

The “Neo Native: Toward New Mythologies” show at the Sam & Alfreda Maloof Foundation: An interview with curator and contributing artist Tony Abeyta

By Katie Nartonis (Art + Design Editor, SoCal Magazine)



Ancestry Image by Steven Paul Judd (Kiowa/Choctaw) (Photo courtesy of Steven Paul Judd)

"We are exploring ways that traditional forms and practices, iconography and ancestral mythologies influence the expression of contemporary Native artists' urbanity, modernity, technology and social priorities." Tony Abeyta

Neo Native: Toward New Mythologies is a current show of over forty contemporary Native American artworks, now on view at the historic Sam and Alfreda Maloof Foundation for Arts and Crafts in Rancho Cucamonga (www.malooffoundation.org).



NeoNative: Toward New Mythologies title wall (photo credit: Tom and Tony Bostick, courtesy of the Sam and Alfreda Maloof Foundation)

This dynamic show runs thru January 7, 2018 (gallery is open Thursdays and Saturdays, 1-4pm) and features the work of eleven North American tribal artists - representing a variety of indigenous tribes. Curated by the New Mexican (Navajo/Dine) painter, Tony Abeyta the show includes works of painting, glass, ceramics, photography, video and mixed media.



Last Indian Market by Cara Romero (Chemehuevi) (photo: Cara Romero)



NeoNative: Toward New Mythologies Curator, Artist Tony Abeyta (photo courtesy of the artist)

I think many of the artists that I curated in the show are all engaged in the same conversation. 'Where did we come from and where are we taking all of this? How can we create change?' -Tony Abeyta

NeoNative explores the ways in which indigenous artists are thinking about their place in modern culture and the continuing challenge of preserving their traditions in the face of modernity. This theme seems particularly important in the current political climate, celebrating the views of all Americans, and honoring our indigenous populations.



Racial Profiling by Craig George (Navajo) (photo: James Hart)

Well-known makers such as contemporary glass artist Preston Singletary (Tlingit) who recreates traditional forms in contemporary glass share the space with up-and-coming artists such as Steven Paul Judd (Kiowa/Choctaw) whose mixed media works include altered early photographs of native peoples incongruously matched with modern “mythical creatures” such as the ubiquitous yellow Minions, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and a particularly powerful image of Star Wars TIE fighters buzzing over Plains Indian Teepees.



Wild Man of the Woods by Preston Singletary (photo: Preston Singletary Inc)



Ancestry Image 02 by Steven Paul Judd (Kiowa/Choctaw) (photo courtesy of Steven Paul Judd)



After the Fall by Cannupa Hanska Luger (Arikara/Hidatsa/Mandan/Lakota)(Photo James Hart)



Gunfire Muted Light 03 by **Monte Little (Navajo/Dine)** (photo: Tom and Tony Bostick, courtesy of the Sam and Alfred Maloof Foundation)



The Sam and Alfreda Maloof Foundation in Rancho Cucamonga (photo: The Sam and Alfreda Maloof Foundation)

This exhibit is just the latest in a long running series of art and design shows at the Maloof Foundation's Jacobs Education Gallery Center.

“Exhibitions are an important part of the Maloof’s ongoing education mission,” notes executive director Jim Rawitsch. “Last year’s Maloof Centennial exhibitions gave us a way to bridge Sam’s legacy to the future, and *Neo Native* adds to that forward journey, celebrating Sam’s passion for Native American art in surprising and contemporary ways and opens eyes, I think, about the range of what contemporary Native art can be.”

Tony Abeyta, the curator of **NeoNative**, was a close friend of Sam Maloof and considered him a father figure. Abeyta and Maloof had discussed the idea of a contemporary Native show years previously, but it took some time for this show to materialize. Maloof passed in 2009, before the show had a chance to take shape. In the Maloof Foundation newsletter Abeyta notes:

“In so many ways this exhibition grew organically from our dialogue, carrying forward Sam’s progressive interest in indigenous art and artists.”



Sam Maloof and Tony Abeyta in Maloof's studio (photo credit: David Wade, courtesy of Tony Abeyta)

SoCal Magazine was fortunate to speak at length with Mr. Abeyta about the unique origins of the **Neo Native** show as well as his special relationship with his mentor and friend, the late California legend, Sam Maloof (1916-2009).

Katie Nartonis: The “Neo Native: Toward New Mythologies” show that you put together is top level - it’s so good.

