



PEM Native American Fellow Elayne Silversmith looks at Richard Ray Whitman's *States of Pervasive Indifference: Earth, Air, Fire, Water*, 1993, in *Shapeshifting, Transformations in Native American Art*.

Native American Fellows help *shape* exhibition

By Eva Parish, contributing writer

Jennifer Himmelreich (Diné [Navajo]) says that when she and PEM's other Native American Fellows readied their presentations for PEM staff on *Shapeshifting* last summer, they hoped that enough people showed up so the room wouldn't feel empty. They needn't have worried. Nearly 50 people came to hear the Fellows talk about the new exhibition, from their perspectives as Native Americans and as up-and-coming museum professionals.

"I could tell that people really listened to us. They were very honest, asking, for example, 'What makes something Indian art?'" Himmelreich says. "That's a big question out there, in the Indian world and in the art world. We tried to give fair, honest answers."

During their 10-week term last summer, the 2011 Native American Fellows worked with PEM's Curator of Native

American Art and Culture, Karen Kramer Russell, as she developed *Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art*. Continuing the work begun with the first class of Fellows in 2010, they helped her devise interpretive strategies and met with her board of advisers, made up of respected Native and non-Native scholars, artists and curators in the field. Most significantly, says Kramer Russell, they gave her feedback on the arrangement of objects in the exhibition and on the exhibition themes.

"We talked through the messages and ideas that hold constellations of objects together in the galleries," says Kramer Russell, "and in several instances I made changes to the exhibition arrangement based on their responses."

"She would ask us, 'Does this feel right — how we have it grouped together in each room, how the exhibition unfolds?'" Himmelreich says. "I knew from the very beginning that Karen was planning the exhibition deliberately and thoughtfully. She looked at each piece, trying to understand it. She chose pieces that mean something, that say big things."

In addition to assisting Kramer Russell with *Shapeshifting*, the Fellows attended weekly workshops with different department heads to discuss museum leadership.

Dan Elias, PEM's director of grants administration, who created the program, said a main goal of the Fellowship is "to connect to a generation of rising leaders in Native American communities in the area of arts and culture, and to do our part to provide training in how to lead institutions. We have a responsibility to keep Native American art collections alive and available to the people to whom they are important — including the communities that created them."



Jennifer Himmelreich (Diné [Navajo]) reacted positively to *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan (We Will Again Open This Container of Wisdom That Has Been Left in Our Care)*, parts I and II, 2006, a video installation by Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit/Aleut). Courtesy of the artist. © Nicholas Galanin. Photo by Walter Silver/PEM.

Individually, each Fellow also worked on projects with other PEM departments. Himmelreich analyzed PEM's existing institutional grants and researched foundations and government grant streams to identify future sources of funding.

Elayne Silversmith (Diné [Navajo]) organized seminars for the docents about the range of Native American ideas and how to teach about Native American art with knowledge and sensitivity.

"Elayne dispelled the grand narrative that reduces all Native American art, history and culture to a monolithic experience by invigorating it with language, spirituality, individual stories and poignant relevance," says docent Nicole Breault. "The seminar inspired me to expand on what we had learned and to register for graduate-level courses in American Indian history. It is impossible to look at Native American art through the same lens as before meeting Elayne!"

Bridget Skenadore (Diné [Navajo]), a master's candidate in the Rhode Island School of Design's program in museum education, developed school tours of *Shapeshifting*. She also made recommendations for programming, including which Native artists to contact, books to read and dance groups to invite.

Dylan Iron Shirt (Tlingit, Haida, Oglala Lakota, Blackfeet and Cherokee) helped build and populate PEM's Native American art collection database. The online database project is funded by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation.

Nanibaa Beck (Diné [Navajo]) worked with PEM's merchandising department to identify and contact artists for the shop in preparation for *Shapeshifting*, and also provided Kramer Russell with general curatorial assistance.

Each of the Fellows who spoke in front of PEM staff interpreted an object from *Shapeshifting* — either "putting it in context by looking at the artist's statement or previous works, or just looking at it as if we were walking into the exhibition for the first time and talking about what an object means to us," says Himmelreich.

Iron Shirt selected *Column (Blanket Stories)*, a work by Seneca artist Marie Watt. He talked about his great-grandmother's story of having received a blanket from the U.S. government that had been infected with tuberculosis. "It was very moving to see how Dylan responded to this contemporary artwork — how it took him back to his family's past, put him back in his original territory," Elias says.



Column (Blanket Stories), 2003, Marie Watt (Seneca). Collection of Deborah Green. © Marie Watt. Image courtesy Marie Watt and PDX Contemporary Art.

PEM is actively seeking funding sources and candidates for the 2012 Native American Fellowships. To help with funding, contact Anne Butterfield at 978-542-1682. For information about the program, contact Dan Elias at 978-542-1578.

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