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CULTURE

Jan. 21, 2025

Nizhonniya Austin's Paintings Are Conversations With Her Ancestors

The Native painter, who plays an artist in 2023's *The Curse*, is showing her first solo exhibition in New York City—a celebration of movement on canvas.

by **Daria Simone Harper**



Photograph by Charles Montoya

Nizhonniya Austin is a hardcore daydreamer. As much of a poet as she is a painter, the Diné and Tlingit artist convenes with the unseen—her ancestors, her own spirit—to produce artworks bursting with pride, vulnerability, and possibility. For *The Year of the Vampire*, Austin's debut solo exhibition at Tara Downs gallery in New York, the artist offers a dazzling collection of large-scale acrylic, oil, and wax pencil works, which reflect intimate vignettes of her life.

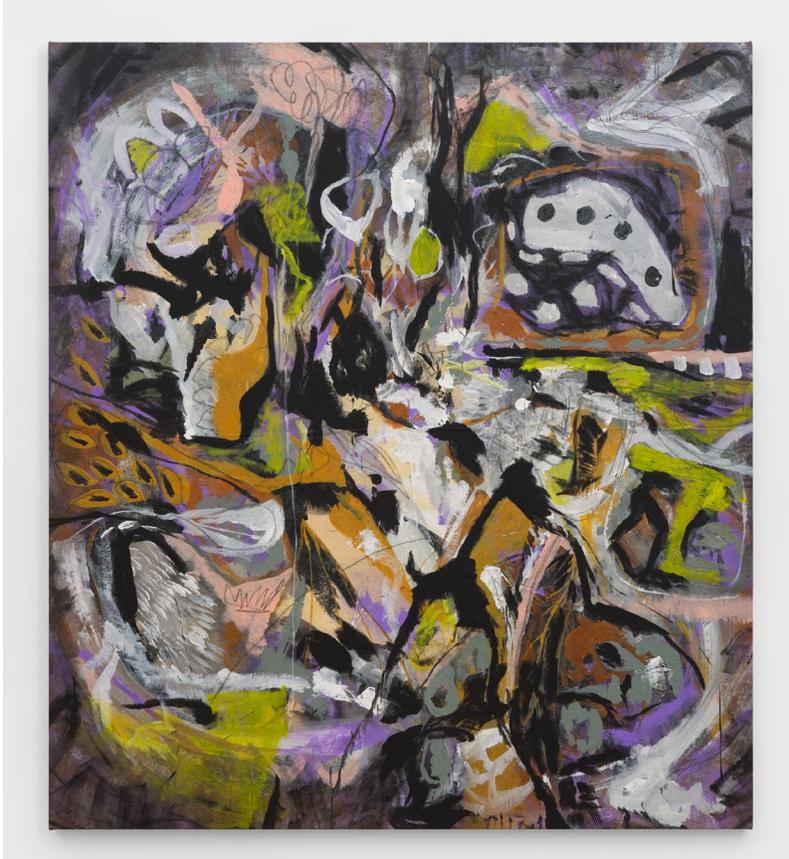
"I have a very personal and spiritual relationship with my paintings," Austin, an Albuquerque native who studied painting at Santa Fe's Institute of American Indian Arts, tells W. "Often, when I'm painting, I'm moving around and around in circles. It's become this meditative dance, this ritual. They're conversations with my ancestors."

The fact that Austin—who is both a painter and an actor, having starred in Showtime’s 2023 series *The Curse* alongside Emma Stone—makes artworks from movement is strikingly evident, even after only a few moments of engagement with her sprawling compositions. “I think of my paintings as prayers,” Austin adds. “Most of the time, it feels like I’m being spoken to. The way that my whole body moves, it’s like it has become a tool, or a vessel. Sometimes my body does really weird movements when I’m doing the paintings and I don’t even know why I moved in that way.”



