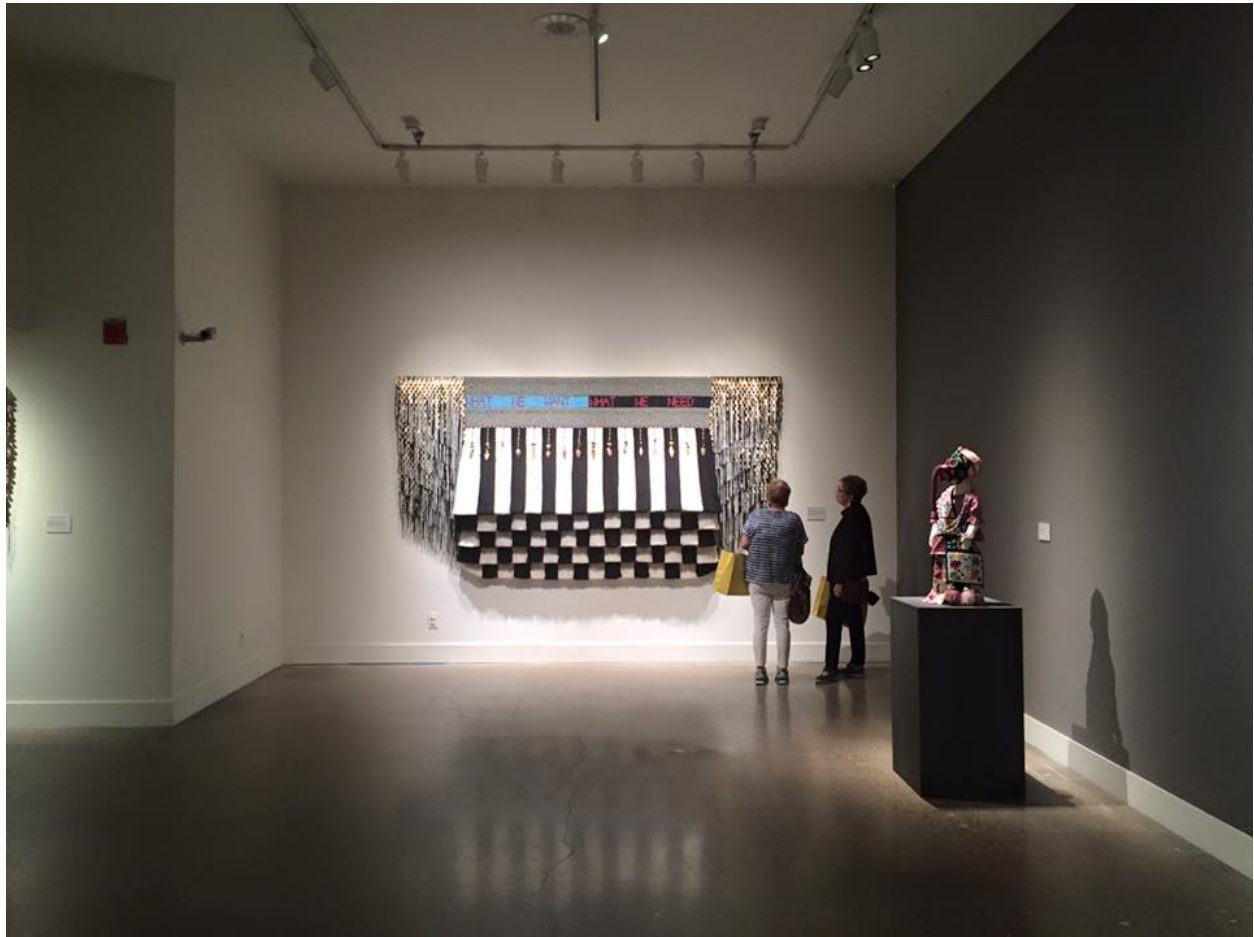


MARC STRAUS

HYPERALLERGIC

Native American Artists Envision a Sublime Apocalypse

NOVEMBER 18, 2015 BY ERIN JOYCE

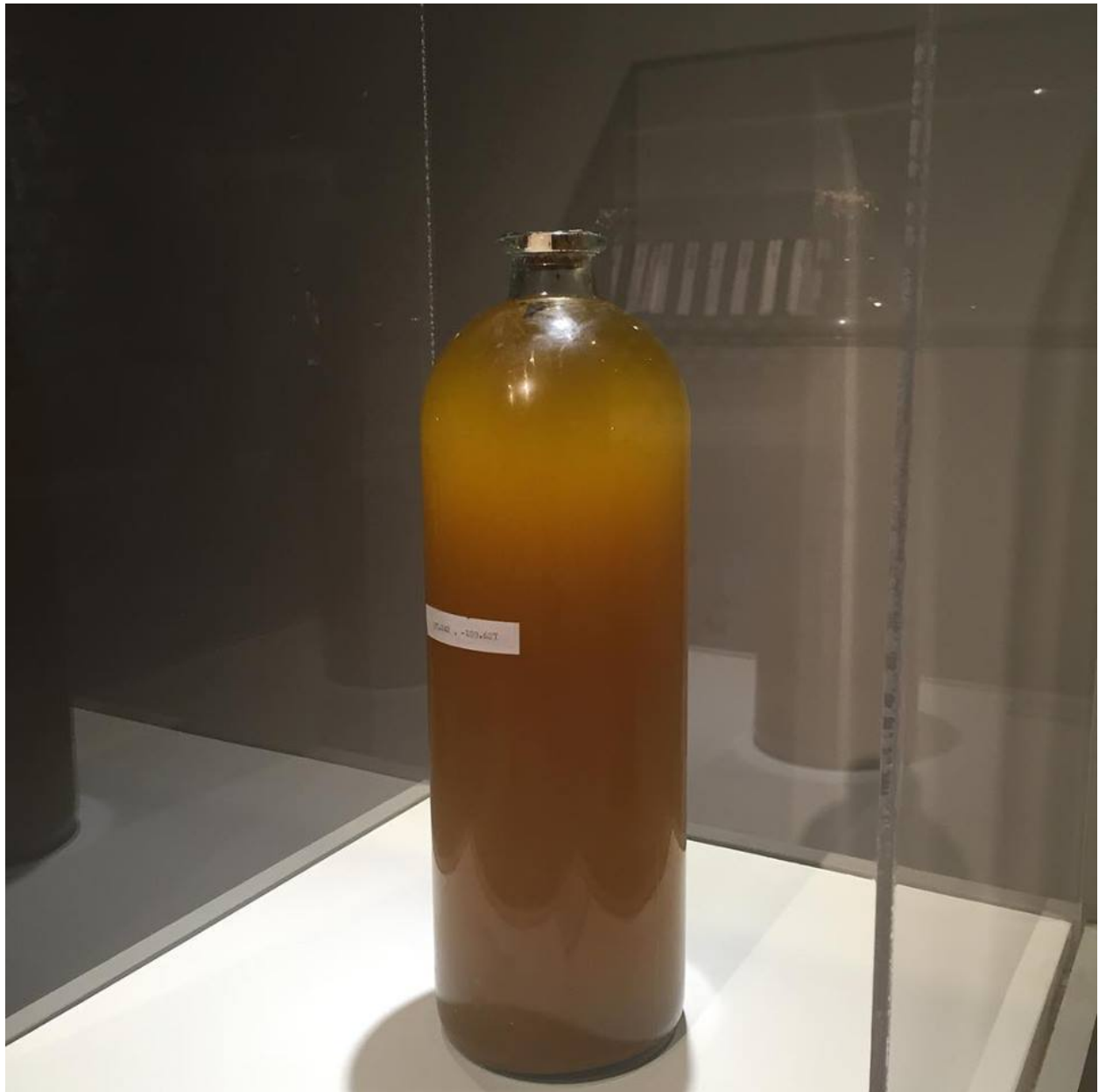


'An Evening Redness in the West,' installation view (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless noted)

SANTA FE — The idea of apocalypse is not foreign to the art world. Artists throughout time have grappled with ideas about the buildup to such an event, as well as its aftermath, in their artistic practice, which could manifest in portentous, grim, and possibly frightening visuality. However, is the depiction of the apocalypse necessarily an entirely dark one? In the latest exhibit at IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Art (MoCNA), [An Evening Redness in the West](#), chief curator Candice Hopkins, who is of Tlingit descent, creates an environment that explores the landscape of an apocalyptic world, investigating the doom of end times, but also their promise of a new beginning. The exhibition's title is inspired by Cormac McCarthy's

MARC STRAUS

novel *Blood Meridian*, in which a disparate group of men make their way violently across the American Southwest and Mexico.



Death Convention Singers (SDW), "Water from the Polluted Animas River as it Flowed into the San Juan River" (2015), 1 gallon of San Juan River water, plinth

MARC STRAUS



Death Convention Singers (AC), "Untitled (Crown)" (2015) (image courtesy of the artists)

Rather than making one think right away of *Blood Meridian*, what the exhibit immediately calls to mind is Edmund Burke's assessment of beauty. In *On the Sublime*, Burke writes, "the passion caused by the great and sublime in nature ... is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other."

The notion of something being simultaneously terrifying and beautiful is quite evident in the range of work in this exhibition. Once in the gallery, you are met with an alter created by Death Convention Singers comprised of audiotape woven through an array of antlers, corn, and various other ephemera. However, it is another piece by the collective that hits with the most impact: a liter bottle of water, unfiltered, unadulterated, taken straight from the contaminated Animas/San Juan river after [this summer's spill](#). The water is the color of apple cider vinegar, and it immediately confronts the viewer with the peril that the natural world is in due to human activity, which at first glance only denotes a feeling of terror, but references the beauty of the natural world as it once was, as well as an unspoken yet profound sadness for this loss.

