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Introduction

Since the beginning of time, Cherokees have been artists and artisans. From a cultural standpoint, art has always functioned differently within Cherokee society than it does in Western society. Many Indigenous arts have been more than ornamental pieces or decorations. Cherokee and Indigenous arts have served and do serve specific purposes, from practical to ceremonial. Cherokee women, being the keepers of tradition, have always had a strong hand in the survival and renewal of ancient Cherokee art forms and aesthetics. Despite the effects of colonization, Cherokee art has survived, adapted, and continues to reinvent itself through contemporary art. America Meredith's work fits within the tradition of Cherokee art by using Cherokee aesthetics as a form of cultural continuance. She moves through the mainstream art world shaping and reshaping our understandings of what Cherokee art is. Her work as a Cherokee artist encapsulates the innovation of a contemporary Cherokee artist and the responsibility of a Cherokee woman.

The first section of this thesis seeks to answer the following question: how does America Meredith fit into Cherokee art? Part 1.1 gives a brief history of Cherokee art. The purpose of discussing Cherokee art history is to give proper context to what Cherokee art has been through due to colonization's impact on materials and shifting political dynamics. This part also dives into an explanation of "art" from within a Cherokee perspective. There is no word for "art" in Cherokee that has the same meaning as it does in English. The English language is abstract, whereas Cherokee is literal and descriptive. As of now, "ditlilosdodi" is the umbrella term for art. Cherokee art is produced in too many media to be written about in such few pages. This part only focuses on the media of pottery and basketry, which primarily influence Meredith's paintings. The modern-day Cherokee painting tradition, the one adapted from the Western

painting tradition, stemmed from the latter half of the 19th century with Narcissa Chisholm Owen, who was dubbed “the Mother of Cherokee Painting.” Many contemporary Cherokee artists paint as their primary medium, including Meredith.

Within Cherokee ways of life, it is difficult to separate the artist from their work. Part 1.2 examines Meredith’s background, which consists of being of Swedish-Cherokee heritage and growing up within the Native American art world because of her parents’ careers. Being a citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, she is an active member of the Cherokee community. She received formal training in Fine Arts during her college career at the University of Oklahoma and the San Francisco Art Institute. She is currently the publishing editor of *First American Art Magazine (FAAM)*. She has received numerous awards and been involved in various exhibitions and publications as an artist. She merges both Indigenous and Western styles and has experimented with different painting techniques, including egg tempera and gouache. Meredith takes inspiration from Cherokee iconography, language, and philosophy, along with medieval art and mainstream pop culture.

Part 1.3 explores the major themes within Meredith’s art, such as relationships, language, humor, and representation. A significant theme in her work has to do with relationships and kinship, not only Native to Native relationships but also Native to non-Native relationships. Despite knowing Cherokee art history and using older forms of Cherokee design here and there in her work, Meredith does not focus on drawing people like those outdated depictions of Cherokees seen in history books. She works to dispel people’s expectations of what they think Native Americans look like. She incorporates humor into her work centered on the Indigenous experience by blending traditional and contemporary aesthetics. Using humor is a way of healing for many Native tribes. Language is also a major element that pops up numerous times in her art;

some of this language serves as prayers, while other examples simply label the content of the paintings. These themes are a means of cultural continuance because they contain knowledge that can be communicated to a broad audience and future Cherokee artists.

The second section will be discussing this question: in what ways does America Meredith shape the future of Cherokee art? Part 2.1 focuses on her work as a writer and editor and her mission to increase dialogue surrounding Native American art and uplift Indigenous voices. Meredith's blog, *Ahalenia: Native American Art History, Writing, Theory, and Practice*, was the start of a compilation of writings about the Native American art world. The blog's latest post was in 2014. *FAAM* picked up where *Ahalenia* left off. The intended purpose for both Meredith's blog and the magazine was to create a more accessible and wide-open discussion about Native American art. With the responsibility of the magazine, Meredith has put painting and creating her pieces of art on the backburner. However, she still includes her pieces alongside several of her editorial greetings. She continues to write and educate on Cherokee art history, often shaping our perception and expectations of what Cherokee art is and what it can do.

Part 2.2 looks at how Meredith actively tries to ensure that Indigenous knowledge and aesthetics are carried into the future. Art can connect the past, present, and future in a way that humans themselves cannot. Often Native Americans look at ancient artifacts to understand our ancestors. Meredith was an activist during her time as a bike courier in San Francisco, which is reflected in her projects *The Cherokee Spokespeople Project* and *Natural Law*. She was able to address social issues and actively perpetuate Cherokee language on a grand scale. She expressed concern about the relationship between Native artists and mainstream art institutions when discussing the alleged fraudulent Cherokee identity of world-renowned artist Jimmie Durham. The misrepresentation of Native Americans produces harmful effects. Bringing issues to light is

a steppingstone to getting the problem resolved for future artists. Meredith demonstrates her hopes for the future of Cherokee art by revitalizing pre-contact art forms, such as reintroducing the use of freshwater pearls and marginella (or snail shells) in beadwork. It is possible to revive thought-to-be-forgotten art forms, which is what happened with pottery and the double-weave technique in basketry. Meredith's work educating and communicating through visual art is proof of her resiliency as a Cherokee woman. She is paving the way for future generations to move through the art world while also providing information on media waiting to be reborn.

These are not the beginning and end requirements of what a Cherokee artist needs to do. Perhaps this thesis will provide a guideline for others to use in the future when talking about a Cherokee artist or art. Art and culture are tied very closely together in many Native American nations. The reason for choosing a female Cherokee artist comes from the cultural perspective that Cherokee women are the ones to carry and pass on culture to the next generations. As a brief example, after the decline of Cherokee basketry and pottery, Cherokee women were able to remember what their mothers and grandmothers had taught them about the craft. This led to the revival of those thought-to-be-lost art forms, which are now taught to Cherokee youth throughout Cherokee country. America Meredith's work exhibits a continuation of culture, and she does an excellent job of presenting lesser-known knowledge about Cherokee art to a wide audience, thereby reviving older art forms and bringing it into the contemporary art scene. With this knowledge being passed around and the ensuing revival of Cherokee media, like tattoos, Cherokee art is not going to slow down anytime soon. Moreover, with the ever-growing use of modern technology, such as digital art and film, more Cherokee artists are popping up every day and taking on different forms. This thesis is here to add to the ongoing discourse of Cherokee art.

1.1: Cherokee Art History

The coverage of Native American art, specifically Cherokee art, has just started to reach prevalence within the last several decades. The earliest books on the subject consisted of Frank Speck's *Decorative Art and Basketry of the Cherokee* (1920), Clark Field's *Fine Root Runner Basketry Among the Oklahoma Cherokee Indian* (1943), and Carolyn Thomas Foreman's *Cherokee Weaving and Basketry* (1948). However, they focused more on basketry than any other art form. A later book, *Crafts of the Cherokee* by Rodney Leftwich, was written in 1970, also had a focus on basketry. Nevertheless, it did include sections on woodworking, pottery, beads, weaponry, and more. Most other writings, books, and catalogs regarding Cherokee art discuss a specific medium or focus on either eastern or western Cherokees. This thesis uses *Art of the Cherokee: Prehistory to the Present* by Susan Powers (2007), which gives both historical contexts and provides information about most, if not all, forms of Cherokee art and craftsmanship.

The inclusion of Indigenous voices in the dialogue surrounding Indigenous art has been a slow process that has only substantially increased in the last several decades.¹ Tribal nations could not place a significant focus on art and culture in the same way that Euro-westerners were able to, because tribes had to spend the first hundred years of colonization trying to survive. Colonization has deeply disrupted and impacted the ways Cherokees crafted and created art, with some examples being the increased use of metal pots to replace pottery and the adaptation to a more European style of clothing. Despite the introduction of new tools and methods of crafting, Cherokees have been able to maintain cultural knowledge for specific skills like basket-weaving

¹ America Meredith, "Editor's Greeting," *First American Art Magazine (FAAM)*, Fall 2013, 8.

and ceramics. However, there was a time when the double-weave basket technique² and the practice of paddle-stamping pottery were close to extinction.³

Within the latter half of the 20th century and now into the 21st century, we have been able to create enough breathing room to not only revive the art forms of the past but expand their use into contemporary media. Starting in the early 20th century, Natives within the United States began to use Western art techniques in places like the University of Oklahoma, Bacone College, and later at the Institute of American Indian Art (IAIA).⁴ The history of Native Americans being forced into Western education as a means of assimilation has done severe damage among tribal nations. However, Natives have been resilient enough to revive their own cultures and reclaim art forms that were thought to be nearly lost. Indigenizing Western art forms has been a way of communicating culture and, for many, has become a means of healing.⁵

Art is always transforming. Cherokee people have always been artists with the ability to adapt and change throughout the years of colonization. While Native contemporary art is not created in the same way that other cultural art practices (such as baskets and pottery) are, it still serves a purpose. It talks about the impact of colonization and draws inspiration from traditional art forms. Many Cherokee artists use the aesthetics and designs that have been passed down in

² Kansas State Historical Society (KSHS), *Cherokee Basketmaking* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1993), 5,

https://www.ksks.org/kansapedia/pdfs/traditions_cherokee_basketmaking.pdf

³ Susan C. Power, *Art of the Cherokee: Prehistory to the Present* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 39, 124

⁴ *Contemporary Native American Art: Teacher's Guide*, American Indian Cultural Center and Museum (AICCM), accessed October 20, 2019, 4-6,

http://s3.amazonaws.com/content.newsok.com/newsok/images/NIE/2012-native-arts/nie-native-am-teachersguide_201.pdf

⁵ AICCM. 10, 14

order to create something new.⁶ This is not to say that all Cherokee artwork must have a traditional Cherokee element within it, but many Cherokee artists use their identity as Cherokee to create art pieces. Within Meredith's work, she transfers the designs from other media into painting. Her work incorporates Cherokee knowledge like stories rather than being limited to merely replicating designs of older Cherokee art forms in her paintings.

