

Northern Paiute-Modoc Mixed Media Artist

Melissa Melero

Profile by Jean Merz-Edwards

I have the constant desire to create these images in my head, and in the process these works mesh into organic, caught-in-time objects of history and personal development. —Melissa Melero¹

NATURAL FOUND OBJECTS, abstract designs, and “green” techniques comprise the mixed media canvases of Melissa Melero, a Northern Paiute and Modoc artist enrolled with the Paiute-Shoshone Tribe of the Fallon Reservation and Colony. Melero became interested in art as a child growing up in Nevada, and her present inspirations include Paiute baby baskets, beaded baskets, and Fallon petroglyphs as well as her twelve-year-old son Marlon and her mother Linda Jones. Referring to her imagery as “personal petroglyphs,” Melero considers her creations “abstractions of stories... bits and pieces of memory of things that I love,” and they solidly encapsulate her place-based aesthetic, derived from spatial rather than temporal thought.



of Paiute, the Toi-Ticutta (cattail eaters), whose many uses for the plant range from sculpting duck decoys to harvesting it as a food source.

Melero’s art did not begin as large abstract works with natural objects, but rather with figures and landscapes. During high school, Melissa took art as an elective all four years. She openly discusses challenges she experienced during her time in elementary and high school and later college years. While earning her bachelor’s degree in science at a state college in the northwest—where she focused her studies on psychology and fine arts—Melissa experienced what she calls the “new racism,” something she defines as “invisibility.”

Demanding to be seen and refusing to ignore the racism she encountered, Melero took action and began making political paintings in the vein of Spokane artist Charlene Teters. Before graduating in 2001, Melero directly countered the system through a one-woman show that addressed the “historical Indian.”

“It was a big installation. I had three walls to work with,” Melero says.

One wall I called, “Historical Indian,” which included old photographs of Indians from museums, the next wall called ‘Stereotypical Indian’ included panels with stereotypes

Beginnings: Family and Schooling

Melissa Melero’s parents met as the result of relocation. Her mother, from Nevada, was in California as part of the Indian Relocation Program, and her father, from New York, was in California as a member of the United States military service, so Melero was born in San Francisco in 1974. Though her life began in California, Melero spent most of her childhood living near Reno, Nevada, where an extended Northern Paiute family, including many artisans, surrounded her. Reflecting on her current interest in incorporating natural materials into her art Melero recalls, “I was always outdoors with my family growing up; we traveled and camped a lot, fishing and hunting, rock climbing and collecting rocks, plants, and fossils.”

These early memories assert themselves in contemporary works like the 2014 mixed media diptych *Cattails*, where Melero embeds actual cattails into the art, that create long vertical lines set in a repetition of dots symbolizing water bubbles. Both the subject and the material express Melissa’s “spatial perspective” of seeing “through cycles of space and places of life as opposed to sequences of time.” More specifically, the cattails connect with the artist’s specific band



Naked, 2010, mixed media with pine nuts on canvas, 50 x 50 in. All images courtesy of the artist.

of Indians, and the third wall, “Contemporary NDN,” included abstract works. I felt everyone at the school knew so little about Indians... and I wanted to bring awareness to racism in this county.

Melero’s empirical knowledge expressed in the show worked in tandem with the epistemological knowledge she had acquired during her brief time at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas. Melero transferred to Haskell shortly after the school started an American Indian Studies program and before she was graduated with her bachelor’s degree in the northwest.

Because her credits were not interchangeable, she went back to the state school, but not before taking Indigenous philosophy with Dr. Daniel Wildcat, a Yuchi member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. Among many accomplishments, Wildcat

co-authored with Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Lakota-Yankton Dakota) *Power and Place: Indian Education in America* and then co-edited *Destroying Dogma: Vine Deloria Jr. and His Influence on American Society*.

In the required reading for Wildcat’s Indigenous philosophy class, Melero read *God Is Red* by Vine Deloria Jr. According to Melero, the reading and subsequent class discussions of *God Is Red* affected her deeply and equipped her with a knowledge that continues to inform her painting today.

