

Unnatural Resources

Indigenous artists from the two different hemispheres talk trash—and discuss the vital alchemies of their art-making.

BY **AMY GROLEAU AND MARLA REDCORN-MILLER**

AS ARTISTS, Aymar Ccopacatty (Aymara) and Nora Naranjo Morse (Santa Clara Pueblo) each explore the question of non-biodegradable waste in Native communities through their art. Independently and on separate continents, Ccopacatty and Naranjo Morse both noted the overshadowing presence of landfills on their respective ancestral lands, and saw the trash as a kind of natural resource—similar to the way that artists have harvested natural fibers from sheep to make weavings, or pulled clay from the earth to make pottery.

Ccopacatty, who grew up in a textile-producing community in Peru where wool and camelid fiber were the predominant natural resources from which to weave and knit, now uses plastic bags and trash found in and around Lake Titicaca for weaving. Naranjo Morse, who was raised in a family of potters in northern New Mexico, produces kinetic mixed-media sculptures from the refuse found in the landfill outside of Santa Clara Pueblo. Both artists apply traditional core values of resourcefulness, ingenuity, and respect for the environment in a decidedly unromanticized, modern context. As the following telephone conversation unfolds, old dichotomies, such as traditional versus contemporary or natural versus synthetic, are absorbed into their projects—then dissolve as they work through and reconfigure what it means to practice art as an indigenous artist in today’s world.



Nora Naranjo Morse: I’m curious about where you live, what the landscape looks like, and how you got interested in making art this way.

Aymar Ccopacatty: My family is from Lake Titicaca in Peru. It’s on the border with Bolivia, and that is kind of where the influence and techniques come from for weaving, knitting, crochet, braiding: many creative fiber art techniques from the Aymara tradition and colonial European influences. My mother is from

“Ch’ullus are traditionally a symbol of authority, worn by men who have graduated into adulthood by taking a larger role in the community and its different yearly tasks such as justice, protecting crops from hail, protecting ducks from over-hunting, and property disputes. Making the ch’ullu out of recycled plastic brings the larger community leadership role of protecting our future into focus.”

—AYMAR CCOPACATTY

the U.S., so I’ve always been back and forth between places. But the traditions of textiles, and the native language, Aymara, have definitely really impacted me. At 12,000 feet, the landscape in Peru is very mountainous and dry. There are a lot of uses of natural resources; my people make braided rope and reed boats out of tall grasses. There are a lot of old traditions and handwork still in daily life. The people have a self-sufficient farming lifestyle.

I realized when I was twelve years old that if I didn’t learn a lot of these weaving techniques, they might be lost, both within my family—my grandmother just passed away about eight years ago—and in the larger community. I remember when my family got electricity in the nineties. The Socca community doesn’t yet have to pay taxes because they are a Native community, but the government is trying to erase those lines and make them like any other municipality of Peru that receives funds from the government. The Peruvian government is big on records; they want to push birth certificates and death certificates. My community faces the challenge of maintaining traditions in the face of overwhelming government interventions on all levels, aimed at homogenization of a very diverse, multilingual area.

Nora: My community, Santa Clara Pueblo, used to be agrarian, but now we are dependent on food sources from outside of the community. Santa Clara has also been inundated with social and cultural transformation. We are struggling with these shifts in our communities, and struggling with the consequences every single day. One of those shifts prompted me to start looking at what we’re embracing as contemporary Native people. We are

This artwork was purchased as a gift to the Museum of International Folk Art by Patricia M. Newman. When asked why she wanted to support this piece, she replied: “Sadly, society of the past several decades has produced masses of ‘convenience’ items that have proliferated across the planet, with huge unintended consequences causing long-lasting harm to our environment, our oceans and rivers. Aymar Ccopacatty’s thoughtful work shows the impact of single-use plastic bags on his culture’s traditions.”



Aymar Ccopacatty, *Ch'ullu for a New Leader*, 2010. Plastic bread bags, grocery bags, plastic netting, caution tape, and fabric litter. 10 × 3 ½ ft. Promised gift of Patricia M. Newman, Museum of International Folk Art (IL.30.2017.1). Photographs by Blair Clark (left) and Addison Doty (detail, right).