Art and Culture

Cherokees have always created art. It is hard to separate art and culture due to the Cherokee worldview being wholistic, meaning everything is interconnected and related to one another. A *Tahlequah Daily Press* article, written in 2017 and titled "Artist Group Debates Cherokee Word for 'Art,'" covers the thoughts and opinions of Cherokee artists on what "art" in Cherokee means, stands for, and their hopes for its future. The Cherokee word for "art" is ditlilosdodi, which means something along the lines of "an object you can manipulate." It is used as an all-encompassing term, much like the English word. Ditlilosdodi is used for visual arts, such as painting, dance, and even basketry. However, because Cherokee is a descriptive and literal language, this term does have its drawbacks. It is a term that describes the process of creating more than a piece of art. Cherokee itself relies heavily on verbs and actions. Ditlilosdodi is a word that, broken down, describes using a long, rigid object to manipulate, thereby evoking the image of a pencil or paintbrush. It is a word that can also mean to measure. There is not a perfect English translation for ditlilosdodi, but as of now, it is the "universal" word that is most often used as "art."⁷

⁶ "Shop for Art," Spider Gallery, accessed May 19, 2019, <https://webapps.cherokee.org/SpiderGallery/Products/Index/1>

⁷ Stacy Pratt, "Artist Group Debates Cherokee Word for 'Art,'" *Tahlequah Daily Press*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.tahlequahdailypress.com/news/artist-group-debates-cherokee-word-for->

If we were to have a conversation about art within the Cherokee language and we were commenting on a well-made piece, one may say something along the lines of “agatosani” (very ingenious or smart work) or “asamudi” (smart or sharp) when praising it. They are saying, “The person who made it was very sharp” or “The person who made it did ingenious work.”⁸

Cherokees always speak of something in connection to a person or the process of something being made. Cherokee language is relational in that sense, and the speaker is acknowledging the effort and process behind something that was created. Within Cherokee philosophy, the object is imbued with the creator’s feelings.⁹ Art echoes spirituality because when an artist is moved to create something, the feeling can be described as similar to the feeling of divine inspiration.

Basketry

An example of why it is difficult to separate art and culture is the Cherokee basket. We learned how to make baskets from Kananaski Amayehi, or the Water Spider within Cherokee mythology, when she weaved a basket in order to carry the first fire.¹⁰ Cherokee baskets came in different shapes and sizes and were often used for practical purposes, such as for gathering food and storage, as well as other purposes. Western Cherokees, because of the resources at hand after Removal, began to use buckbrush or honeysuckle more than rivercane. As a child attending the summer learning programs set up by Sequoyah Schools in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, I learned how to weave baskets, make pottery, and bead. We were only taught how to weave with round reeds. It was imperative to make sure that the basket was not only put together well, but that it also included some color. We alternated dyed and regular reeds.

art/article_72922697-846f-5193-b26f-022b304d8829.html?fbclid=IwAR22eZakt-49d4zPIkjfEduPRrl_XCgs0zIeXyPPHBeUNgLrljRJ0W2JE8

⁸ Chadwick Corntassel Smith, Rennard Strickland, and Benny Smith, *Building One Fire: Art + World View in Cherokee Life* (Tahlequah: The Cherokee Nation, 2010), 20.

⁹ Smith, 22-24.

¹⁰ Smith, 216

Traditionally, we harvested different roots, berries, and plants to create the dye in which the reed is soaked. These days, it is easier to use commercial dyes, especially for colors that would be difficult to harvest in the woods. Eastern Cherokees were able to continue creating a flatter style of Cherokee baskets. The thing that both styles of basket share is that they are double-walled or double-weaved, meaning that you weave up the spokes and then weave back down to the bottom of the basket. Double weave is a technique that was nearly extinct but was revived and taught in the early 20th century by Lottie Queen Stamper in North Carolina and women in Oklahoma, including Eliza Padgett, Sallie Lacy, and Lucy Mouse.¹¹ Many baskets, whether round or flat reed baskets, are considered art and are collected by non-Natives. Cherokee artists today can create intricate designs that add a little twist onto older Cherokee basketry designs.

Ceramics

According to traditional stories about Cherokee pottery, the first pot was created by a Cherokee woman who was watching a wasp build a mud house. She observed that it was impervious to both fire and water.¹² We have been using pottery for thousands of years, collecting clay deposits from areas in the Appalachian Mountains. For many Cherokees, especially back in the eastern part of the United States, the place for collecting clay came from going to riverbanks and shoveling as much as you may need. Some potters hauled as much as ten pounds of clay and stored it for making pottery for the rest of the year.¹³ Pottery has been used

¹¹ Power, 137, 147, 149

¹² Barbara Duncan et al., *Cherokee Pottery: People of One Fire* (Tahlequah: Cherokee Heritage Press, 2007), 17. <http://www.cherokeeheritage.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/CherokeePotteryCat.pdf>

¹³ M. Anna Fariello, "People: Bigmeat Family," *Cherokee Traditions: From the Hands of our Elders*, accessed July 13, 2019,

for ceremonies, utilitarian purposes, and—more commonly today—decoration. Styles and traditions change; even our ancestors were influenced by neighboring tribes. For the Cherokee, there was the Catawba tribe. Cherokee pottery was almost lost but was revived by Rebecca Youngbird and Comeback Wolf with the help of two Catawba women, Susanna Harris Owl and Nettie Harris Owl.¹⁴

One of the most popular styles used today is the pinch pot style. In this style, there is a flat base, and you roll a coil of clay that rests around the circumference of the base. The coils are stacked on top of each other, and after every three or four coils, pinched together to form a solid clay pot. Sometimes Cherokee potters would use broken pieces from previous pottery pieces as a tool to smooth the sides of the pot. One way to tell whether the pottery is good quality is by checking the width of the walls—the thinner the walls, the better. Paddles made from wood or clay were often used to create designs along the walls.¹⁵

The earlier types of designs and motifs that were used to decorate pottery were often rectilinear with accents of notches and punctuations. Later designs started to include more curvilinear designs. There were also more types of textured patterns that include: “concentric circles, figure nines, parallel undulating lines, chevrons, and rectilinear line blocks.”¹⁶ Embellishing the surface of the clay did more than just offer an aesthetic; it was something that helped with the cooking. The textures on the pot allowed for heat to distribute evenly throughout.

https://www.wcu.edu/library/DigitalCollections/CherokeeTraditions/People/Potters_BigmeatFamily.html

¹⁴ Power, 156-157

¹⁵ Ibid., 16, 157

¹⁶ Ibid., 15

Using some form of stamping was also important for this function, but soon over-stamping for a more appealing look became popular, and more Cherokees got creative with their designs.¹⁷

Colonization and Change

Cherokees were not among the first to encounter Europeans, and so they were not immune to the effects of colonization. In the 18th century, more and more European settlers moved into Cherokee territory and created a major shift in Cherokee cultural and political dynamics. Europeans brought goods that replaced or decreased the production of traditional arts like basketry, ceramics, shell carvings, and textiles. More types of metal were introduced and desired for creating jewelry like gorgets as well as used to replace pottery. Different types of textiles were used to create clothing; 18th century Cherokee clothing used wool and linen, which is often still used by the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBC).

White settlers often desired Cherokee baskets, but the rivercane that was used to create the baskets was also used as feed for cattle, pigs, and horses.¹⁸ This led to the decline of Cherokee basketry. Cherokees became increasingly dependent on the Euro-American traders for resources. In order to receive metals, fabric, guns, ammunition, or any other item they may need, Cherokee men had to have plenty of deer hide to trade. Due to Cherokee women being excluded from the market economy during that time, they had to become more dependent on their husbands to provide tools and materials.¹⁹ Despite the changes in resources, Cherokee artists continued to create as they always had. In addition, they were able to incorporate new materials and combine them with old materials.

¹⁷ Ibid., 16

¹⁸ Ibid., 57

¹⁹ Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1998), 83.

Painting and Contemporary Art

The modern Cherokee painting tradition may be traced back to Narcissa Chisholm Owen, dubbed the “Mother of Cherokee Painting.” She was born in 1831, 84 years before the “Father of Cherokee Painting,” Cecil Dick (1915-1992). She was the daughter of an Old Settler chief, Thomas Chisholm. She was a child when she witnessed the coming of Cherokees on the Trail of Tears and the Army herding them in the area. As she grew up, she went to the College of Evansville in Indiana to major in Music and Art.²⁰ Her work has won awards and is still showcased in museum collections. When she returned to Indian Territory with her husband in 1880, she taught at the Cherokee Female Seminary. She taught some Western artistic techniques such as Naturalism, but much of her subject matter reflected Cherokee culture.²¹

Cherokee painters, such as Joan Hill, Kay Walkingstick, and Virginia Stroud, practice different techniques and styles of painting. In the second half of the 20th century, there was an evolution from the flat style of painting to other styles like Realism, Expressionism, Pop Art, and many other Modern, Postmodern, and Contemporary art styles that were done in mainstream art. The tradition of the flat style still makes its appearance within Cherokee art, but it is often done with a twist. Like our ancestors, many Cherokee artists showcase their innovation by using older forms of Cherokee art with contemporary materials. Today, the EBC has a directory filled with Cherokee artists, with many of them sticking to more traditional Cherokee arts like pottery, mask-making, basketry, flint knapping, gourd art, and more to sell to tourists. In Oklahoma,

²⁰ Edwyna Synar, “Remember the Ladies: Narcissa Chisholm Owen – Mother of Cherokee Painting,” *Muskogee Phoenix*, February 1, 2019, https://www.muskogee phoenix.com/news/remember-the-ladies-narcissa-chisholm-owen---mother-of/article_2c8ea67e-0d6a-5f9b-88f5-8ee678ce024a.html

²¹ “Narcissa Chisholm Owen: The Mother of Cherokee Painting?” *Ahalenia: Native American Art History, Writing, Theory, and Practice*, February 7, 2012, <http://ahalenia.blogspot.com/2012/02/narcissa-chisholm-owen-mother-of.html>

Cherokee Nation's Spider Gallery has its own directory filled with artists, including America Meredith.

1.2: Art Style and Influence

The driving force of America Meredith's work as an artist stems from her experiences growing up within the Native art scene and Cherokee community. Being part of the community is an integral part of being Cherokee, and it is impossible to detach the art from the artist in Cherokee philosophy. Her work fits within Cherokee art by incorporating elements of cultural knowledge known within Cherokee culture and philosophy. She has also developed her own style as an artist. She has experimented with different techniques to depict different Indigenous plants, animals, people, and iconography. She has been influenced by more than just Cherokee art, but her work will always represent an important part of Cherokee art history under the modern painting tradition.