Melero credits the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with significantly influencing how she views art through a Native perspective and one of the reasons why she has been successful as an artist.

As a young woman at the IAIA in the early 1990s, Melissa found solace in the

company of new, lifelong friends with whom she shared similar experiences from elementary school and high school. Moreover, the exposure to the rich collection of American Indian art changed her view of art in general. While earning an associate’s degree in fine arts, Melissa took a variety of classes in subjects such as dance, photography, three-dimensional art, jewelry, theater, and painting. Of the classes, Melero says, “I loved it all!” She reminisces that the exposure to such a broad selection of courses afforded her the opportunity to narrow her focus toward the “two-dimensional sculptures” she creates today.

One of the most remarkable opportunities Melero had at the school was frequently exhibiting her student work at the IAIA Museum in Santa Fe. Founded in 1971, the museum moved downtown and was remodeled in the early 1990s.

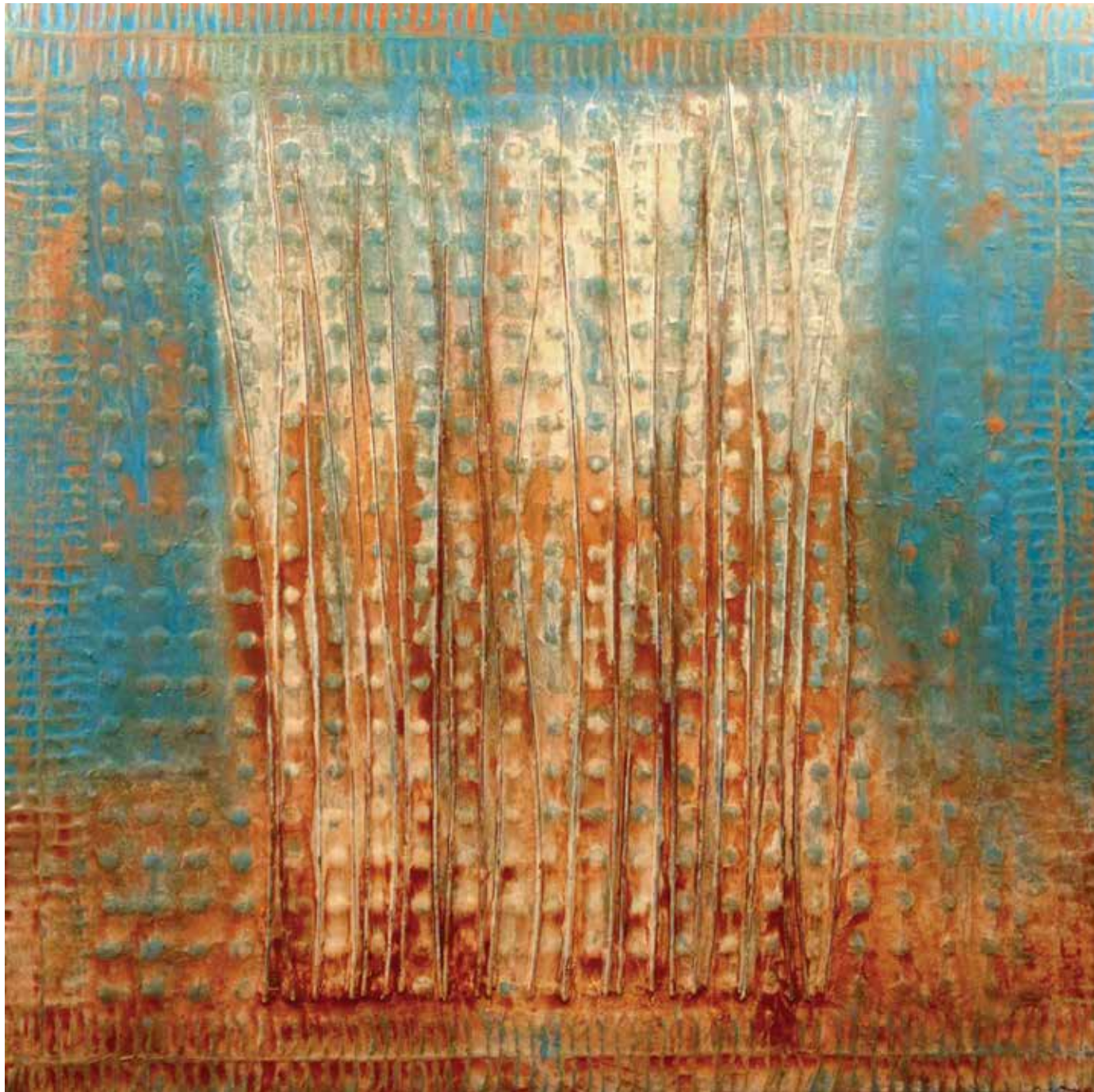
“We were treated like rock stars and exhibited in the main gallery all the time,” Melero recalls thankfully.

