



Piersten Doctor: Navigating Multiple Worlds

Nearly seven years ago, I was introduced to Piersten Doctor and his art. He works devotedly and rigorously out of a studio in Arizona Latino Arts and Cultural Center (ALAC) in Downtown Phoenix, Arizona. He grew up in Phoenix, away from his extended family and the daily cultural traditions and life of the Navajo Nation located in Northeastern Arizona, Northwestern New Mexico, and Southwestern Utah. This young artist is remarkable. Like some other indigenous artists, he successfully navigates between the contemporary world of the dominate culture and his world of the rich culture of the Navajo Nation. Unlike others, he creates stylized surrealistic abstractions which are at once magical and didactic. Through his vision and art, we gain insight into ancestral teachings and mythology that guide Navajo cultural behavior and response. We also see his Pop-influenced paintings and character concept designs and interpretations. For studio visits over the years, I have enjoyed going during specific seasons, like winter, when Piersten feels comfortable in conversing about and when it considered appropriate to show drawings and paintings of indigenous-related works. In the growth cycle season months, he shows me other works in process which relate to our shared contemporary worlds.

Though not generally a fan of curator-artist interviews as exhibition texts, I want to share this one Piersten and I did in May 2022. He is articulate, grounded, and forward-thinking when writing (and speaking) about his work as evidenced by the responses to three questions I posed to him.

1 - Why do you make art? (as opposed to doing something else?)

Art has been with me all my life since I was drawing at 6 years old. I've never really associated myself as an artist until very recently. I had an accident from cycling as I wanted to be a sponsored cyclist, but life seemed to place art right back into my life. Apart from anything that I've done with working in different jobs ranging from bars and restaurants to Home Depot and Amazon, I found passion in cycling and art. Through cycling I figured out that I can take myself everywhere physically by my own strength. As opposed to a car, you experience everything on the road from a smell of the air, the changing weather both hot days and cold weather, the vibrations of the road, and the feeling of being an actual machine. Cycling could only take me so far. Art, on the other hand, has taken me everywhere else in all aspects physically, mentally, emotionally, as well as spiritually. I don't see myself losing much as I fully invested myself into my art. It's by this I have found love, a path in life and a continuous fulfillment after each painting as I continue to express myself throughout each piece. Painting itself helps me deal with my emotions, my personal disputes, as well as motivating anyone else who may feel as I do, to be a better human being.

2- How do you make your art? (Describe your process without giving away any trade secrets.)

Through my traditional Navajo art, I must paint within what we show and are not supposed to show as far as not showing our traditional Ceremonies to foreign eyes. I do my best to try to stay on the Contemporary side of the art, but I do get carried away sometimes with ideas. Most of my figures are influenced heavily from the pop culture world as that was my escape from reality. I decided to bring a modern representative style to bring something fresh to Indigenous art. Building the figures from start to finish is probably the best part of the painting. Often, I use myself as model and often at times turn myself into some of the female figures. I can only do this by my knowledge of studying the human anatomy starting from the skeleton. Using patterns from my Navajo background means a lot of geometric patterns and math that go into it. I feel like that helps me relate to my grandmother as an influence since she measures her woven rugs using only her fingers and everything on the palm of the hand. So, take goes into account when creating my pieces.

3-What are your goals for your artwork? (i.e., social action for change, education, viewer engagement and response/understanding, others?)

With my artwork I take the words of my first mentor, my older brother Riedel Doctor. He said “if you are creating art, your outcome must be to stimulate an expression from the viewer. This may be anything as to making the viewer happy, angry, sad, depressed, or any other emotions. If you make anyone feel anything about your art, you’re done your job as an artist.” So, I take this into account when I’m creating works on Missing Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) and when I’m making pieces about separating families. I go into my own personal life growing up in a poor community with a big family with my mom raising us.

I don’t believe I can actually make a change with art by painting and posting my art on social media alone. I don’t think showing myself praying or capturing the act of praying when horrific acts are done is a way to properly make change. Posting alone is good, but you have to actually post groups or links to donate to that are making the physical change. The groups who actively go to help find missing women. Who go out of their way to make change with a continuous idea. Who donate art to raise money for their community. My goal with my indigenous art is to continue bringing to life our creation story to get our youth involved with their language. I am still struggling with this as well, growing up in the city has its distractions. My art outside my Navajo background consists of trying to capture every emotion I felt at a certain time. That has changed every year. I hope to make art that can immerse the viewer in our everyday world around us. Our jobs as artists to document historical events of the world starts with understanding ourselves as the artist, making us question our meaning here.

phICA is thrilled to showcase Piersten Doctor and his work in this large virtual exhibition for our followers in Phoenix and around the World. Special thanks to Josiah Jones, our virtual exhibition and webpage designer for his noteworthy efforts and results.

Ted G. Decker
Curator
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