Background

Meredith is an enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and is of Swedish descent. She earned a Master of Fine Arts in Painting at the San Francisco Art Institute, and her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Oklahoma.²² Meredith has been an associate publisher of Noksi Press, which is a publishing company that specializes in Cherokee language texts. She has served in several different organizations, such as the Cherokee Arts and Humanities Council and the Bacone College Arts and Culture Advisory Council.²³ She has worked as a curator in Tulsa, Oklahoma and has taught at many different institutions. She has

²² America Meredith, "Bio," Ahalenia, accessed May 9, 2019, <http://ahalenia.com/america/bio.html>

²³ "Meredith, America," Spider Gallery, accessed May 9, 2019, <https://webapps.cherokee.org/SpiderGallery/Artists/Details/45>

won numerous awards at different museums and cultural centers and in different art competitions.²⁴

These days, she is the editor for the First American Art Magazine (*FAAM*) and still features her pieces alongside her editorial greetings in every publication. Her works are featured nationally and internationally throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. She has a website that contains numerous series of her paintings, as well as a blog where Meredith has written on Native American art and artists. As of the writing of this thesis, the best place to find up-to-date information on what she is doing is through her public Facebook page, aptly named “America Meredith Art.” On her Facebook page, there are posts, articles, and announcements of presentations or exhibitions that involve not only Meredith, but fellow Indigenous artists as well.

Meredith grew up in the art world thanks to her parents being curators at the Center of the American Indian in the 1970s.²⁵ Her family moved to the Bacone College campus in the late-70s/early 80s, where she gained intertribal knowledge. Despite not being the most coordinated kid, she participated in powwows, which underscored the importance of being involved in the Native community. She continues to establish and maintain relationships by attending powwows and sees it as a way of bringing generations together and a place to showcase artwork.²⁶ Her mother, Mary Ellen Meredith (Milam), once worked as Cherokee museum curator and director,

²⁴ “America Meredith: Momentum Tulsa 2015 Curator,” Oklahoma Visual Arts Coalition, last modified May 22, 2015. <http://ovac-ok.org/uncategorized/america-meredith-momentum-tulsa-2015-curator/>

²⁵ Staci Golar, “America Meredith Stirs Up Santa Fe’s Art Scene One Show at a Time,” *SantaFe.com*, October 21, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130728015425/https://santafe.com/blogs/read/america-meredith-stirs-up-santa-fes-art-scene-one-show-at-a-time>

²⁶ Dawn Karima, “FIRST AMERICAN ART Celebrates Indigenous Art and Artists,” *PowWows.com*, June 19, 2014, https://www.powwows.com/first-american-art-celebrates-indigenous-art-and-artists/?fbclid=IwAR3-GMdjY83VBMMyZc6wOpNxnlYHb_j6ys-wbkXW9l27a70gIgar6Vt7d8C4

but she has since retired. Her late father, Howard Meredith, was the head of American Indian Studies at the University of Science & Art of Oklahoma and has written numerous books, articles, and reviews.²⁷ He is the only reason she is an artist.²⁸ This following section will be looking at Meredith's artistic style and some techniques that she uses. It will look at her art inspirations, including her background and other influences. It will also examine the major themes of her work and their ties to Cherokee art and culture.

Art Style

Meredith's art style bends both of her Western and Indigenous heritages together. Her style ranges from historically Indigenous visual imagery and media to the more contemporary imagery of pop culture and everyday life. Her work is also very text oriented. The Cherokee syllabary is either at the forefront or is a complementary element in many of her works. Most of her work is done through painting, but she has also done work in smoke art (or fumage), linoleum block printing, pen and ink drawings, and monotypes.²⁹ The types of paints she uses also vary from acrylic to watercolor and gouache, as well as egg tempera. Meredith describes her style as being all over the place, with decorative elements, pre-contact elements, and contemporary, urban elements all coming together in her work.³⁰

²⁷ Staff Reports, "Three generations of artists exhibit work at Standing Buffalo Indian Art Gallery and Gifts," *The Oklahoman*, March 31, 2010, <https://oklahoman.com/article/3450212/three-generations-of-artists-exhibit-work-at-standing-buffalo-indian-art-gallery-and-gifts>

²⁸ Karima

²⁹ "Meredith, America"

³⁰ *The Road to Indian Market 2010: Cherokee & Swedish Painter America Meredith*, YouTube video, 8:58, posted by "uptownpaulie," August 10, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PK6V3HJRoA>

Art Techniques

As mentioned previously, Meredith paints more than any other medium. She uses acrylic



Figure 1. America Meredith, *Mapuche Girl after Milet Ramírez*, 2014, acrylic on wooden panel

paint, which is a typical paint that can be used by people of any skill level in art. Meredith posted on her blog about an experimental piece she did with acrylic. It went in-depth on her process to paint a picture that she found of a Mapuche girl (Figure 1) by using a 16th century Venetian method of painting with acrylic. She learned the process from a post written by Patrick McGrath Muniz. She had agreed to paint for an international art exhibit called

ImagoMundi. While painting, she was thinking about cultural appropriation and hoping that she

was not overstepping by painting a Mapuche person despite not being Mapuche. She was not trying to assume a Mapuche identity while painting this. There was only one comment on this post, and it did not address the question of whether her painting a photo was cultural appropriation.³¹ She had thought about the “Indian princess” stereotype due to this portrait, which included the girl wearing silver jewelry and being draped in fur. In the blog post, Meredith says, “Painting someone puts them on a pedestal, exalts them.” Describing the Mapuche girl as a “princess” is the most readily available archetype that Western knowledge has. Nevertheless,

³¹ “An Experiment in Acrylic Painting,” *Ahalenia: Native American Art History, Writing, Theory, and Practice*, September 4, 2014, <https://ahalenia.blogspot.com/2014/09/an-experiment-in-acrylic-painting.html>

Meredith's purpose was to bring the portrait into the 21st century and to emphasize that her culture is still vital.³²

Meredith wrote another blog post that discussed her journey into egg tempera. Egg tempura is an old type of art that uses egg yolk to bind pigments together in paint. During the Middle Ages, egg whites were used as a binder for pigments in manuscripts. This practice was called "glair." However, for egg tempura, the yolk needs to be completely separate from the egg whites. Meredith's post talks about using quail eggs as opposed to chicken eggs. The smaller size

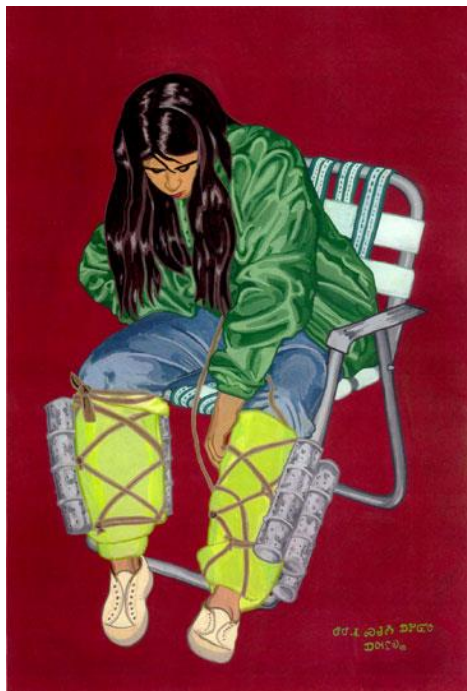


Figure 2. America Meredith, *Unvdi-Sguo Ageyuja (Milk-Tin Girl)*, gouache on paper, 24"x18"

of the quail egg means less chance of it going to waste or having to be stored in a refrigerator. Indigenous people have used different resources as binders, such as animal fat or grease, juices from plants, and even blood. In the post, Meredith contemplates the possibility of tribes that had domesticated turkeys using egg tempura.³³ She has a section on her website that shows 14 pieces she has done using both chicken and quail egg tempura.

Another method of painting that Meredith uses is gouache (Figure 2), which is a type of water-based pigment. It is water-soluble but is not the same as

watercolor, because it is opaquer than watercolor and

therefore does not allow the white from the paper to show through. This type of paint was created in France and has been around since the 18th century. It provides a thicker layer of paint

³² "An Experiment"

³³ "Adventures in Egg Tempura," *Ahalenia: Native American Art History, Writing, Theory, and Practice*, March 19, 2011, <https://ahalenia.blogspot.com/2011/03/adventures-in-egg-tempera.html>

and dries darker than when it was applied. It is said to be tricky to mix and match colors once a layer of it has dried due to the oxidization that occurs. However, using gouache can create a “heavy, velvety texture that absorbs light rather than reflecting it, creating a very smooth appearance.”³⁴ This is what creates the vibrant colors so often seen within Meredith’s work.

She describes her work as being more image-oriented and controlled rather than being experimental with mixed media.³⁵ This can be seen in her use of Indigenous symbols and iconography, which tend to be symmetrical. She uses more than just Cherokee symbols; the context of her paintings dictates what types of designs she will use. For many of her works that focus on people from other tribes, for example, she tends to use designs known to that tribe. Perhaps she does this so people who know what they are looking at will recognize specific patterns and feel more connected to the painting.

