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TRAVELS, CONVERSATIONS & OTHER NICE THINGS **ISSUE 108** OCTOBER 18, 2026

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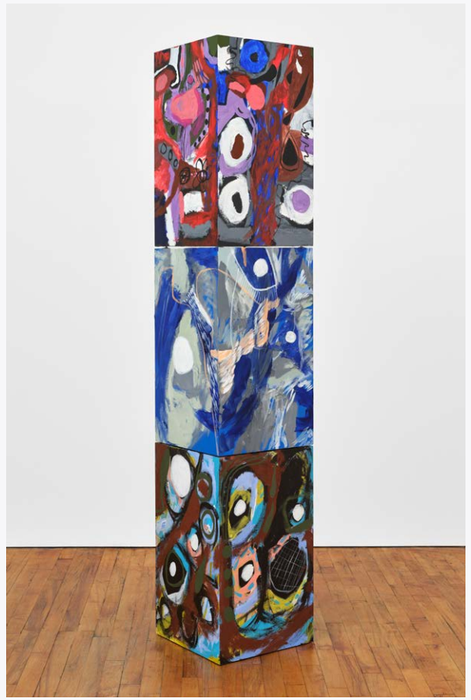
Pieces of the Whole
Nizhonniya Austin's abstract works circle the obscure notion of memory and identity.

STATE OF THE ART

Pieces of the Whole

Maria Vogel





Courtesy of Nizhonniya Austin

In Nizhonniya Austin's work, place is less a fixed geography than something felt, remembered, and carried. Abstracted landscapes, which surface through fragments of color, gesture, sensation, and shape, recall something lived by the artist but not always something that can be precisely located. For the self-proclaimed rambler, place is intertwined with memory, emotion, cultural inheritance, and the complicated pull of home.

In her latest exhibition, *Trying to Be Alaska*, currently on view at the Tara Downs gallery in New York City, Austin turns toward the land where she was born and spent her formative years, and the distance that now separates her from it. Rather than depicting Alaska literally, she works through the remnants that live within her, both the histories of the place and the sensory memories that have accumulated over time. Across layered paintings and an introduction of totem sculptures, the exhibition considers how a place can become transformed through longing and recollection.

Though the exhibition title alludes to one area in particular, *Trying to Be Alaska* is ultimately less about returning to a single location and more about the way that a place continues to live within us, altered by memory, distance, and the impossibility of fully leaving it behind.

Maria Vogel: Place feels deeply embedded in this exhibition but not necessarily as something literal or geographic. How does a sense of place enter a painting for you?

Nizhonniya Austin: I don't think places regularly enter a painting. I actually rarely think of specific places while I'm working on a piece. I tend to dwell more on my feelings while making [the pieces]. My paintings are guided by those feelings, which then take me to memory, and even those memories can feel ineffable. I'm trying to make sense of the meditative state I'm in when I paint. When I'm painting, it's like all my memories, lovers, places I've been, traumas, and conversations I've had become synthesized into a single moment, and it's my job to solidify them.

MV: The exhibition takes its title, *Trying to Be Alaska*, from your childhood home. What does Alaska represent to you now, at a distance from it?

NA: I wrote the poem "Trying to Be Alaska," and it's about the disconnect and longing I've felt for Alaska since I left it. Now that I'm older and far away from Alaska, I'm always thinking about the pieces and fragments from my memory of what it represents to me. There are two ways I think about Alaska: I imagine tangible and visceral details, like the way the ocean smelled, Tlingit artisans carving totem poles, Tlingit dancers, the wild summer strawberries that grew along the beach, and the sound of whales in the middle of the night while [I would camp] on the beach; but there's also the more emotional and visceral way Alaska represents the transience of memory and how much we hold on to our ideas of home, whether that home exists in a person or a place.

MV: How has your relationship to Alaska changed through memory? Are you painting a place you remember, a place that exists now, or something somewhere between the two?