Nizhonniya Austin, *There's Always Some God To Battle... Some Mountain To Climb... Some Song To Dance To*, 2024.
Courtesy of the Artist and Tara Downs Gallery

Through this dialogue, the L.A.-based artist furthers her exploration of the body’s role in translating movement to a visual form. Sharp intuition and a willingness to be guided by something beyond herself manifests in reverberant paintings composed of circumlinear forms, as well as traces of anthropomorphic figures. Austin’s canvases also nod to a tradition of Abstract Expressionist artists who maintain that a “good” painting is as much about its iterations and process as it is about the work in a completed form.



Nizhonniya Austin, *The Problem Wasn't Us It Was the World*, 2024. Courtesy of the Artist and Tara Downs Gallery

As Austin becomes the conduit through which time, space, and memory are transcribed, intricate networks of gestures leap from her canvases. Her artwork titles also tend to possess a narrative quality, a quiet poeticism stemming from the stories she's "always fantasizing about" in her head. In *There's Always Some God To Battle... Some Mountain To Climb... Some Song To Dance To*, the artist presents a cacophonous environment that embodies the motion from which it materialized. Even without the presence of the artwork title, the painting calls to mind a web of small, yet explosive movements, eventually coming together in a rupture so grand, it can only be characterized as cosmic. And an energizing range of green and purple hues coalesce in *The Problem Wasn't Us It Was the World*. Within this fantastical landscape, the artist suggests a tone of vitality and strength.

While Austin's Native heritage plays an integral part in understanding of her work, it is just one element of a complex network of references and experiences that make up her artistic practice. She is committed to resisting the pressures inflicted by the art world to perform her identity in a palatable or oversimplified manner. "I really support fluidity and being in the in-between," she adds. "I shouldn't have to define my existence. As a Native person, you're already walking in both worlds."

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STREET SMARTS ART

7 Tips to Get Ahead in the Art Market in 2025

The art market is changing fast. In his latest column, Ralph DeLuca is here to arm you with intel that will help you navigate the choppy waters.

WORDS

Ralph DeLuca

January 9, 2025



Nizhonniya Austin, *Blood! Tears! Electricity! Love! Power! Friendship*, 2024. Image courtesy of Nizhonniya Austin.

This is Street Smarts, a new column from art advisor Ralph DeLuca that offers art world veterans and newcomers alike a straight-talking, no-bullshit guide to the aloof and difficult-to-crack contemporary art market.

In 2024, the art market experienced a significant correction, marked by a decline in prices for emerging artists, the closure of numerous galleries, and the advent of a totally new political landscape. Against this backdrop, I've observed several new trends beginning to take shape. Below, find my advice for keeping up with the changing art world in 2025.

Take a Closer Look at Indigenous Art

I've observed increasing representation and interest in Indigenous artists in major public and private collections. This is a much-needed correction that taps into an extremely fertile vein in American art history, one that has long been overlooked. That being said, when the market as a whole takes interest in something that can easily be categorized, it's important to go back to my first point—don't buy a work just because the artist fits into a particular label. Look for new and older artists who push the envelope and the visual language of their shared experience.

Artists

Nizhonniya Austin, Breakout Star of 'The Curse,' Debuts Her Striking Abstract Paintings

The painter's new suite of paintings is now on view at Tara Downs.



Photograph by Charles Montoya

by Min Chen • January 21, 2025 ·

Viewers of the black comedy *The Curse* (2023) may already know Nizhonniya Austin from her low-key yet acutely tuned role as Cara Durand. But the Austin that stepped out in New York over the weekend requires some reintroduction.

For, Austin, besides playing an artist on the absurdist TV series, is a painter in real life. Her debut solo exhibition has just opened at Tara Downs, surfacing a vividly abstract visual language that the Diné and Tlingit artist has cultivated over the years. Titled "The Year of the Vampire," the show brings together canvases created over a particularly heavy period, she told me.

"It was a very dark place, just ups and downs, loss, heartbreak, having love, and losing love," she said over a video call. "My paintings are just very personal. They are essentially me and my heart, all my emotions, just laid out there."



Nizhonniya Austin, *Matador Nights* (2024). Photo courtesy of the artist and Tara Downs.

