

Gerald Clarke

About the Artwork

Gerald Clarke has consistently chosen to not have a singular approach to his work: he chooses whatever media, format, or action that he believes would best express the idea, emotion, or concept he is exploring. Clarke also recognizes his need for meaning. While he has a deep appreciation for the aesthetic object, and genuinely enjoys the physicality and craft of making an art object, his ultimate goal as an artist is for his work to have a meaningful interaction with the viewer. In hindsight, Clarke recognizes how his perspective of the viewer has evolved. Early in his career, and as a member of the Cahuilla tribe, Clarke sought to educate the non-Native viewer about contemporary Native culture. Over time, Clarke came to two realizations regarding his work and the viewer: first, by focusing his efforts to educate the non-native viewer, Clarke neglected his own tribal community; second, the more personal, and honest, Clarke is with his own work, the more universal it becomes.

The work exhibited includes work from both his *Branded Prints* and his *Stamped Prints* series. In both cases, he uses unique and inventive methods to create one-of-a-kind prints on paper. In 2002, the first work ever made for the *Branded* series involved constructing a branding iron out of metal with a word spelled out in all caps: INDIAN. This required blacksmithing and fusing several pieces of metal together into a forging iron that, in itself, is its own piece of sculpture. This branding iron is currently in the collection of the Autry Museum in Los Angeles.

Reminiscent of property ownership, the branding iron, in itself, is also evocative of a tool of the "Old West" and even more painful reminder of the use of fire and metal to burn hide or skin, animal or human. In the work *Native Inverted*, Clark chars multiple "burns" onto wet watercolor paper with his all-lower-case "native"-worded branding iron. Each print reveals a unique imprint due to several factors: the heat of branding iron, the dampness of paper, and the length of burn. The artist repeats the technique, but with varying degrees, revealing slightly different, but purposeful, effects. He goes a step further, by amalgamating, mixing, or singling-out, new words with the word "native", like "Art", "Amnesia", and sometimes juxtaposing these words with "Immigrant", dollar signs, and/or a brownish "smoldering" map of the continental US.

Using another "neo-printmaking" technique, the *Stamped* series is created by using immigration data and maps from the Internet, in combination with rubber stamps. Clarke starts by projecting maps representing US immigration settlement patterns onto his paper, and then stamping the names of the countries of immigrant origin onto the paper using a rubber stamp. The maps used purposefully do not include forced immigration (i.e., migration by slavery, ethnic relocation). England, Germany, Ireland, Poland, and Russia permeate the map, just to name a few emigrating peoples. Each work takes about six hours to complete, and the "map" simply reveals itself over time. The current immigration debate puzzles Clarke: "Unless you are a Native Indigenous American, you come to the US from immigrants."

Clarke was raised with a traditional understanding of the world and the importance of family and community. He feels a responsibility to share his perspective and the humanity that everyone shares, and this is reflected in his work. He does not make Native American art. He expresses his Cahuilla perspective as a 21st Century citizen of the world with the passion, pain, and reverence he feels as a contemporary Cahuilla person. As a member of the Cahuilla tribe, he incorporates a variety of media to address issues of the recovery of Native American identity and its intersection with mainstream US culture and politics. Clarke's work questions popular or ingrained views and offers alternative perspectives on contemporary issues and is offended by prejudice and inequality. He, instead, wants his work to appeal to any person who seeks understanding and acceptance.

About the Artist

Gerald Clarke grew up poor. His family had no money for toys, and he learned at a very early age to take good care of the few things his family had. If they broke, he fixed them or found new uses for them. This has made him very resourceful as a contemporary artist, which contributes to his inventiveness in using varied methods of art creation to express ideas. Although Clarke and his sister grew up in Hemet and Orange County, his father, Gerald Clarke Sr., regularly picked them up on weekends and hosted them for summers on the reservation with their extended family.

"I grew up doing the cowboy stuff," Clarke says. "I learned early on, that stereotypes are bullshit. My grandpa and my dad were hardcore Indian cowboys." At a young age, he appreciated the wide-open spaces of the reservation to wander, play and participate in the tribe's cultural activities. He was a very sensitive and empathetic kid and still carries those traits with him today in his work.

