An interview with Tom GreyEyes on street art, *Honor the Treaties* and ‘dreaming a new world into being’

Jarrett Martineau

Jarrett Martineau: Please introduce yourself and tell us what nation you are from.

Tom GreyEyes: I’m Hashk’aan Hadzohi (yucca fruit strung out in a line), born for Todichiinii (bitterwater). I originate from a place called Tsiizizii on Navajo Reservation but was raised throughout the state of Arizona, specifically Flagstaff. I’m a bit of an urban Indian but I’m rugged and can get down with rez life.

Can you tell us a bit about your own creative practice? What guides or informs the art you make?

My creative practice lies across a wide spectrum. Most of my work is politically charged in some way but I also like to experiment a whole lot and get abstract. I prefer to be a multi-dimensional artist because it’s what comes naturally to me. The body of work I created is very dynamic and pulls from many places. Whatever I’m working on, I push myself to think conceptually about it. Once my idea is down, I move on to creatively thinking about how to execute it. It’s important to push boundaries and doing so means taking risks.

I’m developing my own ways of incorporating spirituality into my art, using ways of praying that I’m learning. Street art is taking more of a hold in my work. It’s a means to begin speaking back to power and acting out in legal ‘gray areas’. Decolonization theory and traditional knowledge is something I’m always seeking out and hoping to incorporate. It starts by taking back our mental aspects and then bringing those into our physical reality. At some point it requires the dismantling of the colonial government and the social system that feeds it. I believe that the rights and struggles of Indigenous people are the highest priority. Artists like myself live unconventional lives without a regular job or many things holding us down. I try to keep
my autonomy, trying not to depend on anything else. I love the freedom I have as an artist; it’s empowering. But it also needs to happen beyond the individual and in order for that to happen we need to change our self-imposed values.

What roles do your language, nation/community, and the land where you come from play in your work?

The roles of language and land are playing a larger role in my work. The land claims me, speaks my language, carries all the traditional teachings, and provides me a lens for looking at the world. Rebirth and reclamation of our Indigenous self is a process of internalizing that identity, in its many facets. In my propaganda projects I have to think about the community directly impacted, the message and how it will be interpreted. I relate the connection my family has with the land to my projects. I still go to my grandma’s house to ride horses and herd sheep. It helps me stay grounded and remember who I am.

Is there a word for art in your language? How do the Diné people understand art-making?

There really isn’t a word for art. Traditionally, the highest forms of artwork were in sand paintings. It was for spiritual purposes, for calling the greater energy around us. Art is primarily used in ceremony and often intended for healing.

My own art practice developed out of the frustration of our living conditions. I grew up in a dysfunctional family and suffered childhood abuse; I come from the dark side. I didn’t choose the struggle; I was just born into it. Creativity was a way for me to turn negative energy from our daily life into something positive. It allows me to be less self-destructive and opens doors that allow my own spirituality to develop and grow. I guess I’m trying to heal and I do that by engaging the talent I was blessed with, to push for social change.

On a related note, what are Indigenous aesthetics? How does this idea figure in your work, if at all?

Indigenous aesthetics in the Southwest and among Dine people is very symmetrical and based in symbols. I do use some of these designs in my work, mostly as backgrounds. There’s an identity and philosophy attached to them and I embrace using those.

You do a lot of work with local communities, teaching media and studio art classes, and leading youth mural workshops, etc. What's your process for collaborating on community-based projects?

I search for people who are in positions to collaborate. I reach out to organizations and centers that have the infrastructure to engage in creative projects. Then we dive into brainstorming what is possible, as well as an outlining of roles. I have experience organizing and it’s something that you learn over time. Being professional and keeping open communication is vital. I am putting
my energy into building a movement and it’s going to take organization.

The **Honor the Treaties** crew is doing some really interesting work on this front. Can you tell us a bit more about **Honor the Treaties**? How did you get involved and what are you and the crew working on right now?

**Honor the Treaties** collaborates with Native advocacy organizations to create propaganda. The artists develop connections to communities and work with them to push the issues. I got involved in November 2013. I just finished a project on the San Carlos Apache rez working on the ‘Save Oak Flat’ issue, a sacred site that is the proposed site for a copper mine, which is also a means to steal water from the reservation to sell to the metropolitan Phoenix area. My next project is going to be at Inter-Tribal Friendship House in Oakland on food justice and traditional seed knowledge.