Tony Abeyta: *I know, I know (enthusiastically) I’m super proud of that, and I got to pick the work that went in!*

A lot of the artists are friends, that community of artists is a circle of super progressive Native Americans that are engaged in full-time art careers. They are addressing modernity and also looking at the traditional connections between indigenous people. It is also about what is the progressive role of art and where are we going next. It’s one of the eternal questions.

I think many of the artists that I curated in the show are all engaged in the same conversation. ‘Where did we come from and where are we taking all of this? How can we create change?’ I think that was sort of the criteria for any of these artists. There were 10 artists that didn’t make the cut on the show - we just didn’t have the space!

At some point I’d like to see this as a larger exhibition. You know, to merge it into a more comprehensive show, but we had to consider the economics. There are some really wonderful people who are not included in the show that I felt should have been.

KN: The show that you put together feels very rich, it doesn't feel like you had to cut any corners.

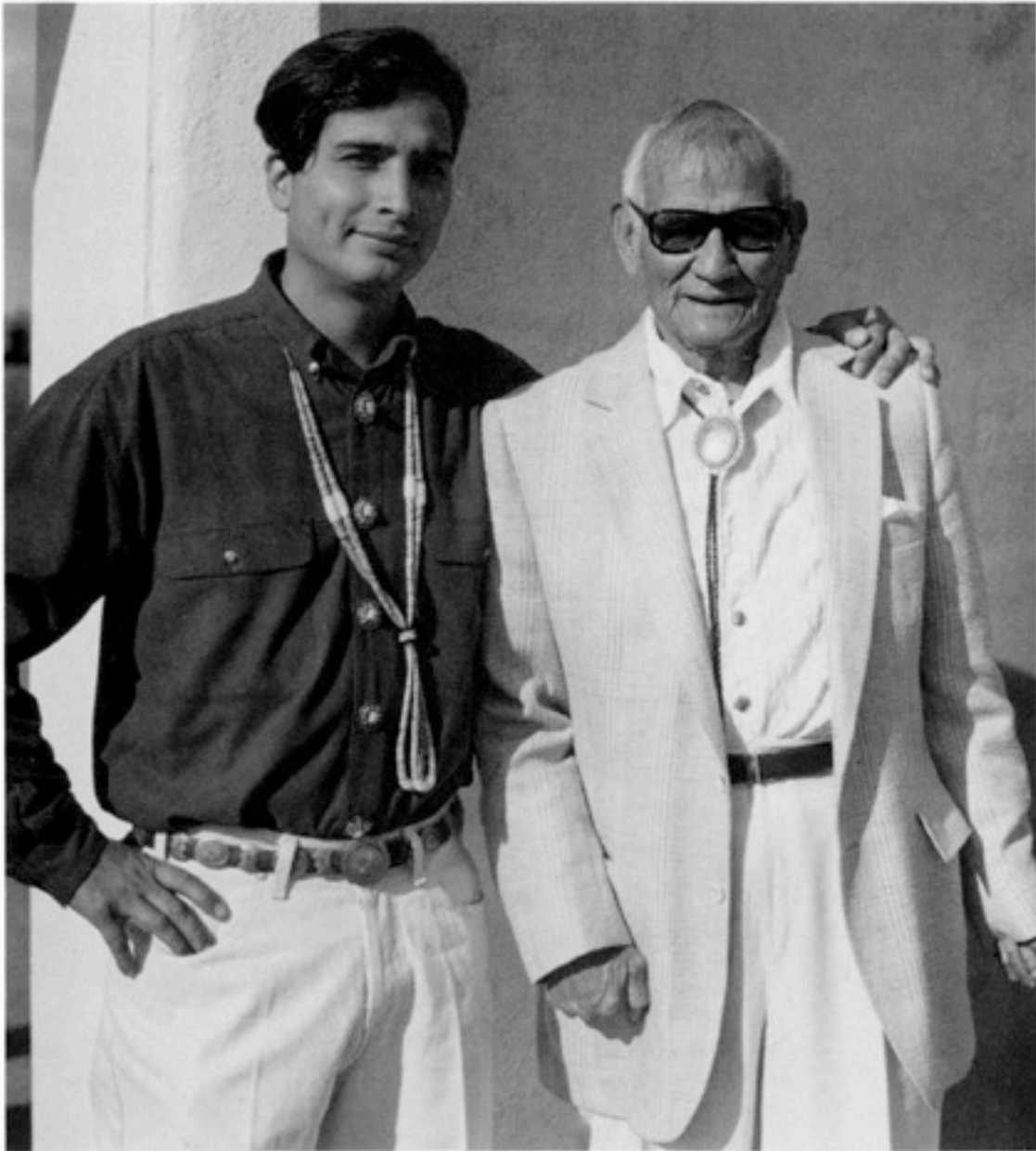
TA: We got a nice grant from one of the local Indian tribes, the San Miguel tribe, and that was really important. And the Maloof Foundation was supportive with money and the really super gallery space. I initially took a look at the space and determined we were at 11 artists. It took a while, just to talk to the artists and get an idea of what they were currently working on, as well as the ideas that they could create and engage in. I also wanted to look at how they would relate to the theme.