Inspirations

A lot of Meredith’s artistic inspiration comes from medieval art, which was done before artists at the time learned how to depict perspectives accurately. One artist in particular, Saint Hildegard of Bingen, who was a Benedictine nun known for her work in medicine, politics, and creative arts, has inspired

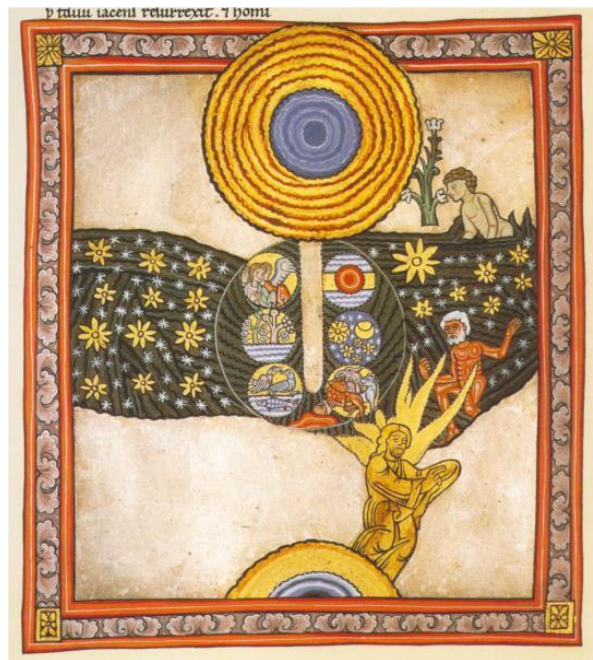


Figure 3. Hildegard of Bingen, *Six days of creation*, circa 1140 CE, thumbnail illustration of Scivias-Codex

³⁴ Jessie Oleson Moore, “Meet Gouache: The New (Old) Paint That Will Rock Your World.” *bluprint*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.mybluprint.com/article/meet-gouache-the-new-old-paint-that-will-rock-your-world>

³⁵ *Road to the Indian Market*

Meredith's work.³⁶ Saint Hildegard created her art during the Romanesque art period within the medieval era (Figure 3). An important characteristic of paintings during the Romanesque period is the depiction of characters without perspective, meaning that there would be some figures that



Figure 4. America Meredith, Awi Unohalisdasdi (*To Hunt Deer*), acrylic on canvas

were bigger than others. The difference in size was not always simply because one figure is in the foreground and other is in the background; it signaled the bigger figure had the most significance.³⁷ The colors used were often bright and contrasted with each other, and black outlines separated the figures from the background and each other. During this time, Christian iconography was used in most paintings, and the use of disproportionate hands and eyes for the people in

the paintings created an emphasis on spiritual expression.³⁸

The influence of medieval art on Meredith's work becomes apparent when looking at the use of color and iconography. Her series *Medicinal Formulae* has some of the most noticeable influences of medieval art within it. Awi Unohalisdasdi (*To Hunt*

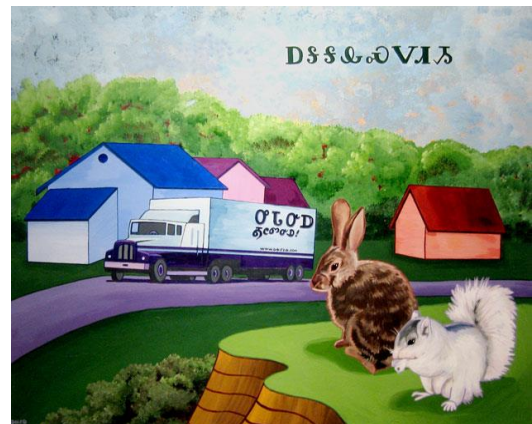


Figure 5. America Meredith, Agaghvsdodiya (*To Convince Them to Move Away*), acrylic on hardboard

³⁶ SWAIA Luncheon with Native Artists, YouTube video, 4:48, posted by "SWAIA Santa Fe Indian Market," June 15, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Heipt1hIsOA&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1a7_e05lAm9jDKewtWeCg_mCY55gdoW7iQCneEiuCj-G1diUNMbVfm96A

³⁷ Neha Kestwal, "Romanesque Paintings (The Age Of Pilgrimages)," last modified September 2, 2014, <https://www.slideshare.net/nehakestwal/romanesque-paintings>

³⁸ Elena Victorero, Elena, "Romanesque Painting," *Art History Summary*, January 8, 2013, <http://arthistorysummerize.info/Art./romanesque-painting/>

Deer) is a painting of a deer in front of the text of a Natchez hunting song (Figure 4). However, the font of the text recalls the type of font that was used in early manuscripts, especially from the Middle Ages. Another piece from this series, *Agaghvsvodiyi (To Convince Them to Move Away)*, depicts a rabbit and a squirrel sitting in the foreground while a house and moving truck sit in the background. As shown in Figure 5, this painting squishes perspective in such a way that the houses and the truck are roughly the same size as the two small animals sitting atop a cliff overlooking what is happening down below.

She also mentioned some of her favorite artists during a Southwestern Association for Indian Arts (SWAIA) luncheon back in the summer of 2010. Some of the artists mentioned included: Judith Lowry (Maidu/Pit River), Enrique Chagoya (Mexican), and Manuel Ocampo (Filipino). Lowry's work is often dark with pops of vibrant color that create the images and is



Figure 6. America Meredith, *Wingspan*, acrylic on hardboard, 12"x12"

influenced by story-telling and social commentary.³⁹

Chagoya's work is mostly monochromatic; each artwork has one prominent color, predominantly red or blue. His work is a mix of Pop Art and Surrealism.⁴⁰ Ocampo's work uses more iconography and historical references in an abstract art style that also incorporates some surrealistic elements.⁴¹

While Meredith's work does not look exactly like these other artists, it is easy to see some similarities between these

³⁹ "Judith Lowry (artist)," *Alchetron*, last modified April 6, 2018, [https://alchetron.com/Judith-Lowry-\(artist\)](https://alchetron.com/Judith-Lowry-(artist))

⁴⁰ "Enrique Chagoya," *artnet*, accessed July 8, 2019, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/enrique-chagoya/>

⁴¹ "Manuel Ocampo," *artnet*, accessed July 8, 2019, <http://www.artnet.com/artists/manuel-ocampo/2>

artists and her work, such as the incorporation of social commentaries, humor, iconography, and the use of color.

Meredith's work is also influenced by Mississippian shell engravings, the teachings of the Bacone school of painting, the Arts and Crafts movement, and 60s cartoons. She is also inspired by her Cherokee culture (Figure 6), which will be examined later. Meredith seeks to incorporate all these styles and traditions into her paintings to express her own life and time. "Common threads run through these schools of art—a love of nature and beauty, an awe of the unseen world, a flattening of space and time, and bursts of quirky humor."⁴² By incorporating Mississippian or Moundbuilding design, Meredith brings awareness to one of the earliest art traditions within the southeastern part of the United States. Using her knowledge of old art forms created and practiced by various other tribes, Meredith turned her attention to specifically Cherokee art.⁴³

Many aspiring artists prefer to be known by the sole merit of their work rather than what their identity is. As for America Meredith, she is very much a Cherokee artist. She is more than an enrolled Cherokee Nation citizen, a criterion for the Indian Arts and Crafts Act, she is involved in the Cherokee community and Indian Country. Her work and style demonstrate the life of a contemporary Native: a mix of Indigenous and western culture. She blends her expertise in formal art education with cultural knowledge learned from her lived experience as a Cherokee woman in the United States.

⁴² "America Meredith," *Native America OnTheWeb (NAOTW)*, accessed May 9, 2019.

<http://www.naotw.biz/directory/native-american-arts/visual/painting/america-meredith>

⁴³ heather Ahtone, "Folding Past, Present & Future: Cherokee Artist America Meredith," *Dreamcatcher Magazine*, August 31, 2012, 13-15.

https://issuu.com/dreamcatchermag/docs/dreamcatcher_036_sep2012

1.3: Themes and Culture in Practice

America Meredith's work fits well among Cherokee art because her mix of traditional Cherokee and contemporary aesthetics represents a continuation of Cherokee culture. Although there is hybridity—the mixing of traditional Cherokee knowledge and Euro-Western education—to her work, she continues to center her content around Indigenous experiences. The presence of Cherokee culture within her paintings can be as overt as the use of specific iconography and language. Alternatively, it could be as subtle as using specific colors that may appear to function as traditional Western color theory, but all the while they represent Cherokee philosophy. Her work exhibits a clear manifestation of Cherokee beliefs, no doubt because she is inspired by older Cherokee art forms and grew up within the Native American community. These beliefs are exemplified by the fact that she uses visuals and humor to showcase the interpersonal relationships among all beings—including ancestors, present-day Native Americans, plants, and animals.

Humor

Humor is a fundamental part of Meredith's art, and it can be obvious or subtle. She often uses “the visual vocabulary of her own generation” to create the humor in her work.⁴⁴ One of the most widely known examples of this is the use of the Pink Panther to talk about the mixture of red and white skin in her *Think Pink* series. *Heavens to Murgatroyd! It's Charles Curtis* (Figure 7) is an example where the influence of

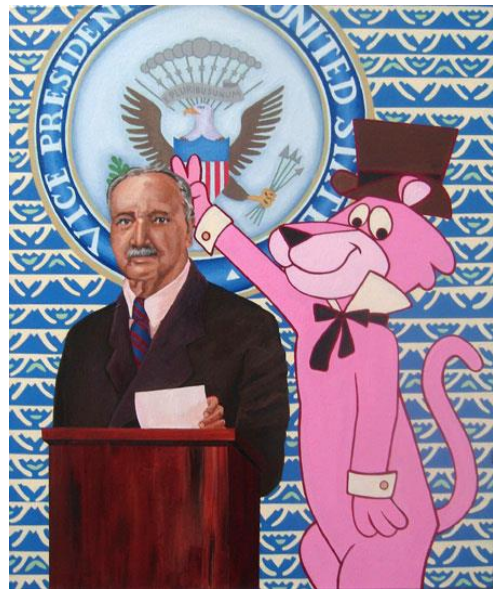


Figure 7. America Meredith, *Heavens to Murgatroyd! It's Charles Curtis*, acrylic on masonite

⁴⁴ Ahtone, 14

the 1960s cartoons and other pop culture references come to the forefront. Curtis was a controversial figure, being Indigenous and Vice President under Herbert Hoover.⁴⁵ Meredith includes Pottawatomi iconography as the background in the painting. The title uses a phrase said by another pink-colored 60s feline, Snagglepuss. The actual character of Snagglepuss, much like the Pink Panther, is known to be a mischievous prankster. He gets curious and tries out different things that do not always go his way, often ending right back where he started or in a worse position. Native to non-Native relations took a turn for the worse with the passage of Curtis Act in 1898. The act delegitimized the Five Tribes' governments and including a reference to it next to Snagglepuss brings humor to something terribly wrong.⁴⁶ We know the severe consequences the Curtis Act had on the tribes, and by no means should anyone make light of it. Nevertheless, humor allows people to talk about difficult things, especially when Indigenous artists and people talk about the effects of colonization and federal policy. Humor is a tool that allows people to look at and cope with tragic things that have happened.⁴⁷

For Meredith, the importance of humor comes from her family, who are always trying to make each other laugh. The most notable of her family members is Will Rogers. She says that everyone back home is funny and is always trying to one-up each other with their jokes. Will Rogers was just the family member to go out to Hollywood and make it big as a humorist, cowboy, author, and political commentator.⁴⁸ Using humor is one of the ways Meredith keeps herself inspired. In one of the paintings she was working on during an interview conducted

⁴⁵ Dakota Hoska, "Seven Sisters: Native Women Painters Connected through Time by Medium," *Hearts of Our People*, ed. Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2019), 293.

