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ALWAYS BECOMING

NORA NARANJO-MORSE, GAIL JOICE, AND KELLY McHUGH

ABSTRACT

The evolution and stewardship of *Always Becoming*, created by artist Nora Naranjo-Morse (Santa Clara Pueblo) for the National Museum of the American Indian, is seemingly contrary to the role and purpose of a conservator to preserve and protect works of art. This unique project, however, defines and illustrates the benefits of relationships that go beyond the convention. It puts the role of the conservator in a larger team, whose purpose is well articulated and redefines the concept of care. Care takes on a larger purpose, underscoring the important principle for Native people of returning to the earth. This talk will discuss the dynamics of the ongoing care of these sculptures as they continue to bring people together, engaging the artist, collections managers, horticulturalists, conservators, and the public.

1. INTRODUCTION

Known collectively as *Always Becoming*, the hand-built sculptures emerged from the grounds of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in 2007. Artist Nora Naranjo-Morse (Santa Clara Pueblo) made history when she erected these five distinct shapes, creating the first outdoor sculpture by a Native American woman in Washington, D.C. It is the artist's intent for *Always Becoming* to purposefully erode over time, reflecting the message of growth, transformation, and Native peoples' relationship with the land, in which it is common practice to leave clay utilitarian or ceremonial pots outside to melt back into the ground. This way of responding to cultural objects was one of the inspirations for *Always Becoming*.

Always Becoming is an ephemeral, cultural object that has opened discussions concerning the way institutions view conservation. *Always Becoming* embraces a more cultural knowledge- and practice-based philosophy, embodying NMAI's core mandate of inclusion. Naranjo-Morse worked side-by-side with family, friends, and volunteers from the NMAI and the public to build the pieces. This all-encompassing approach in the fabrication of the sculptures was not limited to their creation. Adherence to the original concept of purposeful erosion continues; however, the artist acts as steward of the sculptures, visiting them once a year to care for them.

Naranjo-Morse has a strong relationship with the staff of NMAI, who understand and support the nature of the work. The collections manager monitors the pieces on a day-to-day basis, reporting social interactions from the public with the sculptures and evolutions in their appearance to the artist throughout the year. The artist works with an NMAI horticulturist to allow the sculptures to be protected by their environment, as well as interact with it. NMAI conservation staff was involved in the creation process and works with the artist to care for the sculpture under her direction. All of this evolution and work happens under the watchful eye of the public.

This written version of the presentation given at the 2012 AIC meeting in Albuquerque includes the three perspectives of the presenters: the artist, the collections manager, and the conservator. Unlike most OSG Postprint submissions, this paper is written as it was presented and includes the video clips that were shown during the talk. The authors felt it was important to retain the integrity of each participant's version of their experience in this shared initiative.

2. PERSPECTIVES

2.1 ARTIST: NORA NARANJO-MORSE

It has been five years since the making of *Always Becoming*, and in those five years the issue of human stewardship is even more important as weather and animal life become active participants in the continuous creation of these sculptures. Squirrels, birds, bees and insects have an ongoing interaction with the pieces and have offered unique scenarios that we as caretakers of these pieces have participated in. Mason bees burrowing into the adobe of the sculptures have altered the surfaces in a unique and quietly beautiful way, reminding us that the pieces are alive and are responding to the continuous interaction from their environment. Because of NMAI's continued support of and investment in this project, visitors to the museum are offered a unique opportunity for a variety of cultural and environmental exchanges (fig. 1).

2.2 COLLECTIONS MANAGER: GAIL JOICE

I have had the pleasure of working with Nora Naranjo-Morse and *Always Becoming* for five years as collections manager at the National Museum of the American Indian. We have monitored the changes of the sculptures together on site and over long distances, as the adobes interact with the elements and other sources of deterioration.

Not all of the interactions have come from the natural world, however, as illustrated by a scene in Naranjo-Morse's documentary on *Always Becoming* (fig. 2). The scene describes an interaction with the one of the sculptures that occurred during President Obama's first inauguration, which took place in extremely frigid weather conditions. A homeless man crawled into *Taa*, the tipi-like sculpture, and built a fire. When a NMAI security officer confronted the gentleman, he replied, "Hey man, I am just trying to get warm." This occurrence can be



Fig. 1. Video still from Episode Four, "Community," of the ten-part documentary on *Always Becoming*. Courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. <http://youtu.be/LpzexSCw2PY>



Fig. 2. Video still from clip of the ten-part documentary on *Always Becoming*. Courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. <http://youtu.be/nurij0nxpE4>

considered a fairly major human interaction with one of the sculptures. The sculpture was not damaged by the small fire constructed from sticks and an Obama brochure. It is my relationship with Nora and her concept for the piece that taught me to see this incident as a very human reaction to the form she created, as a source of welcoming shelter, rather than an intentional act of vandalism.