Ultimately, these early experiences laid the groundwork for Melero’s many accomplishments including numerous awards and exhibitions throughout her career.

Recent awards include the Lehmborg Fellowship for Native American Women Artists from the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in Santa Fe and first place in mixed media, second in abstract painting, and best in division in painting at SWAIA’s Santa Fe Indian Market.

Recent solo exhibitions include *The Basket Series* at the Metro Gallery at City Hall in Reno, Nevada, and *Willow and Bone* at the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts in Santa Fe, as well as group shows *Abstract Abstract* at the 1Spot Gallery in Phoenix, Arizona, and *Salutations: IAIA Public Art Biennial at the IAIA campus*.

1. Unless otherwise noted, biographical information and direct quotes are from the author’s phone conversation with the artist on May 9, 2014; May 23, 2014; and May 27, 2014, and from the artist’s website.



Tamano (Spring), 2013, mixed media with willow on canvas, 50 x 50 in.

Turning Points and Other Major Life Events

Although studies at IAIA helped her focus on her art, Melero underwent a few major turning points before she fully committed to her art. One of these is her transition to “green” techniques in painting, which began in the late 1990s. Melero recalls,

I began painting ‘green’ quite unconsciously when I was attending school in Portland, Oregon, in 1998. I had to make my paints and supplies stretch further and further when I was working larger than ever, so it was more for economic reasons. This required me to make my own experiments with media and dilute everything while still getting my thick textural effects on my canvas. Portland has such a green presence that

I started thinking of everything I was using, as far as supplies, conservation, and pollution, and over the years I found alternative ways to recycle canvases, extend one tube of paint for years (not kidding), no paint waste down the drain, etc.

Sixteen years later, Melero still uses sustainable practices in her art, a methodology that supports the general subject of her paintings. *Yubano*, which



Cattails, 2013, mixed media with cattails on canvas, 24 x 30 in.

translates from Paiute to English as “Fall,” provides one such example. Melero began the mixed media work during the fall pine nut harvesting season. The Northern Paiute have been collecting and harvesting pine nuts from the piñon trees of the Great Basin region long before contact with Europeans. In her own family history, Melero has rich childhood memories of pine nut gathering.

In addition to its title, *Yubano* sees through these cycles of space and places of life via the repetition of groups of four, such as the four vertical sections of color in the central rectangle containing the four rows and four columns of four circles, referring to the

four seasons and subsequent cycle of life. Even further, within the center of each individual circle, Melero affixed an actual pine nut from around the Great Basin region: a natural object that connects with her childhood home, her current home, and the home of her ancestors.

The implementation of “green” techniques into her repertoire marks a significant turning point in Melero’s art, however, the most momentous event of her life and career—thus far—occurred when the artist became a mother.

“The timing was perfect,” she reflects on the birth of her son Marlon and says it is the “single most important thing

that made me drop everything and do my art.”

After earning her undergraduate degree from Portland State University in 2001, the pregnant Melero moved back to Nevada to be near her family.

“Before, I was creating just to create,” she recalls. “I did the figure, and I was all over the place. When my son was born, it was right when I finished with school—‘it’ turned on... I had content. I had to make stuff, and I had to show it... It was an explosion. And the beginning of the most amazing awakening.”

