs have been acknowledged as the oldest known petroglyphs in North America. In August 2013, news outlets reported that recently tested coating from the rock art dates back at least 10,000 years and possibly back 14,800 years.

Some Pyramid Lake Tribal members are concerned about the ongoing battle against vandalism of petroglyphs and important sacred places at the Lake. Ben says all of the attention brings some negative with the positive. He acknowledges that the discovery of the dates and increased public awareness is good for the museum and the tourism

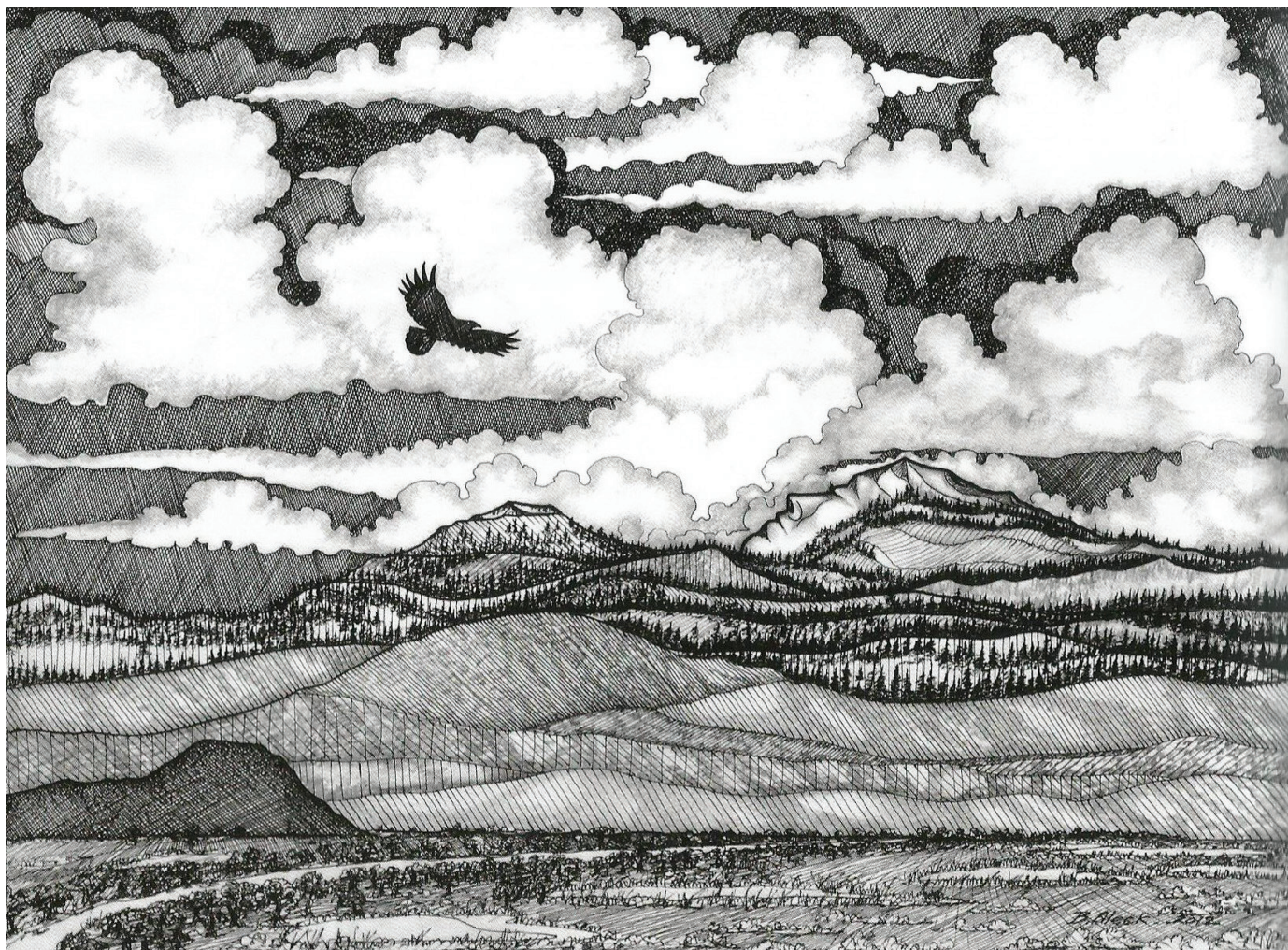
for the Lake. He hopes it will encourage further education and support for such an important cultural resource in the community and not further disrespect from those who come to the lake and deface our precious cultural history.

Ben's current artworks, recently exhibited in *The Way We Live*, have a rich storytelling flare to them. They depict Nevada's landscape and its importance to the Paiute people.

In the pen and ink drawing *Mount Rose*, Ben illustrates a familiar Nevada mountain ridge top with an image of a woman's face in the peak of the Sierra Nevada range. He says the view of the valley in the drawing is of a time before the masses took over and shows the pristine beauty of the foothills to Mount Rose.

Have you traveled very much? What do you think about the different places you have been and how it has affected you as an artist?

I enjoy traveling to other places in this country. Chicago Art Institute. Washington, DC, the National Gallery of Art, and all the art museums on the Mall. IAIA in Santa Fe, [New Mexico], the Bay Area, Oakland, San Francisco [California], museums and galleries.



Mount Rose, pen and ink on paper. Image courtesy of the artist.

Also Indian Country: South Dakota, Arizona, California, New Mexico, most of the western states.

How did you get involved with *The Way We Live at the Nevada Museum of Art* show and *Under One Sky*? (Two major examples of the very few Native art shows in Nevada)

By working at the Pyramid Lake Paiute Museum, I was asked to participate on a planning committee for the *Under One Sky* exhibit. I helped organize the Native American art exhibit by contacting Native contemporary artists and traditional arts and crafts people.

I also helped organize the Nevada Museum of Art [NMA] show by contacting Great Basin contemporary Native American artists to show their work in this major show. I worked closely with Ann Wolfe, who curated the exhibit.

David Walker, the Director of the Nevada Museum of Art, was very supportive of the show and opened doors

for Native artists. This was the first show of Native American art on the new grounds of the NMA since 2003.

What other artists, Native or non-native, inspire you?

I enjoy Picasso's work and also Van Gogh. I also like the Impressionists and artists from IAIA from the 1960s such as T.C. Cannon.

Where do you see the future of Native art going?

I think there will be a combination of the traditional and contemporary. I incorporate traditional techniques as well as contemporary techniques. I'm really excited about the future of Native art. I am inspired by abstracts and mixed media, and I would like to branch out into many different mediums as well as combine those with political statements, which was not as popular to do or try and make a name from years ago. Now, I see a lot of art out there being celebrated for its free opinions, and it is encouraging.

Pyramid Lake Museum and Visitor Center: www.plpt.nsn.us/museum