You don't have to be privy to her specific sentiments to pick out the emotional undertones woven through her textured works. Each marries organic forms, pops of color, and geometric figures in swirling, dynamic compositions that evoke complex internal landscapes. They're loaded with symbolic power. Austin's personal narrative is further woven into the titles of some paintings, such as *The Summer I Swam Through the Thicket of Hocus Pocus* and *Matador Nights*, which offer a diaristic throughline.

Austin created this latest body of work in a Sante Fe studio, one large enough to accommodate her 52-by-52-inch canvases. Instinct and emotion guided their creation, she told me, but also her own creative process.

"Basically, I'm just walking around in the dark," she said, "and that's how I like it."



Nizhonniya Austin, *The Goth Bad Boy Supreme* (2024). Photo courtesy of the artist and Tara Downs.

Born in Juneau, Alaska, Austin had what she termed a "traditional upbringing" in Albuquerque, New Mexico. While she loved drawing, singing, and creating things as a child, art wasn't viewed as a viable career. It wasn't until she was in her 20s, she said, that she started attending the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Sante Fe.

"They gave you a studio there," she said about the school. "That was the first time that I ever had a space bigger than my bedroom to actually work on things. And that gave me the inspiration and the belief to really think that I could actually do this. I didn't stretch any paintings for the first time until I was like 27 or 28. Just having that space at IAIA was enough to give me a better and clearer vision of what my life could be as an artist."

Still, it took years more for Austin to recognize art as "something that I could do as a career." Her oblique path to art, not coming from an artistic background, has also shaped what she brings to her visual art. In lieu of art-historical nods, she plucks "random inspirations that have nothing to do with painting"—the Spice Girls, for one, or anything else she encounters in popular culture.



Nizhonniya Austin, *The Summer I Swam Through the Thicket of Hocus Pocus* (2024). Photo courtesy of the artist and Tara Downs.

She described her approach to painting as almost spiritual—summoning such terms as “prayer” and “seance”—sparked by something as simple as a color or a vision. Even her preferred working method has been driven by an inner prompting: Austin typically paints her canvases on the floor, Pollock-style, so she can walk around them.

“Sometimes it becomes like a dance almost,” she said. “Even the placement of my feet and my hands becomes this language where I almost feel like I’m speaking to my ancestors, and they’re speaking to me. Sometimes I am very conscious of what I’m doing, and sometimes I’m not. Sometimes I almost become this vessel.”

This performance aspect of her practice—what she called “grabbing from the same creative pot”—led to her turn on *The Curse*, which also starred Nathan Fielder and Emma Stone. Her character, Cara Durand, is a young Indigenous artist who is landed amid the show’s delicately constructed liberal fantasy, her desire to reach a larger audience inviting questions about identity and self-presentation.

A standout scene in the second episode sees Cara staging a shrewd performance piece. In it, she invites visitors into a teepee, where they witness her shaving turkey with a meat slicer and sharing the pieces with participants. As Cara later explains of the work: “As a Native person, that’s basically what you’re doing every day. Just fucking slicing off pieces of yourself. It’s exhausting.”

Austin, who first thought Cara to be much different from her, has come to acknowledge: “I actually relate to her a lot. I feel like our lives have become so parallel where I’m like, ‘Wow, this definitely is me.’”

As an artist of color, she told me, she’s expected to play into discussions of pain, poverty, and struggle, as part of received ideas of Indigenous identity. But, much like Cara, Austin is offering a fine riposte.

“The way that I am asserting who I am is just by being who I am, and not performing some sort of character that people are maybe expecting to see,” she said. “What I really want is just to talk about how human I am and how my heart beats, how it breaks, and how it comes alive just like everyone else.”



Nizhonniya Austin, *Heart and Soul* (2024). Photo courtesy of the artist and Tara Downs.

Recently, too, she’s been thinking about how the self is connected to universal ideas—how the personal is often political. In ways, she reckons, her own highly intimate paintings are also highly resonant ones.