Curator Tony Abeyta and ceramicist Diego Romero (Cochiti Pueblo) at the NeoNative Show (Diego's ceramic work in foreground) Photo courtesy of Tom and Tony Bostick, Courtesy of the Sam and Alfreda Maloof Foundation)

KN: Tell me about your relationship with Sam Maloof and the origins of the show?

TA: I met Sam right after my father Narciso Abeyta (Painter and silversmith 1918-1998) had died. Sam had collected some paintings of my fathers, but I had never heard of Sam Maloof. Regionally, I had barely heard of Nakashima! (laughs)



Tony and Narciso Abeyta. Taos, 1993. Photograph by Thomas Valerio

And so, I was working on a show at LACMA West of my own paintings and I just called him and I said "Sam, my name is Tony and my Dad was Narciso Abeyta." Sam remembered me from when I

was a little kid, and he immediately invited me to visit him at his studio and home in Southern California.



The Sam Maloof home and studio (photo courtesy of the Sam and Alfreda Maloof Foundation)

TA: The next week I just showed up, and Sam and I just hit it off. We talked a lot about art, and furniture and pottery and Native American Art. He was very paternal from the very beginning - In giving me advice and spiritual insight, and you know, artistic direction. So he came into my life when I probably needed somebody like that. I'd lost my Mom and my Father, and meeting Sam was just a blessing.

Sam and I would go to the Palm Springs Modernism Show and he would show me stuff and introduce me to everybody. I learned a lot from him by looking and watching him work, seeing how he handled people and his relationship with artists. He always gifted people with an immense amount of care, attention. He was clear about craftsmanship, and loving what you did and knowing how to talk about it. The relationship was incredibly "father/son" I just kinda came into his life at a good time.

When they moved the house and studio and built the gallery, Sam told me he wanted to curate a show of Native American Art. At that time, I had started getting really busy and Sam passed away before we had the chance to do it together. We left that idea hanging, but it was always on the table and something I always wanted to do. When the (Maloof) Foundation came to me and said, 'we'd like to pick up that ball' I just had it on the tip of my tongue, and I knew who I want to be in the show. So, I just said - let's just do it!