You exhibit work in galleries, but many of your projects are focused on public and street art (murals, billboards, painting on industrial buildings, etc). Why is it important to you to work in these forms? How do you balance what you call "inside" vs. "outside" art? Is there a distinction for you in terms of process/practice and form?

It’s important because people on the rez don’t really have galleries to see artwork. We have to bring it to them and it happens on water tanks and abandoned structures. These places become our spaces to showcase our work and spread the message. I always like to go big, and then bigger, in terms of mural projects, to allow myself the space for growth.

At the same time, I learn new things from artists who specialize in specific mediums and I participate in so called “inside art” because the art world is very diverse and I know I can make something on the level of other renowned artists. Why hold back? I like outside work more than inside work. I do see a distinction between the two: outside work takes a lot of physical work. You must be passionate about it in order to endure being outside. Painting in the sun and sand will drain you of all you have. It’s rewarding to finish a project, realizing you went further than you thought. After days of painting I fall into something I call a “painting haze”. It’s like, you’re so involved in the process and in your element that nothing else matters. It’s a creative space where anything is possible. This is sacred to me and helps me maintain the integrity of my work.

**How important is self-representation (speaking to and for ourselves) in Indigenous art vs. speaking to non-Indigenous audiences? What role does audience play in your work?**

Self-representation is very important. The Native art market is based on the same old formulas. It’s time we start speaking out about the real issues that our communities face. We have internalized so much from colonization that simply speaking for ourselves (and to ourselves) is vital. We don’t have many spaces to push these
dialogues, however; but creating artwork stirs up the conversation. My audience has been primarily Indigenous people and I prefer to keep it that way. I don’t tend to cater to non-Indigenous folks.

Much of your work is directly framed in support of local Indigenous resistance struggles against extractive, destructive resource development projects and the dispossession of our homelands. In your view, what makes Indigenous art political? Does or should Indigenous art have a responsibility to engage political struggle in form/content/practice/process?

Being Indigenous is political and, in that sense, so is everything we do. There’s no way you can escape that. There’s a politics already in Native art because we’re still here. I make explicitly political work that has a focus and direct message. Native people have been reprogrammed through the boarding school era to be complacent. I believe that Indigenous art does have a responsibility to engage the political struggle because it’s our communities, our people, who are being attacked on different political levels. The genocide of Indigenous people is always at play. I see Native artists who weren’t political years ago, now beginning to venture into these realms. I don’t have a problem with that, but I think being ‘about it’ is very important. People among the grassroots activist circles in my community have come to know me and my work. I’m connected to them and they help me to remain grounded.

What responsibilities do Indigenous artists carry in their work and practice that are unique to Indigenous people?
We carry responsibilities and accountability to our community and culture. These teachings are hard to find and it takes a lifetime to embrace them, to be understood on deeper levels. Artists play the roles of messenger, but the next level is protector. That’s where I see myself going, I’m not there just yet but I’m on that path.

I love the "Yikáísdáhá" milky-way piece (used for the cover of this issue) and its evocation of multiple worlds and Indigenous visions of the beyond. Can you talk about the inspiration for "Yikáísdáhá" and the others you've done in a similar style ("eyeslikearrows," "horizonwatersilence," and "cloud woman")?

I created that series inspired by my friend and Honor the Treaties colleague, Cheyenne Randall. He made work in Photoshop, using Edward Curtis’s photos. What I did was focus it on my own people and used Navajo based weaving designs and patterns to create work in that vein. At that time in my life I was going through substance abuse counseling and in order to deal with my cravings I would rapidly Photoshop a design, using an intuitive process, to kill enough time for the craving to go away. It helped me out a lot at that time in my life. I guess, in a way, I tapped into my people and culture to find a sense of stability and strength, using my creativity.

**You’ve said that:** “In the process of decolonization theory there’s a part where the colonized start to dream again.

We look at creating a new future. I believe art plays a vital component in realizing what our ancestors have always prayed for.” I like this idea of dreaming a new world into being as being an integral part of the struggle. Is art-making a form of decolonization? How, or perhaps when, is art decolonizing? Are there other works, artists, or projects that you see successfully accomplishing this.