“I always wonder where my paintings can fit in because they’re so personal. Are they also political? I have to say yes, because they are also very existential thoughts. These paintings are my passion. They are what angers me. They are what makes me flourish. They are just as political as I am,” she said.

“I feel like living life is the greatest inspiration that I could ever have.”

art:scope

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INDIGENOUS REFLECTIONS AT BATES

BOSTON PRINTMAKERS AT 75

FAITH RINGGOLD & CORITA KENT
IN WORCESTER

PASTELS ONLY IN KENNEBUNK

ART BASEL MIAMI BEACH PREVIEW



A HARMONIOUS FUSION

ENTRANCING MODERN
NATIVE AMERICAN ART
AT BATES

Imagine, if you will, having lived in the lands which are now America for thousands upon thousands of years. Then aliens from across the sea spread over your land like blood from a wound, bringing smallpox and cholera, diseases for which you have no resistance; cheating you out of your land, using it for settled agriculture as a commodity, not for sustainable self-sufficiency; bringing noisy and polluting railroads, telegraphs, mining, industrialization; destroying your game animals; coming after you with armies which commit atrocities; distorting your sophisticated spiritual beliefs with an overlay of their monotheistic, judgmental God, forcing you into their coercive schools; giving you no option but to join an extractive economy which is so

far from your non-monetary, cooperative sharing way. How would you feel? How could you express that rage, sorrow, displacement as you become a stranger in your own land?

The just-opened exhibition at Bates College, "Exploding Native Inevitable," (the title is a riff on Warhol) tries to come to grips with this history through art by Indigenous people, some well-known, some not, from many different nations and parts of the country, Maine, Kansas, New Mexico, California; from Seattle, Washington; Muskogee, Oklahoma (where my parents got married); Manhattan, Omaha, Nebraska; and Providence, Rhode Island. Their arts are videos/cinema, painting, sculpture, music, multimedia and fiber. Most creations are rooted in their ancestral

tribal traditions but worked in modern techniques to transition the past into the present and future. (Indeed, the concept of time for Native Americans is different than our linear one: it is circular, spiraling, merging past, present and future into one.)

Natives themselves are ambivalent about their approach to settler-invader Americans. Most have been educated by American colleges. Using videos and training sessions, such as those by New York-based artist group New Red Order, in their "Never Settle!," want people to "adopt," "understand" an indigenous perspective to "accomplice" the indigenous, yet rail against those who do as extractive and appropriate; in interviews they, like so many Indigenous people, say that many

COVER STORY

EXPLODING NATIVE INEVITABLE

BATES COLLEGE MUSEUM
OF ART

OLIN ARTS CENTER
75 RUSSELL STREET
LEWISTON, MAINE

THROUGH MARCH 4, 2024

Alison Bremner, *Infatuation*,
2022, acrylic, wallpaper on
canvas, 36" x 24", courtesy of
the artist.



Americans think natives are no longer here. A weird dichotomy: Americans believe there are no natives, but appropriate indigeneity. How to come to grips with this ambivalence?

Elisa Harkins, Muscogee and Cherokee, tries with her endlessly repetitive “Die, don’t die” song accompanied by electronic music, to spoof cultural appropriation in a video where she sports a huge white headdress in Yoko Ono-ish performances. Raven Halfmoon, Caddo, creates large stoneware sculpture, such as “Cedar Prayers and Prada,” which (like others of these artists’ works) comments on and captures the schizophrenia of living native in America, often with sophisticated female figures reminiscent of Cro-Magnon Venuses and of

masks splashed with red and sayings, riddled with eyes.

With the Land Back movement, many want all stolen land returned. As this is unrealistic in a totality (some land may be, and has been, returned), the viewer may wonder, would it not be better to learn to live as partners with the land, using our hands and body in season, respecting water, creatures, everything on earth and sky as living beings?

For those who have been involved with things indigenous, some of the tropes of decolonization are becoming cliché. How to avoid this?