⁴⁶ M. Kaye Tatro, "Curtis Act (1898)," *Oklahoma Historical Society*, accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=CU006>

⁴⁷ *Road to the Indian Market*

⁴⁸ Staff Reports, "Three generations"

before the Indian Market, she included a drawing of a fortune cookie from the dinner she had had the previous night. It is something that may not make sense to the viewer, but it is something that kept Meredith amused while working. Humor is thus a way for her to combat boredom when continuing a project that she has already been working on for months.⁴⁹

Relationships

Another major theme of Meredith's work is the importance of relationships, whether it be establishing or acknowledging a relationship through her art. She once stated, "My work negotiates the space between the Native and non-Native, the urban and rural worlds, as well as the interactions between humans, animals, plants, and spirits."⁵⁰ She often tries to integrate plants, animals, and people in her work. One's relationship with place and the environment, whether it is an urban environment or a rural one, is exhibited through a focus on the specific type of plants or animals one would find in those



Figure 8. America Meredith, *Nvwoti (Medicine)*, bryoglyph, San Francisco, California

locations. Her series *The Plants Are Our Allies*, which includes paintings and nature installations, offers a reminder that humans are part of the natural world, need the natural world, and therefore the relationship between the two is important to maintain (Figure 8). This series is inspired by the story of how disease and medicine were created for humans. In short, the animals created

⁴⁹ *Road to the Indian Market*

⁵⁰ "America Meredith" NAOTW

diseases to give to humans as punishment for hunting too many animals, but the plants counteracted the animals' plan by creating medicine to treat every disease the animals made.⁵¹

Color Symbolism

Colors have meanings within Cherokee culture. For example, consider the functions of the red (war) and white (peace) chiefs in ancient tribal governance, as well as the significance of the red and white path. Meredith, her cousin Daniel Horsechief (Cherokee Nation/Pawnee), and Dorothy Sullivan (Cherokee Nation) all use Cherokee color symbolism overtly in their art. The use of specific colors comes from the seven directions within Cherokee philosophy: east, north, west, south, above, below, and center. Each of the directions has a characteristic and a color that corresponds to it. In his book *The Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees*, James Mooney wrote that east means red for triumph, north means blue for defeat, west means black for death, south means white for peace, above means brown for unknown but promising, and yellow means the same for below. In his list, there was only a line in yellow and a question mark that accompanied above. However, there is some disagreement about the directions and their corresponding colors and meanings. Chad Smith's *Building One Fire* states that east is represented by the color brown, meaning harmony and openness; north is blue but stands for curiosity and intellect; west is yellow, meaning mediate and insight; and south is black for loyalty and compassion. From what Meredith says in her interview for the *Return from Exile* exhibition, she uses the list Mooney had. *The Swimmer Manuscript*, another Mooney book, includes purple, meaning magic or witchcraft, but it is not associated with any particular direction.

⁵¹ America Meredith, "The Plants Are Our Allies," Ahalenia, accessed May 9, 2019, <http://ahalenia.com/america/plants.html>

The use of language is a prominent feature in Meredith's work (Figure 9). In "The Road to Indian Market" video, Meredith says, "The Cherokee syllabary is the most visual symbol of who we are."⁵² If you are familiar with it and know at what you are looking for, Cherokee syllabary is easy to identify. She uses the syllabary throughout her works, playing with the



Figure 9. America Meredith, *Because, You Know, the Cherokee Language Is Coming Back*, gouache, watercolor, and India ink on book

concept of written language and painting as a visual language.⁵³ She also has a painting that includes Sequoyah's rarely used original number system. The use of iconography and the use of traditional imagery bring forth the past into the present.⁵⁴ It also serves as reminder that

Indigenous people have always had a way of communicating culture through visual

means. She asks elders to verify that what she includes in her paintings is accurate and allowed to be displayed. Since some of her work includes prayers or incantations, asking and listening to elders or community members about it is vital. She believes that if she does something wrong, then the Cherokee community will let her know about it.⁵⁵

Meredith does not do art for art's sake; she creates to communicate with the world. She has said, "I do art specifically to talk about Native American issues. That's the only reason I'm

⁵² *Road to the Indian Market*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ ahtone, 15

⁵⁵ "Face to Face: Portraits by America Meredith," Wheelwright Museum, accessed May 9, 2019, <https://wheelwright.org/exhibitions/face-to-face-portraits-by-america-meredith/>

an artist.”⁵⁶ She claims that there is an art history lesson in every one of her paintings, because she will use Cherokee ceramic patterns, basketry patterns, and different aspects of historical Cherokee art pieced together in the painting.⁵⁷ There is more than just monetary value in Cherokee art from a Cherokee perspective, because many Cherokee artworks are a way to enjoy culture, pass on knowledge, and communicate with the next generation and generations to come.⁵⁸ Every piece tells a story. Art is a way for Meredith to explore and pose questions that can then be released into the public as part of the greater dialogue on Native American art.⁵⁹ She said that her mentors—including Benjamin Harjo, Jr. (Seminole/Absentee Shawnee), Mary Jo Watson (Seminole), and Linda Lomahaftewa (Hopi/Choctaw)—made it clear to her that the primary job of a Native artist was to build up the next generation.

She has created illustrations for a few Cherokee language storybooks, such as *Ajalagi Nusdv Nvgohv Elohi (Cherokee Vision of Elohi)*, edited by Virginia M. Sobral and Howard L. Meredith; *Awi Uniyvdi Kanohelvdi (The Park Hill Tales)*, edited by Dennis Sixkiller; and *Cherokee Stories of the Turtle Island Liars’ Club* by Christopher B. Teuton. Looking through Teuton’s book, her illustrations provide a way for the reader to see a visual representation of not only a traditional story, but also a visual of a newer tale by the storytellers. Meredith includes elements from traditional pottery designs and iconography as well as utilizing her respect for medieval manuscripts. All the elements of Meredith’s aesthetic, both traditional and contemporary, seem to converge in *Liars’ Club*. Not including the cover, the only thing that is missing is the use of color.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ *America Meredith: Artist, Curator & Magazine Publisher*, YouTube video, 6:24, posted by “OsiyoTV,” October 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBDdD7f6trA>

⁵⁸ Smith, 217

⁵⁹ *America Meredith*

Representation

Meredith paints historical figures, friends, and family as a way of challenging people's expectations of what Native Americans look like today. She knows that even her complexion and features are not what people assume Native women look like phenotypically. She says people sometimes exclaim that, based on her appearance, she must not be Native American. This experiences led her to create a broad spectrum of paintings representing what Native people have looked like in the past and what they look like now, which includes Natives who are full-blood, Natives of black descent, white descent, Asian descent, and everything in between. She wants to capture the “wide range of diversity” that the Native community had then and still has now.⁶⁰

She has a series called *Present Tense* that is dedicated to showcasing Natives as the regular people they are today, no longer sitting in deer hide around a campfire with a teepee in the background. Her paintings show people from all walks of life. There are paintings of her friends in hoodies or a sweater, and there are paintings of kids being kids—laughing, swimming, or chowing down on some frybread. There is even a painting of her friend, Cameron (Quechan, Pima, and Mojave), who is very much Native American but who loves Japanese culture. So much so that he studies the language and swordsmanship. His name, tribes, and “Native American” are written in katakana, one of the Japanese alphabets (Figure 10). For the most part, except for the Cameron painting, there are symbols and iconography that



Figure 10. America Meredith, *Cameron Chino*, acrylic on canvas

⁶⁰ *Road to the Indian Market*

indicate people's specific tribes in order to show that they can and do exist as part of mainstream society while also honoring traditionally Native culture.⁶¹

Meredith's art becomes a vessel of culture by containing cultural knowledge. It is displayed in visual cues such as language and color. Humor and depictions of everyday Native Americans challenge the stereotypes about stoic Native Americans that still live a "primitive" lifestyle. She uses her works as a way to communicate Indigenous experiences, history, and culture with the world. Art as communication is not a new phenomenon, but it is an important component of Meredith's work. Her work talks about the importance of relationships among all earthly beings. Her art embodies Cherokee philosophy, culture, and beliefs by using traditional stories and other forms of Cherokee epistemologies.

When determining how America Meredith fits into Cherokee art, it was important to look at Cherokee art history and how colonization has impacted the Cherokee people. Colonization led to the disenfranchisement of Cherokee women from their previous economic, social, and political status. It impacted important resources and the land. Nevertheless, Cherokee art has survived Removal and assimilation. So much more can be said about the history of Cherokee art, but what is talked about in this thesis provides a background from which Meredith's art stems. She is knowledgeable about art history and Cherokee culture. These things influence her work, along with her own experience as a Cherokee woman living in the 21st century. She keeps her relationships with the Cherokee community, as well as the overarching Native community. Following the responsibility that Cherokee women have always had, she works to keep cultural knowledge alive. She does this by using Cherokee aesthetics and iconography in her art. In this way, she is a Cherokee artist.

⁶¹ "Face to Face"

2.1: Increasing Indigenous and Cherokee Art Discourse

There are multiple ways that America Meredith is shaping the future of Cherokee art: through her paintings, writings, and her desire to educate her audiences. She has worked as an artist, educator, curator, activist, and is now the publishing editor of *First American Art Magazine*. Meredith was an activist as a bicycle courier in San Francisco, and that experience inspired her art projects *The Cherokee Spokespeople Project* and *Natural Law*. With her formal training in Fine Arts, she knows the language used by mainstream artists, critics, and academics. Meanwhile, her experience as a Cherokee woman and knowledge in Indigenous art history gives her the ability to communicate with an audience that may not have her same knowledge-base or experiences. America Meredith's ability to shape the future of Cherokee art is about more than allowing her art to evolve with changing art styles; it also involves shaping our perception and expectations of what we think it is now and what it can be for future generations.

