

ARTS & CULTURE

A Chickasaw Painter's Layers of Heritage

Native American history
meets Japanese
techniques in the soul-
shaking work of Brenda
Kingery

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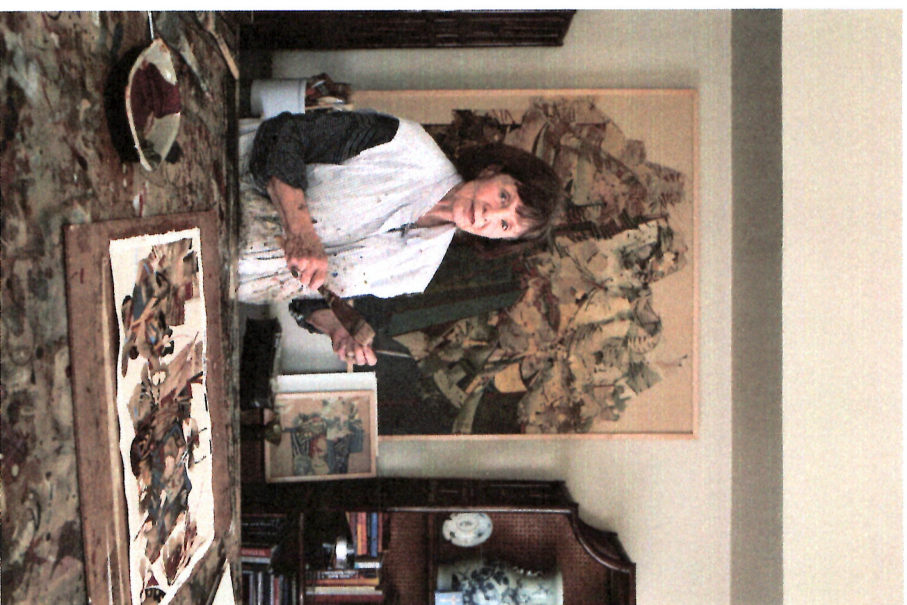


PHOTO: WHITNEY AROSTEGUI

Brenda Kingery in her San Antonio home studio,
with a painting in progress.

In a small painting room in central San Antonio, Brenda Kingery dances with her heritage. Like fallen feathers, photographs of Indian powwows lie scattered around the studio. Sunlight sifts through the louvered window shutters, brightening a table covered with Japanese brushes and acrylic paints. Here in this peaceful place, the eighty-three-year-old Chickasaw painter communes with her Native American identity, telling the stories of her ancestry and artistry through ribbons of color and washes of ink.

While growing up in Oklahoma City, Kingery loved art, and she recalls drawing on the walls of her bedroom late into the night. That creative energy eventually led to a scholarship at the University of Oklahoma, where she studied fine arts and art history. By graduation, the young artist had married her husband, Tom, and they had one child and another on the way.

Tom's job as a fighter pilot in the U.S. Air Force meant the Kingery family traveled frequently after that. Some of Brenda's fondest memories formed in Okinawa, Japan, where they were stationed on two separate occasions. In the late 1960s, the couple purchased a house in Kakazu, a famed World War II battleground. Over time, she immersed herself in the local language and culture with the help of Nobuko Shimabukuru, her maid and close friend.

Kingery's relationship with Shimabukuru's family led her to discover the capital city of Naha's Tsuboya district, known for its centuries-old ceramic traditions. Fascinated by what she'd seen, she decided to study ceramics, along with sumi-e, or Japanese ink painting, and eventually wrote her master's thesis on the origins and influences of Ryukyuan folk art. After a sojourn in Texas, she returned to Okinawa around 1979 to teach drawing, painting, and Okinawan cultural history at the University of Maryland's Asian division. Along the way, she became increasingly interested in how Okinawans held onto their culture, despite the various occupations and conflicts they'd endured.



PHOTO: WHITNEY AROSTEGUI

Fude brushes from Okinawa.

In the early 1990s, Kingery attended one of the first Red Earth powwows in Oklahoma City, where tribes from across the country gather in celebration and competition for prize money. The sound of bells lured her in as she stepped from the car. “It was glorious,” she remembers. “To see the warriors in their regalia, and all the dances, textiles, and sounds in one place, will tear you in pieces.”

Though Kingery was already painting at the time, visiting the powwow marked a turning point. She began seeing parallels between the Okinawans and her own Native American ancestors. “It dawned on me that we were occupied, and how did we keep our cultures?” she says. “I had all this background I realized I could use.” Awakened to her heritage, she started interpreting her Indian identity through a contemporary lens.