With humor, is one way, as Sarah Rowe (Lakota, Ponca) does, modernizing traditional images from her tribal iconography to express the joy and



play of her cultures’ myths — thunderbirds, horses, stars (from which the Lakota people are descended) — with video projected on painting, in vivid colors on large installations.

With a more sardonic humor, Alison Bremner subverts western precepts of art, as well as her own Tlingit imagery (most often traditionally created by men) by placing the face of a hideous dance mask of a Tsimshian wat’sa — an otter which, according to the Anchorage Museum, “would take the form of a beautiful woman and appear to unsuspecting men to steal them away” — on “Girl with a Pearl Earring,” and another mask on the

LEFT: Norman Akers, *Watchful Eye*, 2023, oil on canvas, 78” x 68”.

TOP RIGHT: Brad Kahlhamer, page spread from 91+ sketchbook *Nomadic Studio #1*, ca. 2000 -, 8 1/4” x 10 1/4”, Courtesy of the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

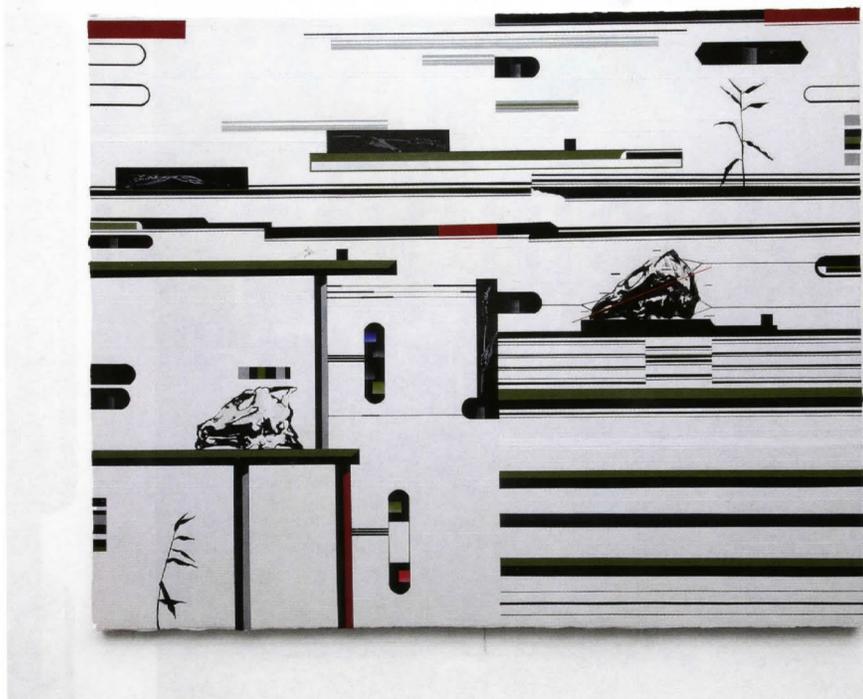
BOTTOM RIGHT: Brad Kahlhamer, page spread from 91+ sketchbook *Nomadic Studio #2*, ca. 2000 -, 8 1/4” x 10 1/4”, Courtesy of the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

"Mona Lisa." She also uses the traditional uniquely refined elliptical ovoids of northwestern tribal art which express parts of a creature or symbol, upside down, or inscribed with figures and merged with animals such as world creator Raven, with wolf teeth and a semi human body — mixing tribal and western art with equal irreverence.

Expressive of, if not ambivalence per se, the dual lives which natives live — a foot in America and in their own tribal life on Turtle Island — are Tyrrell Tapaha's weavings, such as "Áshkii Gáamalii: The Boy Who Lives in Two Worlds," a "Diné-style tapestry, handspun vegetal-dyed Navajo Churro, Brown Sheep, Navajo-raised Alpaca, 12 1/98" x 15 3/8." Terran Last Gun (Piikani/Blackfeet), who paints abstract shapes in vivid colors to express his culture and cosmos symbolically on antique ledger paper, such as the "City of Butte, Montana, Auditor's Register of Treasurer's Disbursements," also combines worlds of past and present, western art and tribal. Ledger art came into being in the late 19th century when Plains Indian artists such as Amos Bad Heart Bull and even Sitting Bull began to depict their own life events pictographically on paper, often on settler accounting ledgers — adding another face to their historiographies, formerly on buffalo hide winter counts.