MARC STRAUS



Andrea Carlson, "Ink Babel" (2014), ink on Paper, 115" x 183" (image courtesy of Bockley Gallery)

Moving deeper into the space, viewers encounter a large-format drawing: "Ink Babel" by Andrea Carlson. The piece, which takes up almost the entire back wall of the gallery, illustrates Christopher Columbus's arrival on the North American continent. A figure depicted in the scene looks on in horror as the European invaders approach, foreshadowing the Native experience with white settlers. The way in which the Carlson piece is displayed sets a ominous tone for the exhibition, in that it illuminates the very different experience that Native Americans have had in contrast to immigrants from Europe; it is an looming presence in the museum, one that serves as backdrop for the other works in the show. The large drawing is flanked with works by Naomi Bebo: an ornately beaded Iraqi gas mask and a small sculptural figure of a little girl dressed in a pink silk gown and also wearing a beaded gas mask. These pieces represent the liminality of the notion of apocalypse: the gas masks depict toxicity, destruction, and war; however that narrative is subverted, or perhaps replaced, by the floral beading, which serves as a signifier of beauty and growth post-apocalypse, the promise of new life after the desolation.

MARC STRAUS



Rose B. Simpson and Virgil Ortiz, "Wanderlust" (2015), mannequins, artist-designed clothing (fabric and leather), 8 ceramic masks with glazes, leather, synthetic hair. Mask titles, right to left: "GLYDR," "STOKR," "DRYVR," "UNTITLED," "FLYR," "UNTITLED," "RYDR" (image courtesy of the artists)

Spatially and thematically related to the Bebo pieces is the collaborative installation by Virgil Ortiz and Rose B. Simpson, "Wanderlust." This piece is an imagined futuristic storefront, displaying models wearing high-tech gear designed to be fashion-forward while also serving as a protective barrier between humanity and the hostile post-apocalyptic environment. The mannequins are accompanied by wall-mounted masks and busts that show the indigeneity of the artists, as well as hybridizing the objects with a futuristic aesthetic.

Directly across from the Ortiz/Simpson installation is the work of Jeffrey Gibson. Gibson, who is known for his intricate beadwork and pop-culture appropriations, has created works that reference counterculture movements and songs of resistance. One piece, "What We Want What We Need" (2015), comprised of pony beads, yarn, and metal, is inscribed with the phrase "Fight the Power" in reference to the [Public Enemy](#) song. The piece plays into the visual tropes Gibson is known for, connecting traditional native art and craft with more modern, commercialized, and mass-produced materials. Thematically, the use of the song lyrics is an unsanctioned

MARC STRAUS

appropriation of popular culture, which references popular culture's unsanctioned appropriations of native imagery and regalia for decades. Another piece by Gibson — also made from beads, fringe, and metal — is “Burn Baby Burn,” which also utilizes song lyrics, this time “The Roof Is on Fire” by Rockmaster Scott and the Dynamic Three. Gibson's pieces evoke the idea of resistance as proclaimed in these songs, as well as the notion of the agency of power and representation, the political landscape of appropriation, and a history engendered in apocalyptic cultural annihilation. Gibson's work serves as a battle cry against a genocidal war upon the Native inhabitants of the North American continent. Concurrently, the work can be reclaimed to fill a promise of a renaissance, a cultural rebirth, or, perhaps better phrased, a rebirth of public awareness, appreciation, and much-needed respect for native cultures and peoples.

Thought there are many other stunning and provocative pieces in this exhibition, there is one more that is particularly worth commenting upon by First Nations artist Duane Linklater. The neon Thunderbird, “Tautology,” from Linklater's *Tautology* series, is particularly powerful, especially given the way in which it is displayed: hanging alone on a gallery wall in the apsidal room off the main exhibition space. The piece gives off an artificial glow, again demonstrating the theme of hybridity between nativeness and popular culture, by taking a symbol that is seminal to many native tribes — the Thunderbird — and rendering it in neon lights. This brings in, in the most direct fashion in the exhibition, the notion of the supernatural being. The Thunderbird, whose narrative varies slightly from tribe to tribe, is a powerful and sometimes wrathful being that can decimate all of humanity at its discretion.

The overall feeling of *An Evening Redness in the West*, while it does include those ideas and narratives of apocalypse, is really more about newness, a newness that is placing Native American and First Nations artists in a setting that allows for free and cutting-edge expression. It embraces the porosity of what it is to be Native, the liminality of definition, and the reclamation of agency of representation.

[An Evening Redness in the West](#) continues at IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Art, 108 Cathedral Pl, Santa Fe, NM 87501, through December 31.

Source: <http://hyperallergic.com/231914/native-american-artists-envision-a-sublime-apocalypse/>