Writing about Native American Art

Inspired by the work that her father did, which included learning from elders of almost every tribe while also utilizing Western academia, Meredith believed in the value of writing and presenting a forum where Indigenous artists could express themselves freely.⁶² She has always worked to increase the discourse on Indigenous art. Her first steps in making Native American art available to a broader audience were through her blog, *Ahalenia: Native American Art History, Writing, Theory, and Practice*, which started January 23, 2011. Over the next several years, she published 83 posts on different subjects, including reviews, questionnaires, art history, and personal experiences involving art. *Ahalenia* also includes links to resources for people looking for more information on terminology, others who specialize in Indigenous art, and other

⁶² Karima

related blogs. The last post on Meredith's blog was a review of a symposium held at the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts published on October 03, 2014. It was accompanied by an ad for the *First American Art Magazine*.

The development of *FAAM* coincided with the posts made on *Ahalenia*. The goal of both ventures was to make Native American art history more accessible to those interested in it and to increase the amount of writing discussing Native American art. Not long after the publication of the magazine, she stopped updating *Ahalenia* with new posts. *FAAM* became the main place where writers and artists can "expand the discussion about Native Art criticism, history, and theory."⁶³ She has also been a presenter and panelist at many art events across the United States. Her work "reflect[s] her commitment to perpetuating her tribal traditions and supporting the development of the arts and cultural landscape for Native American artists."⁶⁴

When talking to Osiyo TV about *FAAM*, Meredith brought up the question, "Why are we creating art if no one understands it, and there's no dialogue about it?" One of the things that non-Native art historians have done frequently is put what constitutes Native art into a box. Even people who do not know much about Native art still have their own set of expectations and assumptions of what it is.⁶⁵ Meredith seeks to defy those perceptions and show that Native art is just as complex, if not more complex, than Euro-Western art forms. This is where the publication of *FAAM* becomes so critical. It is a place for people to read about a variety of Indigenous art and artists.

⁶³ "America Meredith: Momentum Tulsa 2015 Curator," Oklahoma Visual Arts Coalition, last modified May 22, 2015, <http://ovac-ok.org/uncategorized/america-meredith-momentum-tulsa-2015-curator/>

⁶⁴ ahtone, 15

⁶⁵ *America Meredith*

In an interview with Meredith by Dr. Dawn Karima, Meredith says that the purpose of *FAAM* is to make art accessible to people who are interested in Native art, whether they are Native themselves or not. There had been, and in many ways there still is, very little focus on Natives in the mainstream press. However, there's been a rise in Native scholars getting advanced degrees, and they are up to the task of shedding more light on Native issues through writing articles and books. As far as the Native art discourse goes, *FAAM*'s goal is to take academic writing and make it accessible so that the art theory and jargon that is often used when talking about contemporary art does not turn people away. It is meant to build a community by connecting people to the art world and Indigenous artists to the global art world.⁶⁶

The criteria for what content goes into this magazine are as follows: it must be art (but the magazine's definition of that can range from Moundbuilders to pottery to painting to film), and it must come from an indigenous artist from the Americas. There is no limit to how old the media of the art discussed can be; it could be prehistoric or contemporary art. The magazine covers some emerging artists, but artists who are well established in their field and have more works to discuss tend to receive the most coverage.⁶⁷ A typical issue will have an equal number of male and female artist profiles, features on historical art, reviews of art shows and books, a graphic design column, a news section, and memorials about artists who have passed on. Meredith does not see herself as the best artist or editor to be talking about Native art, but creating *FAAM* was something that she saw needed to be done.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Karima

⁶⁷ Meredith, "Editor's Greeting," *FAAM*, No. 23, 15

⁶⁸ *America Meredith*

Meredith's view on art is that it is not static; instead, it is a living "seed of the culture."⁶⁹ The viewer can connect to it as much as they want. Artists are continually reviving lost arts that were almost wiped away due to colonization. Artists can reclaim parts of their identity and culture by relearning an old art form.⁷⁰ She says, "Art is about being human."⁷¹ It should stay tethered to parts of the human experience rather than being art for art's sake that only a few people will understand.⁷² According to Meredith, art should not be reserved for a small audience. Art should save the world; if we can envision it, we can do it.

Mainstream art is often centered around urban areas, while many Native artists live in rural areas. Not all Native art that is created leaves their respective Native communities. Some pieces do not make it into galleries or museums, or even the art market. Because of this, it became *FAAM*'s mission to reach out to Native communities, to gain insight into up-and-coming artists, and make sure that Native art is seen through more than a Eurocentric lens.⁷³ All visual creations can be considered art. It's not just about categorizing fine art as one valid and valuable category and craft as another, lesser category.

Defining Cherokee Art

While discussing Cherokee art history in an article in the *Tahlequah Daily Press*, Meredith points out that just because archaeologists find artifacts in a specific area within the southeastern part of the United States, it does not mean they were created by the tribe most associated with that area. If there is a piece of pottery found in Tennessee or North Carolina, it

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Karima

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

does not mean that it was without a doubt Cherokee.⁷⁴ There were numerous tribes throughout the area, and they intermingled and traded with each other. Tribes even borrowed a variety of styles from each other. However, this is not to say that Cherokees had no unique style.

Cherokees have lived in the southeastern US for thousands of years, if not since time immemorial. This information is provided to demonstrate the ways tribes lived and functioned before colonization and Removal.⁷⁵

Meredith says that Cherokees were forced to get creative after being so close to losing so many art forms. Meredith has stated that Native artists, because they are so connected to their culture, are gatekeepers of knowledge in some ways.⁷⁶ In fact, an artist may know stories and have knowledge that is not even meant for display. She finds that Cherokees are fortunate that art historians have not focused too much on Cherokee art, because that gives Cherokee scholars, artists, and community members the power to define what their art is. We have the power to direct the conversation. It is complicated, as mentioned in an earlier section, due to what the Cherokee word for art is. Meredith uses *ditlilosdodi*, as it is the most standard term at the moment. Some members of the Cherokee community, including Elizabeth Toombs and Dr. Candessa Teehee, have added that finding the right Cherokee word for “art” brings up the question of what makes artwork “Cherokee.” The most prevalent thought as to what makes art

⁷⁴ *Cherokee Days 2014: Cherokee Art with America Meredith*, YouTube video, 45:18, posted by “SmithsonianNMAI,” April 30, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhclisBt_as

⁷⁵ Grant D. Crawford, “Curator discuss definition of Cherokee art,” *Tahlequah Daily Press*, April 20, 2018, https://www.tahlequahdailypress.com/news/local_news/curator-discusses-definition-of-cherokee-art/article_19e3c981-e257-5bc8-be6f-cfda03d5c9ef.html?fbclid=IwAR1Kg2_Oa5JtUoWjOuvJFYo9tzwLx4Y4Ti8TQTiwzr3pNzl06FOqZJwm4hg

⁷⁶ *Return from Exile artist America Meredith (Cherokee)*, YouTube video, 3:39, posted by “Return from Exile: Contemporary Southeastern Indian Art,” August 25, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8OzSgtiq98>

Cherokee is that it should have a connection to language, history, place, and community.⁷⁷ All of Meredith's work fits within these criteria. However, not every artist incorporates these characteristics, so using them to define what makes art Cherokee may not be fair to the artists who have not always included one of these aspects. There is no definite answer to what makes art Cherokee, but all the members involved in this discussion are hopeful that artists and speakers can come together to find something that is the most fitting.⁷⁸

With the discussion of Native American art being so small, and the discussion of Cherokee art in particular being an even smaller subset, determining what makes a particular art piece Cherokee is always up for debate. This debate stems in part from the ongoing identity politics within Cherokee country. There are extensive debates with regard to who is considered Cherokee and who gets to claim to that identity. Art is included in this debate because art is an important part of culture, and culture is an extension of one's identity. The answer may not be so cut and dry if one's identity relies on Cherokee enrollment status; enrollment status is complicated all on its own due to the history and identity politics among Cherokee people. This discussion especially arises when talking about the artists who falsely claim to be Cherokee, which Meredith has written about in a *FAAM* and other art magazines.

America Meredith's art can often speak for itself, but her ideas about Cherokee art and the greater Indigenous art world are conveyed through forms outside of painting as well. She has been able to build a platform and has used it to bring awareness to Indigenous art within the Americas. All the while, she crafts her own definition of what Cherokee art was in the past, is in the present, and will be in the future. Her magazine reaches out to an audience beyond Indian country. In doing so, she makes sure that it is not just her voice being heard but the voices of

⁷⁷ Pratt

⁷⁸ Ibid.

other Indigenous artists, curators, and scholars, with a few non-Native experts here and there. She shapes the future of Cherokee art not only by changing its forms and aesthetics, but also by encouraging a dialogue among Cherokees and non-Cherokees alike. Her interview on Osiyo TV will be regularly played on PBS and in Cherokee Nation health centers. Wilma P. Mankiller Health Clinic often plays Osiyo TV episodes on repeat, so many Cherokee and Keetoowah citizens will be able to watch her episode. Her work as a panelist and presenter performs a similar function by speaking directly to people who are curious to know about Cherokee art. There is a lot of information that many people, including Cherokee members, don't know that they should know about Indigenous and Cherokee art. She is shaping our perception of art, the ways we talk about it, and our understanding of what it was and what it can be in the future.

2.2: Cherokee Art, Activism, and Continuance

From a Cherokee perspective, it is the responsibility of a woman to pass on cultural knowledge and traditions to ensure the survival of the people. America Meredith has worked to ensure her cultural knowledge will be passed on to others through her art, writing, presenting, and educating. She was an activist in San Francisco, which was highlighted in a couple of her art series. The previous section looked at her work as an editor and the ways it shapes our perspective of what Cherokee art is and can be, while this section looks at her writings on Cherokee identity within mainstream art. She addresses the issues surrounding the relationship between Native artists and mainstream institutions. Her efforts as a presenter and educator of Cherokee art history give her the insight on which traditional art forms have the potential to make a comeback within Cherokee country. These art forms could have the same kind of revitalization that basketry and pottery had in the 20th century. Meredith works to not only ensure an increase in the number of Native artist voices in the mainstream art world but to increase the overall awareness of ancient Cherokee art forms. Meredith is a carrier of tradition, and she has worked with future Cherokee and Indigenous artists in mind.