Some artists are simply creating beauty from tribal imagery which for me in this case, resonates more vividly than agitprop (though I am a huge fan of agitprop under certain circumstances and use it myself in my film, "Dreams from a Planet in Peril"). Duane Slick, Meskwaki Sauk and Fox Maxy, revels in native mythology, expressing the iconic Coyote "trickster" (a name given by white anthropologist Paul Radin to a universal native demiurge) — a figure who was both fooled by, and fools other beings, and in some nations was a world creator — with abstract acrylics and silk screens. And master Osage craftsman, Norman Akers, in oil and in monoprint collages, creates worlds of loss: antlered creatures surrounded by ghost tree trunks, and the presence of American treasure chests, soda cans, presidents, houses, all movingly poignant and stunningly presented.

While there is outright agitprop by conceptual artist Jaque Fragua, Jemez Pueblo, posting "Sacred" or "Indigenous Land" on billboards as an act of reclamation and protest, some of the



artists create just to create, infused by, but without the consciousness of their indigeneity at the forefront: Nizhonniiya Austin, Diné/Tlingit, in her abstract paintings, and Fox Maxy. In Maxy's awesomely inventive film, "Fighting Looks Different 2 Me Now," a series of images, fragments, reassemble in the mind to tell a non-narrative story of rejection by her own people from her tribal lands; using rap, subtitles messaging shorthand, snatches of conversation, found and newly created footage. Fox said that it's an individual voice not a tribal creation.

TOP: Duane Slick, *An Actuarial Space*, 2021, acrylic on linen, 54" x 68". Courtesy of the artist.

BOTTOM: Mali Obomsawin, *Wawasint8da*, 2022, 5:59 minutes (still). Courtesy of the artist.



Perhaps the most powerful expression of many themes is by Mali Obomsawin, who combines worlds in her music and videos. Obomsawin acts, sings and directs “Wawasint8da.” This perfect short black-and-white video with her musical score shows discomfiting images of the Catholic church vying with those of a lodge hung with cradle board, animal skulls (what may be a sacred medicine or Mide ceremonial lodge).

As the chaos builds, music and imagery sift between the two worlds, one indoors, masochistic and white, the other within a world of wood and soft-spoken language. What appears to be a statue of St. Kateri Tekakwitha, the Algonquian saint and martyr, and pale bloodless images of the human-god centered church give us a sense of repression, of the nature of sin, which natural, native people have no recognition of, nor is a part of their spirit — as the film pits the conqueror’s enforced religion against Wabanaki ritual and vision that at last relieves us with the comforting wood of the lodge, of nature and harmony.

“Wawasint8da”’s score is the first composition of “Movement Two” from Obomsawin’s album “Sweet Tooth.” The album plays not only mournful music compositions sung in her Abenaki language, but a true synthesis of music, native

and non, some featured in the TV show “Reservation Dogs,” in fascinating combinations of jazz instrumentation whose Mingus-like horns whinny into a kind of native “Guernica” with Indian drum beat and moaning song.

Duality has always been a part of indigenous thought, complementary halves, male, female; moon, sun; night, day; earth, sky — in a non-judgmental way, not as good and evil but as parts of life, synthesis in the reciprocity of humans with creatures, spirit with material, aliveness and spirit. And while, in a bit of the art, intention does not always match execution and reminds us just because you are Indigenous and oppressed doesn’t mean you can automatically make good art, most of the works in this compelling exhibition embodying ambivalence and the duality of America’s worlds seek (or lead the viewer to seek) a harmonious fusion, trying to end the chaos of harm done.