NA: My relationship to Alaska is still this ongoing conversation I'm always having within myself. To me, Alaska has almost become a symbol of a parental relationship. I've gone from hating it and feeling like it abandoned me to thinking it was old-fashioned or even drab to believing that it is, in some way, my very being — to believing that Alaska is wholeheartedly my beating heart.

So, to answer your question: It exists somewhere between the two. A lot of my mark-making unintentionally comes out looking like traditional yet abstracted Pacific Northwest form-line designs. As a child, I used to draw form line for fun. As I got older, I actively ran away from it. I've embraced

it more now, but I'm also still running away from a lot of things. I often feel like my work allows me to come back to whatever I'm running away from because it's always hitting me in the face through my paintings. There's no getting away from your truths when you've spent your whole life painting them.

MV: You're now based in Albuquerque, a landscape that is visually and environmentally very different from Juneau. What happens to your work when those two places — Alaska and the Southwest — begin to overlap?

NA: I actually like to tell people I don't live anywhere. I'm a kind of rambler. I split my time between Los Angeles and Albuquerque. But despite that, it's probably important to mention that I'm Tlingit from Juneau, Alaska, as well as Diné, and my mother is from the Navajo reservation in northern Arizona. I spent many summers [in the Southwest], so the duality of desert and rainforest lives within me. Those two landscapes have been overlapping in my work since I began, and it also comes through in the way I work. My paintings can look like distorted desert landscapes. They have a geographical quality to them. My Navajo grandfather was a medicine man, and he made sand paintings on the ground. I, too, work on the ground. Making the painting on the ground is a very important part of my process, and I'm proud in some way to carry on that kind of sacred movement.

MV: What is one artwork apart from your own that holds particular meaning to you?

NV: "Judith Slaying Holofernes" by Artemisia Gentileschi. It's such a powerful feminist statement. It reminds me that women will always find a way to prevail.

MV: How has the context in which your work is shown changed how that work is understood?

NA: I don't really think about making work for a particular kind of audience. I don't feel like I'm here to make Native art specifically for a Native audience, or to make Native art for a white audience to understand. I actually find it complicated to identify too strongly as a Native artist because I'm not here to be only a Native artist. I'm a human being making art, and I want the work to exist on that human level. At the same time, being Tlingit and Diné is so deeply a part of who I am that it inevitably enters the work. I don't think I can separate myself from that, even when I try.

So, wherever the work is shown, people are going to experience it through their own lives and histories. Someone looking at it in New York might take something very different from it than someone looking at it somewhere else in the world or someone who comes from a completely different background. I don't necessarily see that as a problem. That's part of what it means for a work to leave you and enter the world.

MV: Can you point to an exhibition (your own or someone else's) that has shifted how you think about your practice or the role of art today?

NA: My best friend, Joanna Keane Lopez. I've been to several of her openings, and I'm always so blown away by how she continues to evolve her materials and her work. She's an adobe sculptor from Albuquerque, and she makes incredible sculptures onto which she's painted, printed, and projected images. The majority of her life's work is dedicated to making art that educates people about and addresses the effects of the Trinity bomb testing that happened in New Mexico in 1945.

She's gathered soil from places that were affected by the testing and built it into beautiful sculptures, and she's also projected films she's made about the testing onto the sculptures. She does very impressive work and extensive research, and she's always making me want to think outside the box and think about how I can make more work that gets people to think about the world and the history around them.

MV: What kind of exhibition or context would you want your work to inhabit that it hasn't yet?

NA: Painting is only one part of what I do. I'm also a poet, a musician, a performer, and an actor; I'm in the very early stages of making avant-garde films. After making my totems, I've kind of fallen in love with the idea of making my paintings more 3-dimensional and pushing them further out into the world in that way. Being an artist is so emotionally, physically, and financially draining, especially when you weren't raised with any kind of money or foundation to go along with the dream, but I'm never going to stop. My ideas are constantly being generated, so I want to see my art go wherever it can.