PROJECT INDIGENE

consumers now, going to Walmart with our meager incomes and buying a lot of plastic-based products, and then basically throwing that stuff away at our community dump. One day when I went to gather clay—something that I had been doing almost all my life—I saw so much discarded material in close proximity to a traditional clay pit, and I was greatly affected.

At that moment, I realized I'd been living in denial about what I consumed and how and where I discarded waste. Without reasoning why, I walked into the dump and started collecting everything from plastic to fencing wire. I took it to my studio and started cleaning it up. I began deconstructing the materials I had collected, but in a way, I was also deconstructing my own attitudes as a consumer. I began to question so many issues. What did it mean to be a contemporary Native person consuming in this sort of careless manner, especially since I was raised with an entirely different value system and consciousness?

Stepping into this new creative portal has transformed me and the way I make art. I now am reconstructing my attitudes and creative intention concerning my work, culture, and community. Since this realization I'm even more determined

to challenge expectations by a non-Native audience of what Pueblo clay art should look like. This makes earning a living far more challenging, but in the end, protecting my creative and cultural integrity is most important to me.

Aymar: It is absolutely tormenting. I have bags of plastic that I brought from my community [near Puno, Peru] all the way to where I am now in Rhode Island. And it is sitting there, and it is some kind of an experiment, because supposedly some of it is actually supposed to biodegrade with time, and break up. And some of it does and some of it doesn't. Some of us can just go on living in a dream state of ignoring reality, and some of us just can't take it and have to sit there and do this dance with it. I spent a year asking that stuff: *Who are you? Where do you come from? Why are you here?*

Below, left to right: Nora Naranjo Morse, *From the Bottom Up*, 2012–13. Discarded material: plastic, wire, styrofoam, and clay. 9 × 1 ft. Morse, working in her studio. Photograph by Eliza Naranjo Morse. **Opposite:** Aymar Ccopacatty and son wearing ch'ullus. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



This piece is evolving and being reconfigured into a larger-scaled installation. The artist shares, "After a year and a half of deconstructing and reconstructing this idea of what discarding and consumerism means on our ancestral lands, I now look at this work today and it is connecting to something else and taking a different shape. The work's new direction reflects a deeper personal understanding of these paradigms of materialism and consumption."



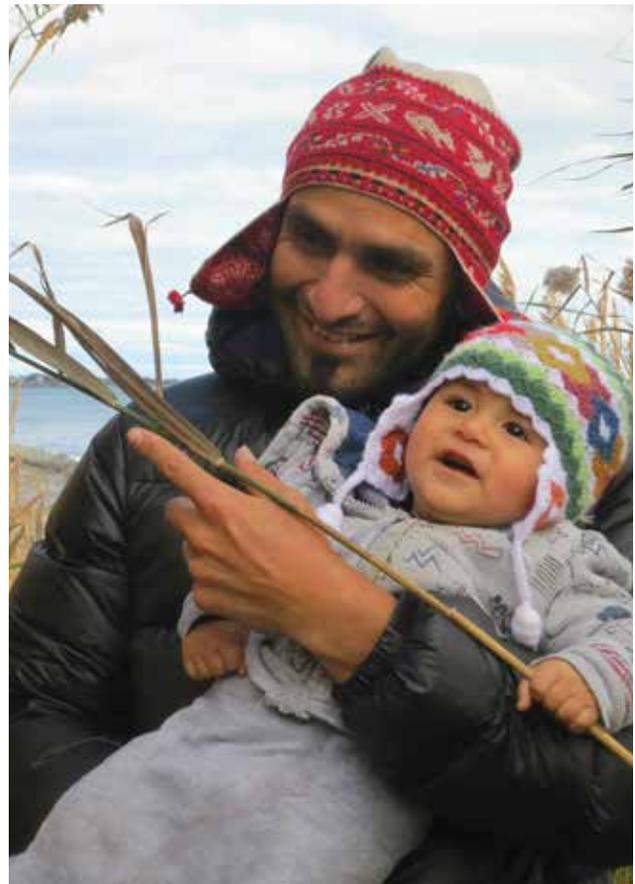
I make these pompon kind of things from plastic, which creates a thousand little pieces that are so small that I have these crazy thoughts of boiling it all up and trying to pour it into a mold. But then I'd be poisoning myself. I am not supposed to be burning and melting plastic, but I have these fantasies of finding a place for those small pieces, because it's just painful to throw it in the trash when that's the whole point: Get it out of the trash!