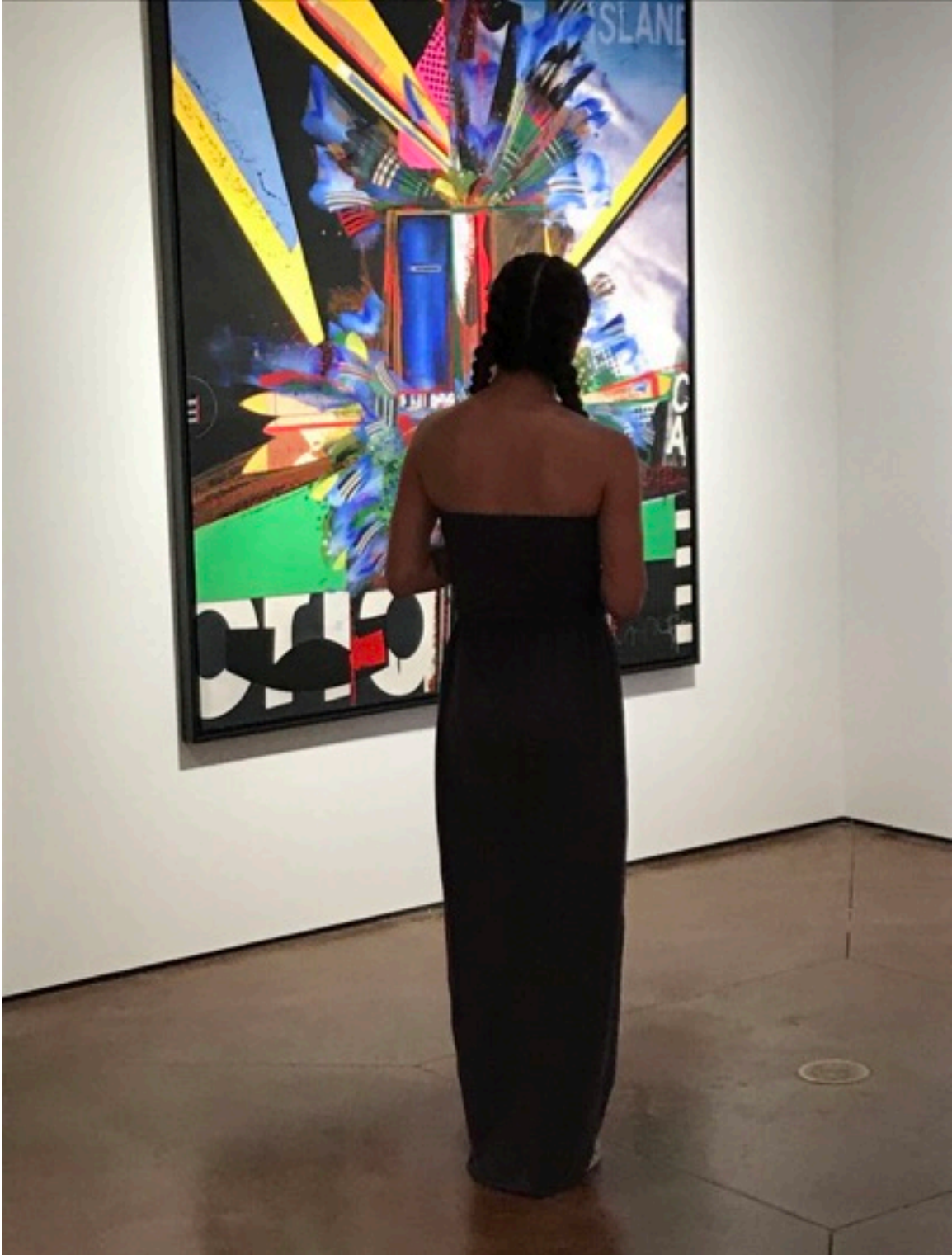
*A lot of these artists (included in **NeoNative**) are really moving and shaking at the top of their game. Because of that, they are opening other shows in other cities, they are lecturing, and so it was really tough to get the paintings from all over. The bulk of the work we got from the artists directly and it took us a good year to get it all shipped and to prepare the catalogue. I'm very proud of it.*

KN: It's a beautiful show catalog, and I'm so grateful I could be there for the show opening. What a great crowd! It was good to see so many of the artists there in person.

TA: Yeah, a lot of them were there, and they had a super time. It's all really a part of the tradition that Sam spent so much of his life doing which was cultivating creative people and inspiring them. So really, it's what being an artist is authentically about. It's about creating a community of like-minded creative people merged to show one another what they are capable of. You know, human experience is whatever we make from our culture.

KN: Thanks so much Tony, for your time.

TA: It was perfect timing, I needed a break from painting!



NeoNative: Towards New Mythologies painting by Tony Abeyta (Navajo) – (photo courtesy of Tom and Toni Bostick, Courtesy of the Sam and Alfreda Maloof Foundation)

The exhibition, made possible with support from the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians and others, seeks to share the vision of artists whose work is informed by traditions within tribal cultures, but whose themes express a newfound contemporary narrative.

Show Information:

The Sam and Alfreda Maloof Foundation

Jacobs Education Gallery Center

5131 Carnelian Street, Rancho Cucamonga, CA 91701

All exhibits FREE to the public and is open on Thurs and Sat, 12-4 pm, or with custom tour.

Featured artists (and tribal affiliations) include:

Christi Belcourt (Metis)

Gerald Clarke, Jr. (Cahuilla)

Craig George (Navajo - Diné)

Steven Paul Judd (Kiowa/Choctaw)

Monty Little (Diné)

Cannupa Hanska Luger (Arikara/Hidatsa/Mandan/Lakota)

Kent Monkman (Cree),

Cara Romero (Chemehuevi)

Diego Romero (Cochiti Pueblo)

Preston Singletary (Tlingit).

Katie Nartonis, Art & Design Editor for SoCal Magazine, is a writer, curator, documentary filmmaker and design specialist whose focus is the historical West Coast art and design scene.



Last Indian Market by Cara Romero (Chemehuevi) (photo: Cara Romero)