After closing at Bates on March 4, the exhibition will travel to the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Scottsdale, Arizona; Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska; and Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

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Leaving Larchmont, acrylic on canvas, 30"x30"



TOP TEN

BRUCE LABRUCE

By Bruce LaBruce



The Curse, 2023–24, still from a TV show on Showtime. Season 1, episode 2. Cara Durand (Nizhonniya Luxi Austin).

Among the many memorable characters in Nathan Fielder and Benny Safdie’s satirical black-comedy cringe-porn series *The Curse* (2023–24), Native American artist Nizhonniya Luxi Austin, in her acting debut as Cara Durand, is a standout. She essentially plays a version of herself (in real life, she’s an abstract painter and musician from Juneau, Alaska, of the Tlingit and Diné tribes, who now lives in Santa Fe, where the program was shot). In *The Curse*, Austin is a Native artist trying to elude the passive-aggressive, co-optive machinations of Whitney and Asher Siegel (Emma Stone and Fielder, respectively), a smarmy married couple trying to dress up the gentrification project of their sincere-but-phony HGTV renovation show as an endeavor that’s both environmentally sustainable and sensitive to Indigenous land claims. (The Siegels even stole the mirrored, eco-friendly design of their “passive houses” from artist Doug Aiken.) Cara evinces a stoical sangfroid: She evades as best she can Whitney’s awkward overtures to be her best friend and to use her art in her glass houses to lend them aboriginal originality and legitimacy. Yet as a marginalized artist, Cara isn’t above accepting a hefty sum of cash to act as Whitney’s “Indigenous consultant.” Cara’s solo exhibition “dinner for ten” in episode two (a sly send-up of Judy Chicago and Marina Abramović) has her handing out turkey from a meat slicer to anyone who enters her tent. When Whitney eats some, Cara screams, later explaining that it was because Whitney was symbolically consuming her soul. Cara ends up quitting being an artist altogether; in a nice bit of irony, this action finally garners her a feature in the *New York Times*. The character is a complex dialectical portrait of the artist as a young Indigenous woman negotiating all the ethical potholes that contemporary artists are heir to.



Illustration by Lauren Crow

INTERVIEW

Art without the mask of Native identity

Multidisciplinary artist Nizhoniya Austin talks about authenticity, trust fund pottery hipsters, and her role as Cara in 'The Curse.'

B. 'Toastie' Oaster May 1, 2024

In an episode of Showtime's new black comedy *The Curse*, Indigenous artist Cara Durand hosts a performance art piece during which she invites participants, one by one, into a tipi. There, she uses a meat slicer to shave pieces off a hunk of turkey and distributes the slices to participants. "As a Native person, that's basically what you're doing every day — just fucking slicing off pieces of yourself. And it's exhausting," Durand later explains.

The Curse is a series by Nathan Fielder, whose shows *Nathan for You* and *The Rehearsal* have defined the cringe comedy genre, and Benny Safdie, best known for his work in the critically acclaimed film *Uncut Gems*. With two non-Native showrunners, *The Curse* might seem an unlikely contender for raising the bar on Indigenous representation. But the show, set in Española, New Mexico, touches on serious real-life issues, including gentrification, tribal sovereignty and sustainable development.

"As a Native person, that's basically what you're doing every day — just fucking slicing off pieces of yourself. And it's exhausting."

The characters parody real-world archetypes. Emma Stone leads as Whitney, a white-savior type who considers herself an ally while using her generational wealth to build eco-certified "passive homes" in poor neighborhoods. She tries to befriend a tribal governor, played by Gary Farmer, who is welcoming but skeptical. Durand, the artist, is Indigenous, but she's also contemporary, career-driven and morally complicated: She's contemptuous of Whitney's aspirations but willing to sell her own Native credibility, if the price is right.

Durand is played by real-life painter and musician Nizhoniya Austin (Diné and Tlingit), who was born in Juneau, grew up in Albuquerque, and studied painting at Santa Fe's Institute of American Indian Arts. Austin recently relocated from New Mexico to Los Angeles. HCN sat down with her for a conversation about Native identity in the art world as it relates to both Austin and her character.