During this surge of creativity, Melero had her first show, *NDN Perspectivism*, at the Nevada State Museum in Carson City, and another show in Santa Fe, which sold out.

With a renewed purpose and a new baby in tow, Melissa left her home in Nevada and moved back to Santa Fe in 2002. IAIA now offered a four-year degree, and Melissa took classes off and on again as an anomalous undergraduate student represented by the Modo Gallery of Hudson, New York. In 2009 when she graduated from the IAIA with a bachelor of fine arts degree in Studio Arts, Melissa exhibited regularly and was recognized by SWAIA with awards in 2006 and 2008. In other words, Melissa Melero was thriving in the artist community of Santa Fe.

In retrospect, Melero acknowledges she was getting comfortable in Santa Fe because she could be herself. She says, “My paintings got pretty and decorative.” Additionally, her growing son was then fascinated by dinosaurs and fossils, and they both loved to visit the sites around Santa Fe where they could see rock art. Some of these images surfaced in Marlon’s childhood artwork, which subsequently inspired Melero in her paintings. And though she was comfortable and successful with fodder for inspiration in New Mexico,

Melero had a deep longing to raise her son in the place of her childhood and the ancestral home of her family.

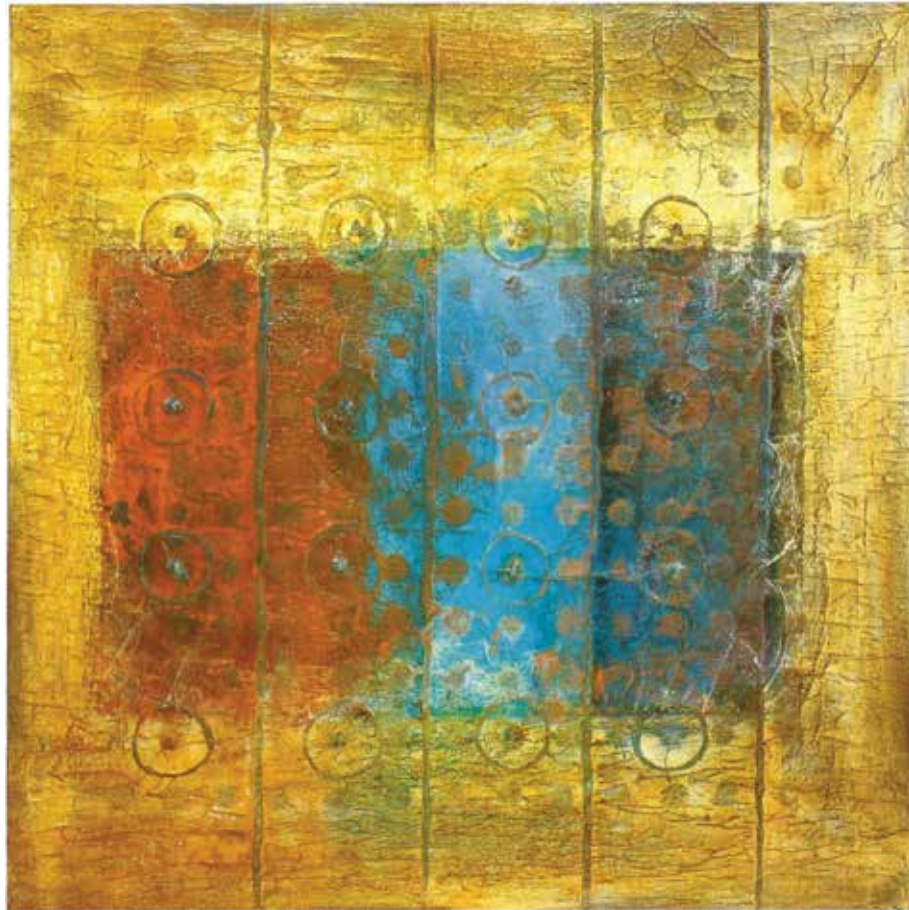
Melero Today and Her Thoughts on “Returning Home”

Recently, Melero and her son moved home to Hungry Valley, home of the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony in Nevada, Marlon’s tribe. Initially, the change seemed precarious considering the level of professional success Melissa had achieved in Santa Fe and all the caring and supportive friends she left behind. However, seeing her son continue the “cycle of life” by discovering all the things Melissa previously experienced during her childhood, she knows the change was worth it.