Today, the artist’s aesthetic is a distinctive blend of Japanese and Native American influences. “Her work has a dreamlike quality to it,” says Michael Duchemin, the president and CEO of the [Briscoe Western Art Museum](#) in

San Antonio. “Movement is a major feature, whether seen in *11 Blue Blessings 2022*, with its dynamic convergence of energy, or the more calm and serene *Winds and Smoke 2022*.” This spring, the museum will showcase some of her original works, including the two aforementioned paintings, alongside pieces from eighty other leading Western artists as a part of its prestigious, invitation-only *Night of Artists* event and art sale.

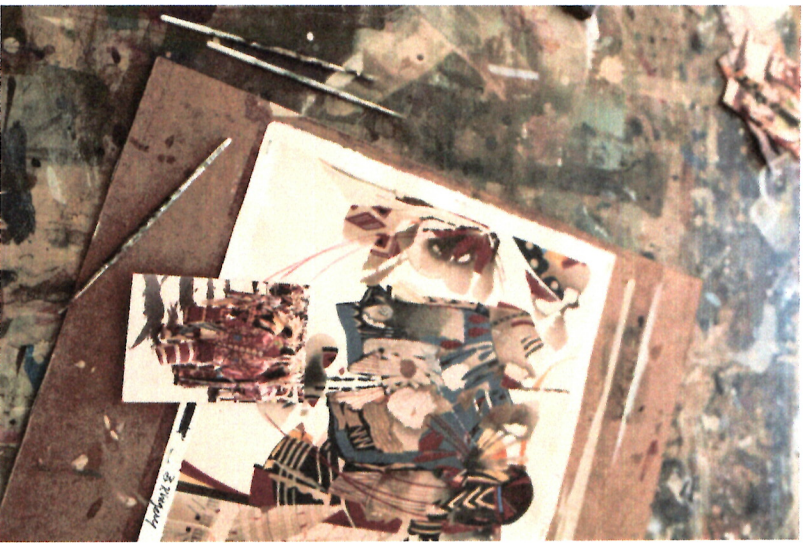


PHOTO: WHITNEY AROSTEGUI

This photo of a powwow at the Red Earth festival in Oklahoma inspired the piece.

Kingery’s paintings, including this new work for the Briscoe, are often inspired by photographs she’s taken at powwows. The images inform a process that the artist likens to solving a complicated puzzle. After deciding on the composition, she begins by using a *fude* brush to wash her canvas with ink, a technique she learned in Okinawa while studying Japanese ink painting. “I have no preconceived idea of where it’s going to go,” she says of the fluid. “I let the shape talk to me.” Then, she takes fragments of the figures and regalia in the photographs and paints the story abstractly, from

left to right, like a scroll. Between the ink washes, opaque forms, and rigid ribbons of color, any one canvas features twenty-five to thirty layers.

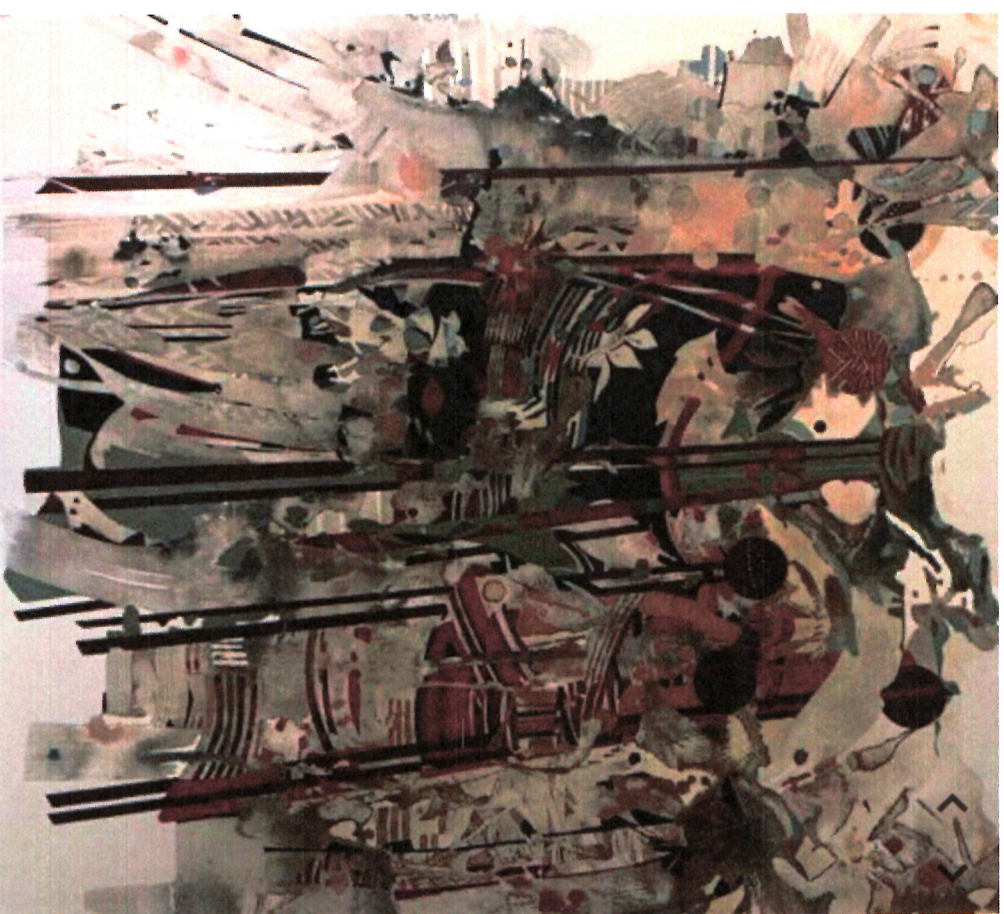
Despite being Chickasaw by blood and honoring the tribe in her work, Kingery also creates homages to other tribes and the greater Native American narrative, each work striking a balance between elements of chaos and control. Stories and symbols seem to whisper from the layered colors, expressive brushwork, and geometric details. Like a mirage, circular shapes suggest the faces of dancing warriors, while woven textiles emerge from a labyrinth of fine lines.