Our relationship was built during the summer of 2007 when I participated in the community creation of the works of art I would eventually help care for, in collaboration with our conservators. This time of collaboration was a catalyst for change in my baseline thought for object care. As a collections manager and registrar, I aspire to being able to write on every condition report, “No Change”. To Nora, this would be a disappointment.

Normally we have an “Artist Intent” form at the NMAI that documents the living artist’s intent for the future care of their work. This is based on an assumption of maintaining stasis for the object. As we sat down to interview Nora about her wishes, we realized that we were creating a living document that would follow “Nature, Nurture, and Nora”, with her evolving concept of the artwork. Monitoring major weather events and documenting the results of heavy summer thunderstorms or exceptional snowfalls are part of my ongoing communications and photo log with Nora (fig. 3).

Nora’s artist instructions included her desire that any pieces that wash out of the adobe or fall to the ground be left alone, to go back to the earth, as is Pueblo custom. This was to include any Pueblo pottery shards or memory stones that were embedded in the adobe. She did not want me to pick up these pieces and place them in “frag bags” and number them.

Nora wrote an exception to maintain the integrity of the of moon-phase globes of fired ceramic that are inserted into the side of Moon woman, as long as the woman’s adobe shape



Fig. 3. Nora Naranjo-Morse, *Always Becoming* (adobe, wood, bamboo, rawhide, ceramic and stone), National Museum of the American Indian, 265840.000. Image of sculpture family in the snow. (Courtesy of G. Joice)

remained intact (fig. 4). If one moon were to fall off, she asked me to save the piece so that she could re-fire that particular moon. We have replaced only one moon in the first five years. Nora looks at what nature has added to her work and follows the lead, to assist with changes in the evolution of the form.

We knew that she wanted the plant environment to be an intrinsic part of the piece. Our landscape around the museum is designed with native plants of the Potomac region. My job included working with our Smithsonian Horticulture staff to encourage native clematis and yam vines to grow on the bamboo trellis of the sculptures. In order to preserve the landscape from too much visitor appreciation of the sculptures up-close, we eventually consulted with Nora on an acceptable style of raw rope and locust pole fencing to protect the plants from trampling.

Nora's document of care was very specific about letting insects and birds inhabit the pieces. She did not want any intervention for insects and certainly no use of pesticides. When mason bees began to perforate the mother figure of *Gaia* in the second summer, I did feel I needed to call Nora for consultation. Her immediate response was basically, "cool", because the same type of mason bees has been drilling into the adobe of Santa Clara Pueblo buildings for centuries.

Nora welcomed the animal world's response to the adobe family, and this affection was shared by the museum staff. We had a red tailed hawk perch on top of the father figure *Taa*, which was well documented by staff photos. A robin nested atop the viga pole inside of *Taa* this spring, laying a perfect blue egg just as we finished the latest conservation workshop with Nora in April 2012 (fig. 5 a,b).



Fig. 4. *Moon Woman* (Courtesy of G. Joice)

Nora's annual return, for at least the first ten years of the life of *Always Becoming*, is a key component that Nora proposed in her original sculpture concept for the museum contest. The stewardship is closely shared and ongoing.

Over the last five years it has been a deep pleasure to share work in the most direct hands-on process with Nora and with five classes of National Museum of the American Indian Conservation Fellows and Interns. Each team has clearly come to appreciate Nora's vision for a sculpture family that will always be changing.

2.3 CONSERVATOR: KELLY MCHUGH

The artist's intentions of inclusiveness, family, community, interaction, and engagement embodied in the adobe sculptures at the time of their creation carry through in their stewardship



Fig. 5a. Robin's nest atop the viga in *Taa*
(Courtesy of K. McHugh)



Fig. 5b. Robin's egg inside the nest (Courtesy of K. McHugh)

and care. As conservators whose mission it is to preserve and protect works of art, working on a group of sculptures that are meant to act as hosts to the animal world, interact with the plant world, and ultimately return to the earth encourages us to confront our notions of change. This generates an entirely different view on transformation and permanence than we typically have, given our job is to preserve and to protect. In her intent, the artist has freed us from our obligation to “make something last forever.” Participating in the artistic process is not common practice for conservators. We interview artists and advise on material choices at times, but we are not typically part of preservation through creation and deterioration. With *Always Becoming*, we are involved in the artistic process and we are challenged to expand our comfort level with change and alteration (figs. 6–9).