Nora: Well, that is what is so great about art. Art forces you to think out of the box, and traditionally, that's what Pueblo people did all of the time. For my ancestors, thinking that way was a form of surviving. Trash is my biggest resource at this point, besides the clay and other organic materials I use in my work. Some of the pieces I made of trash are very tall, wire pieces; they are wonderfully kinetic. What I discovered with these pieces was that when the wind blew through the studio and caused movement, they would dance, but eventually topple over. I ended up making clay stabilizers for the bottom of the forms, so that they could still be kinetic, but they would be stabilized. What this meant to me is that whatever we do to this earth, it is still the stabilizing force of our existence.

Aymar: Wow, that's a wonderful metaphor, because it's the opposite of what we would like on so many levels. We would like to be without trash; I'm noticing the potent symbolism of counterbalancing the found materials (trash) with the clay, the Mother Earth. To participate in the modern world, you buy something—even if you are buying a necessary thing, like diapers—that will end up in a landfill. I have small children and diapers drive me crazy.

People are always really amazed by the stuff you can make in plastic, like textiles, but then they go back to seeing plastic as mundane, something they can throw out on the street. And it is just collecting. It just piles up. It can be really depressing, it can be really too much. Whatever you can do, keep that spark of energy, that original intent of an honest conversation with the refuse—so the refuse can be welcome. As weird as that sounds, that has to continue.

Nora: Yes, that is really true. I think the thing that keeps me going with this new creative expression is that I'm always going back to the main reference point: the Earth. As a contemporary Pueblo woman, I am articulating my relationship with the Earth. It's a relationship that's been influenced by the people that I come from. And how I articulate that in my work



and share it with people, whether they understand it or not, is an important element in my process as a human being. It is my passion. I make art every day. It's become a nutrient to my soul. And now I know, Aymar, that there is someone else, somewhere else, doing and thinking the same thing because that really does help, and I hope that someday we can cross paths so that we can continue this conversation. ■

You can see Ccopacatty's sculpture *Ch'ullu for a New Leader* at the Museum of International Folk Art's exhibition *Crafting Memory: The Art of Community in Peru* through March 2019. New works from Nora Naranjo Morse's series *Remembering* will be coming to the streets of Albuquerque as the artist takes out bus ads to encourage others to remember and protect "the sacredness of life, no matter who we are, where we're from, or where we're going." For more information on this project, visit noranaranjomorse.squarespace.com.

Amy Groleau is the curator of Latin American collections at the Museum of International Folk Art. **Marla Redcorn-Miller** is the deputy director of the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture.



Mateo Romero



Cannupa Hanska Luger



Susan Hudson



Nocona Burgess

Project Indigene in Action

IN THE SPRING of 2018, eight dynamic Santa Fe cultural institutions joined forces in a collaboration called Project Indigene to examine perspectives and create awareness of some of the issues facing indigenous art: authenticity, appropriation, activism, and artistic identity.

These complex issues sparking public discourse are addressed in works in the permanent collections of these institutions, or works that will be investigated in upcoming exhibitions. It is critical to this collective to examine issues of copyright and intellectual property, to be mindful of the power dynamics in the telling of indigenous stories, and to engage critically with contemporary political and social issues that artists face.

The collaborative partners include the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts (MoCNA), the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture (MIAC), the Museum of International Folk Art, the Native Treasures Art Market, the Ralph T. Coe Center for the Arts, the School for Advanced Research (SAR), the Southwestern Association for Indian Arts (SWAIA, Santa Fe Indian Market), and the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian. The project is supported by the Santa Fe Arts Commission.

IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts

Without Boundaries is an exhibition that grew out of a series of curated conversations led by guest curator and artist **Sonya Kelliher-Combs** (Iñupiaq/Athabaskan) at the Anchorage Museum, Anchorage, Alaska. The exhibition features indigenous leaders in the arts and the work of contemporary artists that encourages social action. Through July 29, 2018.

Museum of Indian Arts and Culture

The work of artists in MIAC's permanent collection will be examined within the perimeters of the four themes. These artists include **Mateo Romero** (Cochiti Pueblo), a writer, curator, educator, and painter whose narrative scenes deliver social commentary on the contemporary Rio Grande Pueblo world; **David Bradley** (Minnesota Chippewa) who merges pop

culture icons, appropriations from art history, and references to indigenous civilizations throughout the Americas in his work as a way to explore social and political justice from a Native perspective; and **Cannupa Hanska Luger** (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota, Austrian and Norwegian), a New Mexico-based, multi-disciplinary artist raised on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota, who uses social collaboration and, in response to timely and site-specific issues, produces multi-pronged projects that take many forms.