Art making is a form of decolonization because we need to dream. Without that, how can we envision anything? That’s exactly what artists do. We find inspiration and then we begin to bring it out into the physical reality. When we do that, it carries an energy, and with that it promotes dialogue. We need to take this approach to decolonization theory too. Bring it into a space any way we can and, then, from putting it into action, we start creating and evolving the theory based on our experiments. Art is decolonizing when that fire inside you is re-lit. You realize that we can do anything. The system has our minds confined and part of decolonizing is radicalizing our minds. I don’t have all the answers but I know which direction to face and right now walking that way is enough. Developing a practice out of that and continuing to build that fire is what I’m doing. It’s more important than fame and money.

And, thinking a bit deeper about the 'colonized starting to dream again', what role do dreams play in your work?
I don’t have many dreams, but when I do it’s usually something relevant to my life. I know people who dream almost every night but it’s not something I’m gifted with. “Dream without Sleep” is something I like to write on walls. I do daydream a whole lot. It’s part of my creative process. It’s right after I take in information, where I mix it up and see where it can play out. I dream about what could happen and then I start engaging people who I think can help me achieve it.

Is the 'traditional vs. contemporary' or 'two worlds' binary that is often associated with Indigenous art still a relevant consideration or distinction?

Not really. It’s way too easy to get caught up in the binaries. My mind falls into them but I know circumstances are more complex than that. I’m done painting the two-world theme.

There's been a lot of recent interest in the idea of art and social practice that "blurs the lines among object making, performance, political activism, community organizing, environmentalism and investigative journalism, creating a deeply participatory art that often flourishes outside the gallery and museum system" (Kennedy, 2013). You're planning to study social practice in California this fall. How do you understand art as "social practice"? Does art have a responsibility to be socially engaged or to educate people?

Art as social practice goes beyond hanging something up on a wall. It’s dealing with social dynamics; it is engaging people and communities to create interactions, interventions, and promote a dialogue. It’s based in conceptual thinking, but with knowledge of the political landscape at a given time. Art actually doesn’t have any responsibilities; it’s sheer expression. ‘Artivism’ does have that responsibility though.

And last, in your view, what limits or expands the possibilities for Indigenous art? What do you hope that your work contributes to?

The established Indigenous art markets limit our possibilities. It’s way too safe and based on catering to White people with money. What expands our possibilities is going outside the established norms, to venture into the unknown. It’s a leap of faith to do so. I did it years ago when I made a commitment to myself to be an artist. I didn’t think I would be where I am now. I hope my work contributes to our re-humanization. I want

"You cannot use someone else’s fire. You can only use your own. And in order to do that, you must first be willing to believe that you have it." – Audre Lorde
the younger generation to see what I’m doing and go beyond that. I wouldn’t be where I’m at if older activists in my community didn’t reach out to the youth. That’s a responsibility I take on for myself: to pass on whatever I have.

Tom GreyEyes is an interdisciplinary artist from the Navajo Nation, who was raised throughout the state of Arizona. He graduated from Arizona State University with a degree in Intermedia. He has taught media and studio art classes at the college level on the San Carlos Apache reservation and, in 2012, he was awarded the Phoenix New Times Big Brain award in Visual Art. To further attempt to combine art and activism, he took part in a Ruckus Society non-violent direct action training camp using the Big Brain award money. Tom has also participated in acclaimed artist residency programs at ASU through Map(ing), and the School of Unity and Liberation in Oakland, CA. His artwork appears on the cover of this issue.

Jarrett Martineau is Cree/Dene from Frog Lake First Nation in Alberta and a Ph.D. Candidate in Indigenous Governance at the University of Victoria. His research examines contemporary Indigenous political communication at the critical intersections of media, technology, art, aesthetics, music, and performance. His dissertation focuses on the role of art and creativity in Indigenous struggles for nationhood and decolonization. He is the co-founder and Creative Producer of Revolutions Per Minute (RPM.fm), a global new music platform to promote Indigenous music culture and an organizer with the Indigenous Nationhood Movement. He is currently a 2013-14 Fulbright visiting scholar at Columbia University and CUNY’s Center for Place, Culture and Politics.