

*Trying to Be Alaska*

Nizhonniya Austin

September 9/October 24, 2026

Tara Downs is pleased to announce a new exhibition of paintings and site-responsive sculpture by Nizhonniya Austin (Diné/Tlingit). Building upon the improvisatory abstraction of her acclaimed New York debut at the gallery, Austin's newest body of work expands her painterly vocabulary into an immersive installation in which painting and sculpture activate a continuous experiential field. Executed in acrylic, oil stick, wax pencil, and looping drawn line, the canvases traverse ice blues, tidal greens, and mineral reds across registers ranging from cellular structures and geological strata to coastlines and distant star fields. Drawn from memories of the artist's childhood home, from which the exhibition takes its title, *Trying to Be Alaska*, these works return to the geological and familial formations that shape her understanding of place.

Austin's compositions marry the diagrammatic expansiveness of Julie Mehretu with the fluid biomorphism and unstable figure-ground relationships of Arshile Gorky and Elizabeth Murray, together with the crystalline luminosity of Charles Seliger, while remaining unmistakably her own. Beneath their exuberant formal invention lies a distinctly kincentric worldview, in which land, animal, ancestor, weather, and bodily presence are understood as mutually constitutive discrete domains. The looping circularity that courses through the paintings bears the imprint of Austin's training as a dancer: each canvas is worked upon the studio floor, recalling the embodied spatial logic of Diné sandpainting, through a process that is at once improvisational and diaristic. Performance likewise forms an integral strand of Austin's practice, extending from the studio to her lauded portrayal of the indigenous artist Cara Durand in *The Curse* (2023) alongside Nathan Fielder and Emma Stone, a role exploring tensions between cultural identity and its public representation.

"Every inlet. / Every sound. / Every strait." The stanza originates in *Trying to Be Alaska*, a new poem by Austin that lends its title and allusive geomorphic longing to the exhibition, cataloguing coastal geography from a more than periplum distance. *Love Crimes in Alaska* pins a black, totemic form against red and cobalt target-eyes that recur throughout the show, a visual analogue to the iterative, mnemonic sounding of indigenous song-mapping traditions no less than the atomization of body and sight into orificial fragments within the Surrealist work of a similar polymath, Unica Zürn. *My Mother Was Born on Dirt Floor and Every Grain Was a Gemstone* sets a pale vertical form, dotted like bone, into a field of rust and ultramarine segmented with peninsular, red contour lines. *As Long As the World Turns I Will Love You More Than Fruit Trees* radiates from a central mass across a cerulean sweep as vertiginous as it is both ground and grounding, its structure more compass rose or rose's perianth than horizon, resistant to landscape painting as an emblem of sovereign vantages, territory possessed. The concentrated density of *Moth Country and the Opal Dynasty* channels Emmi Whitehorse's telluric, pictographic layering and Rita Ackermann's looping, referential surfaces, yet Austin's own stylistic intuition and uninhibitedness keep the paintings in variation with sensations outside her medium, whether near or far: the broader choreography of the studio floor, the cadence of a poem that hinges on displacement, the anamnestic substitution of light poles for spruce.

The exhibition inaugurates Austin's extension of these formal and conceptual concerns into sculpture through a group of monumental painted totems conceived in dialogue with *Red Totem I* (1977) by George Morrison (Ojibwé), in the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Their vertical format punctuates the exhibition's spatial grammar while redirecting the modernist column toward questions of ancestral continuity. Installed among paintings whose titles and imagery alike evoke a fragmentary poetics, the

sculptures establish a rhythmic architectural pulse that encourages viewers to navigate the gallery as a single environmental composition. Cumulatively, the paintings and sculptures mark a significant expansion of Austin's practice, contributing to the evolving language and expanding genealogy of abstraction.

Nizhonniya Austin (b. 1990, Juneau, US) is an artist based in Albuquerque, US. Austin received her degree from Institute of American Indian Arts (Santa Fe, US) in 2020. Selected exhibitions include: "Traying to Be Alaska," Tara Downs, New York, US (2026); "The Year of the Vampire," Tara Downs, New York, US (2025); "Exploding Native Inevitable," Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Logan, US (2025); "Exploding Native Inevitable," Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln, US (2025); "Exploding Native Inevitable," Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Scottsdale, US (2024); "Exploding Native Inevitable," Bates College Museum of Art, Lewiston, US (2023); "Jíík'éh," FaraHNHeight Fine Art, Santa Fe, US (2021); "Indigenous Feminist Spatiality," Rainosek Gallery, Albuquerque, US (2019); "Desert Woman," Peralta Studio, Santa Fe, US (2019); "I Wanna Be Well," MCAU Gallery, Los Angeles, US (2015). Her work is included in the permanent collection of Anchorage Museum, Anchorage, US, Bates College Museum of Art, Lewiston, US, and The Clark Collection, St, Louis, US.