Museum of International Folk Art

Crafting Memory: The Art of Community in Peru is on exhibit through March 8, 2019. This is an important exhibition of contemporary folk art that expresses political, economic, and environmental ideas, and uses memory and heritage to forge the future.

Native Treasures Art Market

This market, which has generated sales for Native American artists, takes place every year over Memorial Day weekend, this year on May 25–27, 2018. Many Native Treasures artists address hot-button issues through messaging in their art, and others produce unique art that continues to evolve their artistic identities. The work of **Nocona Burgess** (Comanche) and the 2018 MIAC Living Treasure **Maria Samora** (Taos Pueblo) will be examined.

Ralph T. Coe Center for the Arts

The exhibition *IMPRINT* opens August 14, with a reception from 5–7 p.m. *IMPRINT* brings art to the public and the public to art in widely accessible ways through the use of repurposed newspaper boxes, wheat-pasted posters around town, and free print giveaways. It includes six leading Native printmakers: **Eliza Naranjo Morse**, **Jamison Chañs Banks** (Seneca-Cayuga, Cherokee), **Jason Garcia** (Santa Clara Pueblo Tewa), **Terran Last Gun** (Piikani), **Dakota Mace** (Diné (Navajo)), and **Jacob Meders** (Mechoopda/Maidu), along with Coe curators **Bess Murphy** and **Nina Sanders** (Apsáalooke) who have spent the past year working collaboratively to build *IMPRINT*. The exhibition will not only appear on the Coe Center walls, but in public spaces as well.

School of Advanced Research (SAR)

In 2018, SAR and the Indian Arts Research Center celebrate the 40th anniversary of the latter, and will recognize the creativity of Native American artist fellows, their accomplishments, and the last forty years of innovative programming. IARC presented the series **Trailblazers and Boundary Breakers: Honoring Women in Native Art** on March 28, April 4, 11, and 18. It examined the indelible impact, and often untold stories of Native American women in art. The series

culminates in a celebratory event on June 22 at the Poeh Cultural Center, where Nora Naranjo Morse will be presented with a lifetime achievement award..

Southwestern Association for Indian Arts (SWAIA, Santa Fe Indian Market)

At **Santa Fe Indian Market** (August 18 and 19, 2018), authenticity is paramount. All participating artists must be enrolled members of a federally recognized U.S. tribe or Canadian First Nation. As a 100 percent juried show, in which artists must follow standards of quality, buyers are guaranteed only the best handmade work. In addition, individual artistic identity and expression are encouraged at Indian Market. Visitors will see both extremely traditional and highly contemporary works on display. Artists making political statements and social commentary are not controlled or censored by SWAIA. Themes of activism and appropriation are explored during Indian Market's panel discussions on the Plaza, which are co-sponsored by the Native American Rights Fund.

The Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian

On exhibit through October 7, 2018:

Memory Weaving: Works by Melanie Yazzie will feature works on paper and

sculptures by the prolific Navajo artist.

Peshlakai Vision will also be on exhibit through October 7, 2018. It is the first solo museum exhibition to honor master Navajo silversmith **Norbert Peshlakai** (born 1953, Fort Defiance, Arizona; Towering House Clan), whose career spans over 40 years. *Peshlakai Vision* will feature over one hundred pieces, including jewelry, vessels, and small sculptural works in gold and silver, inlaid with precious materials arked with Peshlakai's signature stampwork.



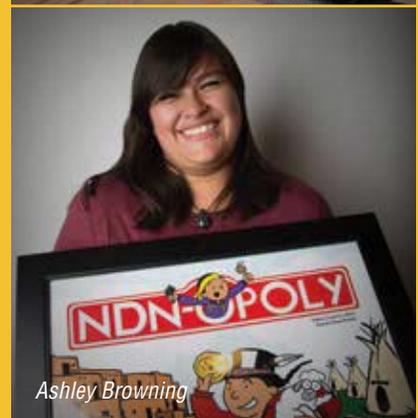
Maria Samora



Jason Garcia



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Ashley Browning