

**The Dead Zone: San Joaquin Valley art movement.**

I’m not sure how I became an artist. When I was a teenager, my friends and I who were from multiple racial and mixed Native blood were meant to fail at an early age. Kids who were from mixed racial background, even in the Middle Class neighborhoods were not meant to go to college or succeed in life. Yet, art, music and poetry were like breathing air for us. In order for us (my friends who were of mixed native and mixed racial origin), we had to have an outlet, a sense of purpose to live and some positive way to express ourselves. I can’t remember if we were in any “art movement.” I believe that any artist, music or writer who creates does not think if he or she is a part of a movement. It usually takes years to even figure out if there was such a thing called a “Post Native or Indian” art movement.

Despite the violence in the San Joaquin Valley, I believe we were all a part of something special. During the late 80’s and early 90’s, the San Joaquin was called “the dead zone.” But, even in a desert life can exist and thrive. We created punk bands, performed at music club venues, wrote poetry, and created art for the sake of expressing our mixed racial identity.

**The broad term of Post Indian and the image of the Native American artist are a complex and evolving entity.**

It depends on the location, whether you grew up in the reservation or outside of the reservation and how much exposure to the Native American tradition. My ancestral background is complex with a range of three different tribes: Potawatomi, Osage, and Cherokee. The Caucasian side of my family is French Canadian. I never grew up near a

reservation which my ancestors left the Indian Territory in Oklahoma long ago to survive the Dust Bowl. I essentially did not know this new art term until recently attending Vermont college of Fine Arts.

Like many art historian terms, the term Post Indian or Post Native or Post Indian originated with Gerald McMaster a Canadian Art Historian and Curator as well as a Cree/Blackfoot decent. McMaster searched for a broad perspective of the image of the Native American in Canada. In many of his exhibition as a curator, the artists were also in tune with providing a completely different view from the old perspective of traditional Indian art. Of course, there is nothing wrong with keeping to the traditions, yet if we are to express our identity, we cannot continue to display the typical image viewed by the mass media. It’s a fine line. This is the value of the term Post Indian that comes into the art historian term.

Today, the image of me as a mixed blood Native American has changed. I grew up with the influence of Jimi Hendrix, California Punk Rock, Blues and Jonny Cash. All rebel images of going against the establishment. It is important to reevaluate the image of the Native American instead of being locked into the image address by the federal government. Yet, from a Native American decent, it is important to distinguish from the everyday image of the “Indian” which we see so many times in old picture films like *Dances With Wolves*, in Westerns even earlier films of the 1950’s with John Wayne. For generations, the typical stereotypes of the Native Americans have been portrayed as savages willing to steal, drink whiskey and implement war. A relative stereotype mentioned by one of my colleagues from work stated, “Are you sure your Indian? You’re not

dark enough to be an Indian...at least grow you hair long." Another comment at work is, "So you Indian, does this mean you're going to dance in a circle and have Pow Wow's?" The stereotype for being of Okie decent was similar growing up in the Valley of California.

It is essential now to separate our mixed identity in our artwork from the usual Indian art artifacts seen so many times in the tourist areas. With the Post Native movement Gerald McMaster describes and artists like James Luna, who explained the multiple layers of identity we have now in our artwork. James Luna installation piece displayed him in lying in a museum artifact box in full stereotypical Native regalia which is labeled with all the other Native American artifacts displayed around him. Luna attempts to question the image of Native American art as the usual artifacts of jewelry, fake mannequins and premade Tepees. What Gerald has done was simply create contemporary art exhibitions that shows how today's Native Americans identify the many areas of influences.

### **The image of the mixed blood**

But, how can we uphold the traditions of our Native American heritage and express our own views as mixed bloods? This is a sensitive issue between the federal government and the tribal councils. If the tribal council accepts mixed bloods, then they risk the legitimacy of obtaining rights and funding from the federal government. A close friend from New Mexico stated (which I will have to leave his name anonymous due to the sensitive of this issue in his tribe) said it quite well, *"If we accept all the mixed bloods into our tribes, the population of tribal rolls would increase to almost a quarter of the US population. This is a powerful incentive."* Mixed bloods Natives make up the massive

percentage of the United States population. These individuals are the next generation of Native American but because of federal blood rate laws; these individuals are on the fringe or outside of the tribe. They are considered "wannabes, fake, or outsiders." I believe the only way for the tribes to accept the mixed bloods would be to agree to strict terms. If mixed bloods are willing to be accepted into the Native American community on the terms of accepts no Native American benefits from the federal government (i.e. Native grants, medical benefits, retirement, etc). Mixed bloods will have to accept a respect for the tribal traditions and the personal value of privacy the traditions require. In art, there is many different ways to approach identity in ones artwork without using traditional Native American symbols. Time and time again, I have read very good convincing articles on the rights of mixed blood Native Americans, but it always seems to end with obtaining benefits or Native American college grants which is completely the wrong approach to the issue.

### **Examples of Post Native Art**

The Post Indian or Post Native term describes an overall view of the change of artists in the Native American community just like the change of collective artists in the Post Modern era. As an artist, I don't completely believe in these broad art terms are an attempt to describe a range of events which cannot be completely described. How does one describe an art movement when it is still happening?

During my youth in the San Joaquin Valley, my childhood friends and I were only concerned for the survival of our creativity. There was no thought of an *art movement* or an attempt become famous or become a part of the Post Indian movement. At the time, creativity was a

## Post Indian Art Movement: "Today's Mixed Native American Identity and expression"

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source of expression necessary to simply say "we are alive" or to "seize the day" (Carpe Diem). Another reason for such creativity in the region was not because we were of Indian origin. The social landscape of the region was and still is made up of industrial plants, factories and oil rigs. In the Stockton/Lodi community, the area had a reputation for creating nothing in the arts. Hence, the term we coined as "The dead zone." Yet, as I traveled out of the area and when have gotten older, I have found there were many more artists who eventually survived the area and found their niche in the art world.

For example, it was the same with the exploration of gender issues during the Aides crisis of the 1980's. The artists, musicians and writers during the 1980's addressed the issue

and the image of the LGBT community. Yet, during this time, it was also other concerns and movements going on which art historians are trying to make sense. This is the same with the Post Indian art movement. There is not a specific date when this "art movement" occurred. The art historians/curators like Gerald McMaster tried to harness what was going on at the time inside and outside the Native communities. Since the Native communities have been diminishing and appropriating themselves into suburban society, we are now more than ever dispersed throughout the US. To survive the diminishing of a vibrant multi-cultural identity, we must come to a consensus of what our tribes elders can give us now.

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