Activism in Art

For many Native artists, art and activism go hand in hand, and this is often exemplified by bringing up the historical trauma experienced by Native communities or exposing the rocky relationship tribes have had with settler state governments and their policies. Part 1.3 mentioned that Meredith



Figure 11. Photo by Judah Mendez in San Francisco, California

creates artwork about representation and language, both of which exhibit a fair amount of activism. She has created two series that are also examples of activism within her art. One is *The Cherokee Spokespeople Project*, which is a series that focuses on Cherokee language (Figure 11). It operates differently than the use of Cherokee language in her portraits or other artworks. Each piece in *Cherokee Spokespeople* had laminated cards with Cherokee words written on them that were meant to be placed in between the spokes of a bicycle wheel. The cards were used by many bike messengers. The cards featured Cherokee syllabary, phonetics, and an image of what the word means. Meredith received help from fluent speakers to create words and phrases for things that, until then, did not exist in the Cherokee language.

It was a project that lasted from 2004 to 2011. It spanned the United States and into other countries across the globe, from Canada and Mexico to countries in Europe and Asia. Cherokee leaders have said that it is up to the current generation to determine whether the language will die out or survive. In her website's description of this project, she says, "To survive Cherokee cannot be regulated to the past or isolated in one geographical area."⁷⁹ The purpose of *Cherokee Spokespeople* is to introduce the language to new people and recontextualize it in an urban and international setting.⁸⁰

The other courier-related art series is titled *Natural Law*, which depicts San Francisco's birds, animals, and Native American bike messengers. Meredith worked as a bike messenger in San Francisco for ten years.⁸¹ She was part of a movement in San Francisco where they tried to

⁷⁹ America Meredith, "Cherokee Spokespeople," Ahalenia, accessed July 20, 2019, <http://ahalenia.com/cherokee/index.html>

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Gina Boltz, "Cherokee Artist America Meredith Puts Words on Wheels," *Native Village Youth and Education News*, Issue 179, Volume 2, September 1, 2007, <http://www.nativevillage.org/Archives/2007/September%201,2007%20News%20I%20179/Sept%202007%20News%20I179V2.htm>

unionize for better wages, health benefits, and vacations. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union backed this movement. In an article in the *Deseret News*, Meredith says that the perception of bike messengers is not serious enough for people to know that it is a “legitimate way to earn a living” rather than child’s play. This article was published in 1998, three years before 9/11; soon after the 2001 incident, a series of letters containing anthrax was sent out in the mail. There was an increase in paranoia, a heightening of security, along with the increased use of email and sending documents electronically.⁸² The number of bike messengers decreased dramatically in many places, including San Francisco.

Meredith’s art on the subject (*Natural Law*) has different birds, which are messengers,



Figure 12. America Meredith, *Squawkies*, acrylic, gel medium, and stickers on hardboard panel

indigenous to San Francisco area, painted over stickers that bike messengers and other contract workers had to use after 9/11. Meredith’s description on her website says that it was an arbitrary rule that gives a false sense of security. The birds are a representation of freedom, and they signify that natural law is the utmost law (Figure 12). The birds and nature are juxtaposed with images of bike locks that are known to be easily broken and other technology used for security purposes, such as building cameras and even a machine gun.⁸³ *Natural Law* serves as a reminder that even though we as

⁸² Emily Chappell, “Cycle Couriers: my life as one of the dwindling band of urban cowboys,” *The Guardian*, August 6, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/aug/06/-sp-cycle-courier-life-urban-cowboys-bike-messengers>

⁸³ America Meredith, “Natural Law,” *Ahalenia*, accessed July 20, 2019, http://ahalenia.com/america/natural_law.html

humans do so much to protect ourselves from one another through laws and regulations, there is a higher law that will continue with or without us.

Identity in the Art World

There are issues with “authenticity” within the Cherokee art community, much like any other tribe. Fraudulent artworks and non-Native artists who claim Native identity and sell their works as Native are an issue within the Native art world. It is the reason why a policy such as the Indian Arts and Crafts Act (IACA), passed in 1990, was put into place. The IACA prohibits the marketing of “any art or craft product in a manner that falsely suggests it is Indian produced, an Indian product...within the United States.”⁸⁴ It only allows for Natives who are enrolled in a federally recognized or state-recognized tribe to sell Native arts and crafts. However, this policy is problematic due to the existence of unenrolled Natives. Cherokees, particularly Cherokee Nation, have always had issues with people claiming to have a great-grandmother that is Cherokee, without any real connection to the people or the culture.

Some people claim to be a part of the Cherokee community and have caused damage within it. It is important to note that there are differing opinions about Native identity in general and differences in the way tribes regulate citizenship. It gets complicated when it comes to art and creative expression. Meredith, along with other Cherokee citizens, artists, and scholars, has vocalized her thoughts on one example: world-renowned artist Jimmie Durham.⁸⁵ He is an artist that has allegedly made false claims of Cherokee identity, but all the while, he misrepresented Cherokee culture to an international audience. The acceptance of Durham by those in the

⁸⁴ “The Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990,” Indian Arts and Crafts Board, U.S. Department of the Interior, accessed May 10, 2019, <https://www.doi.gov/iacb/act>

⁸⁵ “Dear Unsuspecting Public, Jimmie Durham Is a Trickster,” *Indian Country Today*, June 26, 2017, https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/dear-unsuspecting-public-jimmie-durham-is-a-trickster-Rk7_oZ6TPkmIIQLNJJN-gPw

mainstream art world, all while they ignored Indigenous voices, highlighted the problems faced by Native artists within non-Native institutions and museums.⁸⁶

There is a lot of dialogue among those in the Native community about the importance of representation and the harmful effects of misrepresentation, from characters in films to mascots.⁸⁷ There has been research done in Indian country about the adverse psychological effects of misrepresentations and the use of Indian mascots on Native American youth and young adults.⁸⁸ Meredith does not dive into the correlation between stereotypes and misrepresentation and the very real epidemic of suicide. However, she writes about the harm that is caused by misrepresentation and “ethnic fraud” within the Indigenous art world and what it does to tribal sovereignty. Recognizing the issues between Native artists with the non-Native art world can lead to the next step toward fixing those issues. However, if the art world is anything like other institutions that need to be Indigenized, then it will be a long process.

Cultural Continuance

Art has the potential to shape the world in such a way that it can change our perspectives and understanding of the world around us now, and, if we look at past artworks, the world before us. America Meredith considers herself to be an idealist in the way that she believes art should positively impact the world. As mentioned in Part 1.3, she believes in art as a tool for communication. Art can let people share their own experiences in a way that language cannot

⁸⁶ America Meredith, “Decentering Durham,” *First American Art Magazine*, No. 16, 88-89.

⁸⁷ Rebecca Nagle, “Research reveals media role in stereotypes about Native Americans,” *Women’s Media Center*, July 18, 2018, <https://www.womensmediacenter.com/news-features/research-reveals-media-role-in-stereotypes-about-native-americans>

⁸⁸ “Stolen Identities: The Impact of Racist Stereotypes on Indigenous People,” Committee on Indian Affairs, May 5, 2011, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112shrg66994/pdf/CHRG-112shrg66994.pdf>

always achieve. Art “allows us to bridge divides when words fail.”⁸⁹ It often becomes a tool for advocating for specific movements, critiquing social issues, or it simply becomes a means of expressing a person’s thoughts about life. For many Indigenous artists, art takes on the vital task of communicating the impacts of colonization and serves as proof of the resilience of Indigenous people.

In the words of Joy Harjo (Muscogee), “Our arts carry memories.”⁹⁰ When looking at the past, we as humans tend to look at the artwork that was created by our ancestors. When examining Indigenous art, it is tough to ignore the amount of work behind its creation, especially when looking at traditional art forms. From a Cherokee perspective, it is hard to separate the object from the person; the object is an extension of that person and their community. “Art objects contain the code of tribal identity.”⁹¹ Traditional Indigenous art is embedded with cultural knowledge that is carried from the past into the present. Contemporary Indigenous art of the present will be looked on in the future by the next generation of artists, and they will be able to learn from the past in order to create new receptacles of cultural knowledge.

From a Cherokee perspective, Meredith has a duty to be a vehicle of cultural continuance. From the beginning of time within Cherokee mythology, women have taken on the responsibility to make sure that the world continues. This is seen with the water spider within the first fire story, the myths recognizing the sun as a woman, Selu in the story of the first man and woman, and numerous other stories. Even though Cherokees no longer live in the same town systems that we used to live in back in the 1700s, many modern-day Cherokee households are centered

⁸⁹ Karima

⁹⁰ Joy Harjo, “Thoughts and reflections,” *Muscogee Nation News* 44, No. 1, January 1, 2014, https://archive.org/details/muscogee_2014/page/n5

⁹¹ Smith, 218

around women.⁹² Cherokee women, from Selu through present day, keep the culture alive within their respective families and communities, despite having lost all political, economic, or social control within the dominant society. As an artist, Meredith can increase the presence of Cherokee culture within the international art world. Moreover, as an editor, she educates both Cherokees and non-Cherokees alike with her platform.

Cultural Revitalization

Through her knowledge of Cherokee art history, Meredith has come up with ideas for revitalizing older forms of Cherokee art that are not as widely practiced anymore since Removal to Indian Territory. For example, in her presentation at the National Museum of American Indian (NMAI), Meredith suggests the idea of bringing back shell jewelry or the use of shells, which would revive a lost art form. Back in the pre-contact and into the early-contact era, Cherokee households used to make their own beads, which could have been made with stone, shell, or clay. Some artists still do use clay to create different trinkets and necklaces. However, there are not many, if any, Cherokee artists who are well-known for making shell jewelry in Oklahoma. There are a few EBC artists, including Vera George and John Grant, who use shells in their beadwork.⁹³ Marginella shells, also known as snail shells, were very difficult to come by and collect, which made them expensive. However, these days, it is much easier to acquire snail shells. They are often sold in places like party stores and dollar stores. In the presentation, she showed a couple of non-Cherokee deer hide pieces—one mantle and a pouch—adorned with designs made from shell beads just to give an idea of what can be created with the revival of using marginella shells.