My attendance at the “TechFocus II: Caring for Film and Slide Art” conference in April 2012 at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden illuminated connections between this project and the genre of time-based media. Words used to describe the care of these media-generated artworks by Chief Conservator of the Hirshhorn, Susan Lake, in her introductory presentation can also be used to describe *Always Becoming*. The following is paraphrased from her talk : “Complexity and vulnerability are factors in these works. The temporal and ephemeral nature of these works demands an interdisciplinary approach, utilizing multiple areas of expertise. As conservators we need to have a thoughtful discussion about acceptable alteration



Fig. 6. The artist discusses the sculpture's needs in an April 2012 workshop (Courtesy of K. McHugh).



Fig. 7. Mellon fellow Peter McElhinney chips away adobe plaster under the direction of the artist (Courtesy of G. Joice).



Fig. 8. Collections manager Gail Joice recycles the adobe plaster removed from the sculpture (Courtesy of K. McHugh).



Fig. 9. Artist, Nora Naranjo-Morse replasters part of the sculpture (Courtesy of G. Joice)

and to have tolerance for ambiguity that is inherent in these works of art.” In working on the adobe sculptures that comprise *Always Becoming*, we too are working on time-based media, but instead of discontinued 16mm film, these pieces were made out of clay and straw, materials that have been time-based media for thousands of years (figs. 10 a,b).

How we participate in an object’s change is dependent on the type of collection we work with, the mission of the institution we work in and our role in fulfilling that mission. Through *Always Becoming*, Nora gives us the freedom to experience change in a way that makes us examine the role it plays in our work as conservators. She inspires us to always become something, be it a better conservator, person, or citizen. We return to the conservation lab with a renewed perspective and understanding that we, the world, and yes, conservation, are always changing (fig. 11).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge Nora Naranjo-Morse for her willingness to share this amazing project with us. We are very grateful to everyone who has participated in the creation and care



Fig. 10a. The artist removes a section of *Taa* (Courtesy of K. McHugh)



Fig. 10b. Conservator Kelly McHugh uses a Japanese saw to remove a piece of bamboo (Courtesy of G. Joice).



Fig. 11. Preservation of cultural ideas through deterioration (Courtesy of K. McHugh)

of the *Always Becoming* sculptures over the last five years. Special thanks go to Dan Davis of the NMAI Media Department, Glenn Burlack from the NMAI Community Services Department and Robert Patterson of the NMAI Exhibits Fabrication Department. We also would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

FURTHER READING/VIEWING

Ten podcasts on the *Always Becoming* Sculpture Project are available on YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLEAF79944F6B13C8D>

A video of the 2013 conservation workshop with the artists can be seen on YouTube at the following link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=liQ1TgQ6DLQ

Naranjo-Morse, N. 1992. *Mud Woman*. Tuscon, Arizona: University of Arizona Press.

NORA NARANJO-MORSE is a member of the Tewa tribe from Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico. Nora Naranjo-Morse earned a BA from the College of Santa Fe. She is the daughter of the potter Rose Naranjo and grew up surrounded by women relatives and siblings, all of whom worked with clay. Her own sculptures and films are in collections at the Smithsonian Institution, the Heard Museum, the Albuquerque Museum, and the National Museum of the American Indian. Naranjo-Morse is the author of the poetry collection *Mud Woman: Poems from the Clay* (1992), which combines poems with photographs of her clay figures.

GAIL JOICE is the collections manager at the National Museum of the American Indian's Museum on the National Mall in Washington D.C., where she has worked since 2003. Prior to working at NMAI, she was the head of museum services and registrar at the Seattle Art Museum where she was the administrator for contract conservation. She currently serves on the Smithsonian Collections Advisory Committee. In 2010 Gail traveled to Port-au-Prince, Haiti to help set up the object registration and storage system for the Smithsonian Haiti Cultural Recovery Center for conservation of earthquake damaged art.

KELLY McHUGH is an objects conservator at the National Museum of the American Indian. She received an MA in Art History/Certificate in Conservation (2000) from New York University, Institute of Fine Arts; BA in Art History/Peace and Global Policy Studies (1990), New York University. Areas of interest: collaborative work with north, central, South American Native communities, contemporary art, materials and technology of ethnographic objects. National Museum of the American Indian, Cultural Resources Center – Conservation, 4220 Silver Hill Road, Suitland, MD 20746. E-mail: McHughK@si.edu

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