His elementary school was progressive in terms of arts education and so, he immediately excelled in the arts. He received several awards his art class projects. Clarke's ability to "build" and "fix" was translated into his efforts in drawing, printmaking, sculpture, and more. He was passionate about learning. Clarke went to college and earned Master's Degrees in Painting and Sculpture from Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. He became an educator, knowing all along that his heritage would eventually lead him back to the reservation. "From the time I was very young, I knew it was my role to take over the ranch after my dad died," he says. That day came in 2003, when Clarke was teaching studio art at East Central University in Ada, Oklahoma. He gave up his position, returned to the ranch, and began teaching part time at Idyllwild Arts, where he later became chair of the Visual Arts Dept.

Clarke has emerged as a tribal leader and is back on the tenure track as an Assistant Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Riverside. But neither he nor his tribe is stuck in a time warp; the reservation has plenty of modern amenities: a bright-white internet repeater towering on a hillside, a softball field situated across from a new *ramada*, solar panels on several rooftops, and Clarke's art studio, a Quonset structure he built two years ago.

For the past 25 years, Clarke has been creating poignant, conceptual, and often humorous art addressing Native American identity and its intersection with mainstream U.S. culture and politics while defying the trappings and stereotypes of Native art. Clarke cherishes the opportunity to exhibit his art where Cahuilla tribal members can see it. "For me, success is being respected in my community," he says. The contemporary art world's emphasis on the individual "genius" and the "cult of celebrity" are in direct opposition to the traditional beliefs Clarke was raised with. While many contemporary artists stress the importance of self-expression, Clarke feels the weight of the responsibility he owes to his ancestors. He believes self-expression is as natural as breathing and does not want to focus on it at all. Instead, Clarke focuses on trying to make art that is honest to the life he has led as a contemporary Native person.

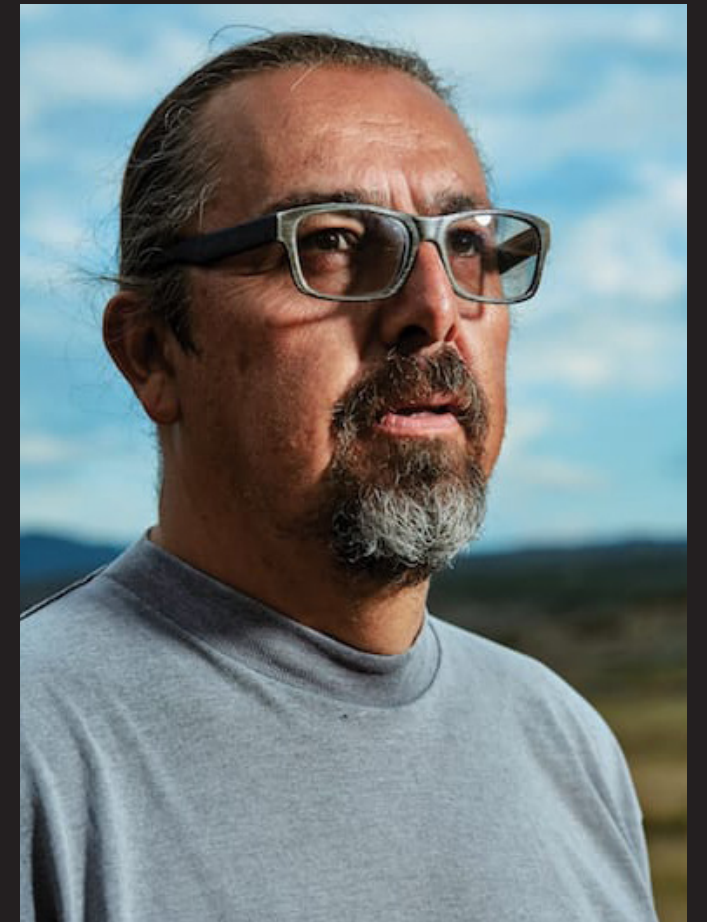


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