

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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Weaving Back To Roots



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Sara Siestrem has several jobs, no cell phone and no car, allowing her to focus intently on what she cares about most. “I was taught I could do whatever I wanted to do, so I have some big ideas,” she said.

The 38-year-old is a multimedia artist and educator. She teaches studio arts at Portland State University, tribal museum studies at Northwest Indian College in Washington and pre-college painting at Pacific Northwest College of Art. She also serves as a consultant for art institutions in contemporary indigenous fine art, education, and theory and professional arts practices.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

A Hanis Coos tribal member from the Confederated Tribes of Coos Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians, Siestream grew up in the Lower Umpqua River Valley and in Portland. Every member of her family practiced the arts in the home and professionally, and Siestream wanted to follow the family path.



It seemed only natural that Siestream would enroll in art school at Portland State University. “It was dreamy,” she said. “I was impressed with my teachers’ brains and that they were there to give us their knowledge. I thought it was the coolest place in the world.”

The allure of New York City for young artists is powerful. For Siestream, grad school at Pratt Art Institute in Brooklyn was a cultural and conceptual stepping stone. “I had thought the art scene in Portland was podunk, and I

CRISTIN TIERNEY

couldn't wait to get into the 'art world,'" she said. "I got there and saw that they had a huge crush on us. I realized I had gold back home."



She returned to Oregon in 2008 to be close to her family, the land to which she is culturally connected and the arts community she knew. "I love New York, but I was really homesick for quiet and space," said Siestrem. "I'm almost six feet tall—I need a lot of room to relax. Everything is compact and stressful there."

In 2011, she began studying traditional weaving. Historically, in her culture, young people were taught how to weave, using the skill throughout their lives. At some point, though, the skill was lost. "During the 1850s, my tribe experienced tremendous cultural disruption through contact with the U.S.

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Government. The weaving practice was severely impacted at that time,” she said.



While she practices most forms of her art in solitude, learning to weave in a group setting has been a collaborative experience for Siestreem. “Meaningful art does not happen in a vacuum,” she said. “What you make becomes pretty boring for those outside yourself if there is no external influence or intention.”

She eventually made it her goal to help reestablish the skill in her tribal community. This was no minor commitment, she explained. Just the process of gathering and seasoning the materials takes a year and a single basket often takes more than sixty hours to weave. She studies and weaves during weekly

CRISTIN TIERNEY

classes at a Grand Ronde center in Portland with teachers Greg Archuleta (Grand Ronde) and Greg Robinson (Chinook).

In addition to honing her weaving practice, Siestream is creating educational tools and resources around the practice for her tribe. She is increasing accessibility by building a cache of weaving materials, documenting existing collections of notable baskets housed in museums around the region and establishing maps of historic gathering territories for her tribal members. She was recently awarded a master artist initiative grant from the Evergreen State College Longhouse Education and Cultural Center to support this project.



“In this work, there are challenges regarding the documentation of indigenous art,” she said. “There’s a misconception that if an object is functional, then it is

CRISTIN TIERNEY

not fine art. This was a way to marginalize our artwork institutionally. Often there is no record of the artist's name or even the tribe that the objects are connected to. This is a huge problem we are all working to fix.”

The body of her work created with Archuleta and Robinson will be featured in the inaugural exhibit of the Native American Contemporary Art Gallery at the Portland Art Museum. This show will open in September and run through December. Her weaving project will also be included in the State of Oregon Craft exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Craft where she will also be featured in a film component of the exhibition.



Deana Dartt, the Portland Art Museum curator of Native American art, has worked closely with Siestrem and is excited to share the exhibit. “It’s so beautiful that she’s willing to take this on,” she said. “If she didn’t, another generation of potential artists would go without this knowledge.” While

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Siestreem is still learning, Dartt sees an artist who is well on her way to becoming a master weaver.

“In twenty years, I want everyone to say, ‘of course we weave,’” Siestreem said. It’s a long road, and she admits the weight of the cultural responsibility can be daunting. Still, she’s confident the effects of the work will last beyond her time. “I’d like the mainstream to understand that we were always here, we are still here, and we’re all around you.”