Now that I’m back, I get to go to all the places that are in my memories and what I have been longing for. [It’s] just been deeper with every time I go to a powwow out here, or to a house for a cultural gathering; I learn something new. I’m so excited for Marlon, because during my childhood I was not paying attention. I want him to soak it up, from language to culture to stories to experiences. I had no idea how much we needed to be out here.

With this new season in Melero’s life, new images appear in her work. *Basket Series II* from earlier this year recalls memories of community days and cultural conferences where basket makers demonstrate their artistry. Particularly, the geometric patterns in the painting call to mind willow and beaded Paiute baskets.

“I’m doing a little bit with new images that come into my head since I’ve been back—basketry, collecting basketry...” Melero muses of her recent works. “I’m loving texture, and it came to me on the sly. The images pop up at me and



Yubano (Fall), 2013, mixed media with pine nuts on canvas, 50 x 50 in.

are influenced by baskets that reorganize themselves into these works.”

In earlier works, such as *Naked* (2010), the color and finish on the painting’s surface mimic attributes of three-dimensional sculpture. Bronze and silvery colors suggest metal, while the carved lines that comprise the crosses and circles create physical depth much like a bronze relief sculpture. Repeating rows of pine nuts embedded down the vertical center of *Naked* further emphasize three-dimensionality. In *Basket Series II*, Melero creates the sense of depth through the raised dots and geometric forms, covered in a patina-like wash.

Blending shapes, forms, and textures, from a Paiute pine nut winnowing basket with Marlon’s cradleboard, describe the recent work *Pine Nut Basket*. This merging of aesthetics

speaks metaphorically about Melero’s return to Nevada and echoes the antinomic quality of life that Melero expresses in her art; it is simultaneously ephemeral and permanent as a season in the much larger cycle of life.

During this period where Marlon comes full circle to the place where it all began for his mother, Melissa has arrived full circle in a space where she uses her exceptional and particular skills for the benefit of her community. Melero worked as a program associate at the nonprofit Sierra Arts Foundation, “dedicated to providing funds and education to support and develop local artists.” While there, Melissa specifically focused on programs such as Arts in Education and the Galleries at Work program.²

Melero interviewed Pyramid Lake Paiute artist Ben Aleck in the Spring



Prayer II, 2011, mixed media with willow on canvas, 16 x 20 in.

2014 issue of *First American Art Magazine*. From the meeting, the two artists decided to found the Great Basin Native Artists (GBNA), “a venue for Native American professional working artists residing in Nevada and the Eastern Sierra Nevada mountain range,” according to the fledgling organization’s website, maintained by Melero.

These artists “wanted to be available to the public in one resource center, and available to each other for professional support.” GBNA has a growing artist directory, online image gallery, and listings of exhibition opportunities. The organization will provide a

forum and art business workshops for professional and emerging artists.³

Finally, being back in Nevada allows Melero to support her mother Linda Jones, an Indian boarding school survivor, with a current book and film project about the Stewart Indian Boarding School located southeast of Carson City in Nevada. Jones received a grant from the Nevada Arts Council for the project to create awareness about the history of Stewart.

Not surprisingly, Melero looks to her mother for inspiration, and when asked about her own perseverance and the advice she would give to young people today, Melero shares, “The best thing I ever did was learn about myself and the history of Natives in this country. Learn about your history—that was the spark of motivation for me—once you learn about who you are and how you fit, you won’t try and be something you are not.”

www.melissamelero.com
www.greatbasinnativeartists.com

2. “People on the Move: Melissa Melero Joins Sierra Arts Foundation,” *Reno Gazette Journal*, January 5, 2012, accessed June 1, 2014.

3. “Home,” *Great Basin Native Artists*, accessed June 1, 2014.