In 2007, President George W. Bush appointed Kingery to be a trustee of the Institute of American Indian Arts. Currently, students from more than ninety tribes attend the school in Santa Fe, all of whom she considers members of her family. Many of the young people she works with feel residual anger, resentment, and frustration over the historical treatment of Native Americans—emotions Kingery chooses to interpret through acrylic and ink.

“All of this is story for me,” she says, pointing to the brushstrokes. “My work is very peaceful, but it’s full of energy and message. Indians tell stories, and I have a lot to tell.”

Contemporary artist inspired by visit to ancestral Homeland

Special to The Ada News
Mar 29, 2023



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"Copper Faces" acrylic on canvas by Brenda Kingery.



Although contemporary artist Brenda Kingery will not be physically present during the 10th annual Artesian Arts Festival, her art and spirit will.

The Chickasaw artist from San Antonio is sending her work, which has been featured across the globe, with fellow Chickasaw artist Chance Brown, who will share a booth with Kingery's art.

"I am so grateful to be coming back and sharing my art, in one way or another. Personally, I won't be there. But I will be there. Chance will represent me well," Kingery said.

She is the primary caregiver for a family member and making the 400-mile trip is not possible. She will miss the camaraderie with other First American artists, she said.

Kingery developed a strong bond with several Chickasaw artists during the recent Visual Voices exhibition.

Visual Voices features 15 Chickasaw artists in an exhibition described as unique, intrinsically Southeast in design and distinctive among today's contemporary tribal artists.

One of the final exhibits before the pandemic was in the Chickasaw Homeland, near Tupelo, Mississippi, with several artists in attendance.

The Homeland tour affected all the artists Kingery said.

"We stood on a mound together, and we talked about ancestors and early history. Just being in the (historical) spots is more than you can imagine. I can't wait to go back again," she said.

"As artists, we wanted to go back, and we planned to go back together and do an exhibition of work about our reaction to the trip."

When the pandemic shut down travel and public gatherings, Kingery began researching her Chickasaw family history and painting.

“I’m having more fun asking questions now and getting answers. It’s pretty amazing, and all of that is going into the paintings.”

Since the impactful trip, Kingery’s work has been inspired by the Chickasaw Homeland.

“What surprised me about it, was I got to see places of my grandfather from way back in the 1700s, which is such an affirming thing for me. It really was important,” the 85-year-old artist said.

From the research and experience, she created several paintings inspired by the Homeland, including “Treasure Mounds” which is on exhibit in Santa Fe, New Mexico; “Copper Faces” and “Turtles and Doves.”

“A lot of my paintings are about remnants – pieces – because our culture was so taken apart and it affected me that our history and culture was lost to us in so many ways. We are recovering it now and we’re putting the pieces back together, whether it is me learning about the culture or it’s historians collecting stories from elders,” she said.

Kingery’s paintings, on exhibit at the Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, are accompanied by written stories.

“One is our creation story, one is stomp dancing, they all have stories connected to Chickasaws.”

Her work is currently included in the “Masters of the American West” exhibit at the Autry, where she was awarded a Gayle Roski Stories of the West award for best work of narrative art.

“I thanked them very much for the award but more for the ability to say some stories about Chickasaws,” she said.

Artists exhibit at the Briscoe Museum, San Paris, where she recently received an invitation

held at the Orenda Gallery, which is also in person show at the Hunt Gallery in San

ts of Blessing International, an organization en in developing countries to use their ointed by U.S. President George W. Bush to the can Indian and Alaska Native Culture and Arts

a world led to her being named the Dynamic on in 2017. She was inducted into the

ed April 22 at the Artesian Plaza, adjacent to st., Sulphur, Oklahoma.