⁹² Perdue, 46

⁹³ “Bead Working,” *Qualla Arts and Crafts Mutual, Inc.*, accessed October 16, 2019, <https://www.quallaartsandcrafts.com/gallery.php?view=gallery&cat=2>

Something else Meredith mentions in her talk at the NMAI is the revitalization of freshwater pearls. The introduction of glass beads into the western hemisphere traces back to Columbus, and it made its way into Cherokee country in the 16th century.⁹⁴ Cherokee beadwork used a lot of the white beads that Europeans brought over because it was easier to use them in the same way that pearls were used.⁹⁵ However, freshwater pearls were still very desirable among Cherokees and Europeans during this time. They were known as riches and exported to Europe.⁹⁶ Today, pearls are known as a classic and timeless gem. Freshwater pearls are more available and affordable, with many jewelry supply shops selling them in 15-inch strands that cost less than \$7⁹⁷ or a pound for less than \$25 on a good sale day.⁹⁸ China is the primary place where freshwater pearls are grown and harvested in today's market.⁹⁹ The availability of pearls could reintroduce an older form of Cherokee design in contemporary beadwork.

The best way to acquire the materials for both of these media today is a far cry from the traditional way that Cherokee people collected them in the past. However, using them in contemporary ways has the potential to keep Cherokee aesthetics alive, which, who knows, could eventually lead to Cherokee artists to revitalize the traditions of gathering marginella shells or culturing freshwater pearls. Relearning and practicing the ways that traditional Cherokees obtained these materials would be ideal, but the changes in climate and the increase in private property restrictions may be challenging obstacles to overcome. Meredith acknowledges that her

⁹⁴ Power, 24

⁹⁵ *Cherokee Days*

⁹⁶ Power, 25

⁹⁷ "Freshwater Pearls," *House of Gems*, accessed October 17, 2019, <https://www.houseofgems.com/freshwater-pearls.aspx>

⁹⁸ "Freshwater Pearls," *JewelrySupply.com*, accessed October 17, 2019, <https://www.jewelrysupply.com/pearls.html>

⁹⁹ "16 Interesting Facts about Pearls," *The Pearl Source Blog*, accessed October 17, 2019, <https://www.thepearlsource.com/blog/pearl-facts-beautiful-organic-essence-pearls/>

ideas about the future of art are idyllic, but that idealism and hope are the reason she continues to create art for future generations. Her position, the lessons her mentors taught her, and the Cherokee values that have been instilled in her keep Meredith's mind looking to the future.

Meredith shapes the future of Cherokee art by advocating for Native voices to be heard in non-Native art spaces. Activism in art is often a call for immediate change. The activism in her artwork showcases the adaptability of all Native people, not just Cherokees. Her *Cherokee Spokespeople* series transmits a message of hope by spreading the Cherokee language across the globe. Meredith is not the sole person who is shaping the future of the Cherokee, but she is a very prominent figure in the art world and within Cherokee country. By broadening the discussion of Cherokee identity when it comes to art and by being an example of how we can be proactive with art, her voice can change the future.

Conclusion

Defining what constitutes Cherokee art can be a sticky subject. Cherokees have had a long history of identity politics, and that happens more and more as people claim a Cherokee identity. This thesis is not focusing on identity or defining the “true” Cherokee art. Art itself is fluid, and pigeonholing what Cherokee art is or must be is not how our culture can continue to thrive. Art is a form of cultural continuance, and Cherokee women artists are doing what has always been done. A caveat: the artist I have chosen to look at when talking about Cherokee sovereignty and art is not the pinnacle of Cherokee women artists. This is also not to say that people of Cherokee descent, those who are not enrolled but are culturally active, cannot make Cherokee art, but doing so could create an issue with the American Indian Arts and Crafts Act. More artists emerge every day, and the dynamics shift with the times, much like any other aspect of life.

Cherokee art and culture are closely intertwined. The Cherokee word for art, *ditlilosdodi*, is used to encompass all art, at least for right now. There are so many complexities to Cherokee art and its history that could not all be written about in a few pages. The specific media chosen for discussion in this thesis pertained to the types of artwork that Meredith draws from in her own works. Her biggest influences come from Cherokee ceramic designs as well as basketry. The methods, materials, and aesthetics used in Cherokee painting have evolved over time, and they continue to evolve today, much like our understanding of Cherokee art history. Cherokee art was impacted heavily by colonization, whether it was the introduction of new material or the destruction of land that contained Indigenous material. After the Removal, art reflecting the Trail of Tears emerged—especially paintings and sculptures. It was not until the 20th century that the revitalization of traditional Cherokee art forms became a goal for Cherokees in Oklahoma.

Meredith's art style and influences are a blend of both her Cherokee and European, specifically Swedish, heritage. She grew up around Native art thanks to her parents. Her father was the main reason she became an artist. She does various types of visual art, but painting is her primary medium. She uses watercolor, acrylic, and gouache the most, but she is not afraid to try other techniques like egg tempura. The content of Meredith's work often features Native people who are not or do not necessarily present as Cherokee in order to combat non-Native people's expectations or misconceptions of what Native Americans look like in the present. Her work is influenced by medieval manuscripts and pop culture, as well as by other Indigenous artists who are not afraid to use color in their work.

Whether or not the people within her pieces are Cherokee, Meredith uses Cherokee and Mississippian cultural influences. She sometimes uses elements found in ceramics, shell carvings, and beadwork. She tends to use bold colors that have significant meanings within Cherokee culture. Each color has a meaning and is often paired with a direction from Cherokee philosophy. The major themes within her paintings are humor, the importance and nature of Native and non-Native relationships, representation, and language. All of these themes are important aspects of everyday life within many Native communities, not just the Cherokee community. Native humorists have said that laughter is a form of healing. Despite the stereotypes of the unemotional, stoic Indian, Natives laugh together at any and every occasion. Humor builds relationships among people. Within Meredith's art, she showcases her relationships with the subjects of her paintings. She also highlights the relationships the subjects have with the world around them and other beings (such as plants and animals). The use of the Cherokee syllabary in her work keeps the language alive while also serving as a reminder that the syllabary is perhaps the strongest visual indicator of Cherokee people. Her work moves the

representation of contemporary or modern-day Natives to the forefront in order to challenge stereotypes people have about Native Americans. She uses her numerous and varied skills to communicate with her audiences, whether they are local, tribal, national, or international.

The training as an artist she received during her college career gave her the tools to speak the language of art history and the art world. However, she is aware that not everyone who is interested in Native American art, whether they are Indigenous or not, knows the jargon used in art circles. Creating a link between the average person and the art intellectual has become a significant focus of her written work. She started with writing in her blog, *Ahalenia*, about different artwork, exhibitions, art shows, and Native art history that she found interesting. Then, her next venture, the Indigenous art-focused *First American Art Magazine* finally took off and became a more significant and collaborative project, not only within the Native art world but the global mainstream art world as well. It not only brought together people who know about art, it made it accessible for people who love art but did not go to art school. Through her writings and presentations, she sheds light on art history and the significant impact of art on our lives as humans. Her influence is especially pronounced within the Native art scene, where Meredith is able to not only communicate through her paintings but also to write and share opinions that have the potential to shape our perception of what Cherokee art is and can be in the future.

She has used her platform to address issues within the Cherokee art world and the Native art world in general. She was an activist during her time working as a bike courier in San Francisco. She references that time and continues that activism through her art with her *Cherokee Spokespeople* and *Natural Law* series. By showcasing Indigenous and Cherokee language and knowledge, these series also showcases Meredith's passion to create a dialogue about specific subjects that are important to the preservation of Cherokee and Native culture.

Moving past her artwork and life as a bike messenger, her work as an editor has given her the opportunity to speak to wider audiences. Meredith has written about the issue of fraudulent identity within Cherokee art. Identity politics are always a touchy subject, and Meredith uses her knowledge of Cherokee history and Native art history to speak about the repercussions of the mainstream art world giving attention to a person who misrepresents the community of which he claims to be a member. Meredith's writings on the issues surrounding Durham, the misrepresentation of Native people in the media, and Indigenous artists' relationships with mainstream museums and galleries may provide a starting point for future discussions should more artists like Durham appear.

Meredith always keeps the future of art—and the future of Cherokee art in particular—in mind. To that end, Meredith presents ideas with the potential to revitalize ancient art forms, such as reincorporating marginella shells and pearls into modern Cherokee art forms. She also hopes that people will eventually relearn older ways of doing things. Cherokee beadwork has changed in key ways since colonization, such as pearls getting replaced with white glass beads. However, basketry and pottery were revived, which means there is a possibility for other media to be revived. Things will never entirely be the same due to the changes in the environment and climate. Nevertheless, Meredith remains optimistic when it comes to Natives' cultural resilience and the impact of art as a form of that resilience. To reiterate what was said in Part 1.3, Meredith believes that art is a vital form of communication. It is a sentiment that many artists share, but the way art functions within the Indigenous community is not quite the same as it is in mainstream contemporary art. Cherokee and Indigenous art have the ability, and some would argue responsibility, to speak on issues unique to their respective communities. It preserves the

collective memory of its people and becomes a way to speak to future generations. Art can shape the world and change the future.

America Meredith is not the end-all-be-all Cherokee artist, but the work she has done to educate people and increase the reach of Indigenous artists is a shining example of what it means to be a Cherokee woman in the 21st century. As a Keetoowah woman, my whole examination of Meredith's work for this thesis was done through a gendered lens. I acknowledge that there is so much more to explore in terms of gender and art, especially when looking at it from a trans and two-spirit perspective. Cherokee women have always had the responsibility of keeping their community's culture alive. Meredith's work as an artist, activist, and editor showcases a continuation of culture and a fulfillment of that responsibility. She brings an awareness of Indigenous art and its history to the mainstream art scene. The knowledge that she shares will be passed down for future artists, Native and non-Native alike, to consider and potentially incorporate in their creative careers.

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