

Jeremy Dennis: Portraying Indigenous Memory and Resistance

“ The inclination to make the forgotten history of his tribe visible is also reflected in the images Dennis presented in his talk, as we see different stories about the construction of the tribe’s identity, as well as the omission of their culture and the violence that has been inflicted upon it. Photographs that also remind us that these Indigenous people and cultures are not invisible, that they are here, have always been here, and will continue to be here. ”

by Pamela Flores Hidalgo



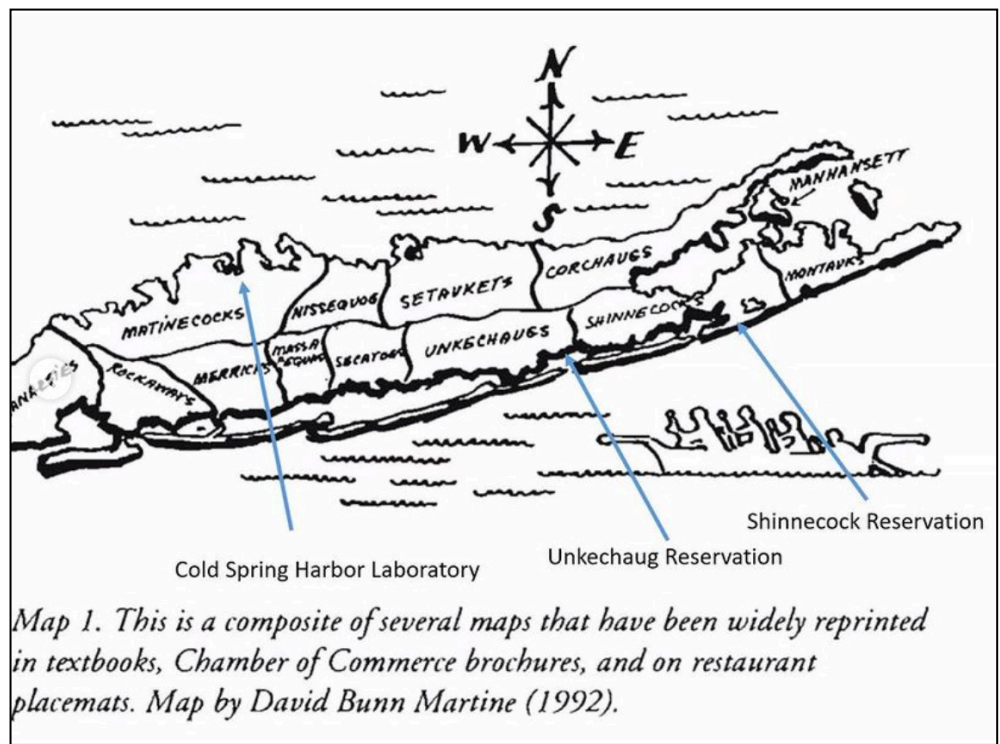
Jeremy Dennis, *Choknanipok, Man of Flint* (2015)
Image from the artist's lecture

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The Visual & Critical Studies Forum is one of a series of dialogues that have taken place at CCA throughout the semester, bringing together students, professors, and anyone interested in the visual arts with multidisciplinary artists, scholars, and creatives from various academic fields. On Thursday, November 16, I had the opportunity to attend the final forum event of Fall 2023 – a lecture by Jeremy Dennis, a New York-based artist and photographer who is a member of the Shinnecock Indian Nation in Southampton, New York.

As both a first-year graduate student in the Visual and Critical Studies program and an international student from Chile, the experience was very formative and enriching. I was able to understand much more about the culture and history of the Shinnecock tribe, which I confess I did not know prior. Discovering the cultural richness and advocating for the recognition and preservation of Indigenous identity is extremely important in all areas, considering it is also a transversal history experienced in the different cultures that have faced the processes of colonization.



Map of Shinnecock Territory
Image from the artist's lecture

Jeremy Dennis' work primarily explores the history of his community through photography and digital art, with a focus on advocating for the preservation and recognition of indigenous culture. To do this, he combines contemporary and traditional aesthetics in his photographs, referencing the tribe's spiritual traditions in contrast to the reality of the contemporary Hamptons – a group of towns on the eastern end of Long Island in New York. In his work, Dennis acknowledges the invisibility and marginalization of Indigenous people while celebrating their resistance and resilience throughout history.



Boudoir card photograph titled *The last of the Shinnecock Indians* (1884)
Image from the artist's lecture

One of the most remarkable aspects of Dennis' talk was how he used photography to both explain and learn about some of the history of his tribe, illustrating how the medium has historically been used as a tool of colonization, labeling, and oppression. For example, Dennis showed us a photograph from 1884 that had been captioned "The Last Shinnecock Indians," and while this image can be understood as a way of preserving historical archives, it also represents the Westernized belief that Native American communities are destined to disappear with time and assimilation. From this idea, his primary goal is also to critique these myths of erasure and to fight for the recognition and defense of his culture through the use of art, especially photography.

One of the works for which he has received recognition is a series that captures, through digitized images, the essence of the powwow, an event that celebrates traditional crafts, dances, and ancestral traditions. In his words, participating in Shinnecock powwows came with a sense of empowerment and a desire to document other tribal members. So, he began working with Keith Phillips, a renowned dancer on the powwow circuit: "Just for one whole summer in 2015, we went in his truck, bought our little tents, and I just took pictures, thousands and thousands of pictures, not really knowing what to do with them," Dennis shared. This desire to document and store a photograph in memory reminds me a lot of what Susan Sontag expresses in her book *On Photography*. Every photograph, more than just an image, is a trace or a remnant of what is photographed, a memory of reality. This is the work that Dennis ultimately does when he attempts to transmit the history and spirituality of the Native Americans in the photographs, recreating the essence of the powwow while also creating his own narrative.



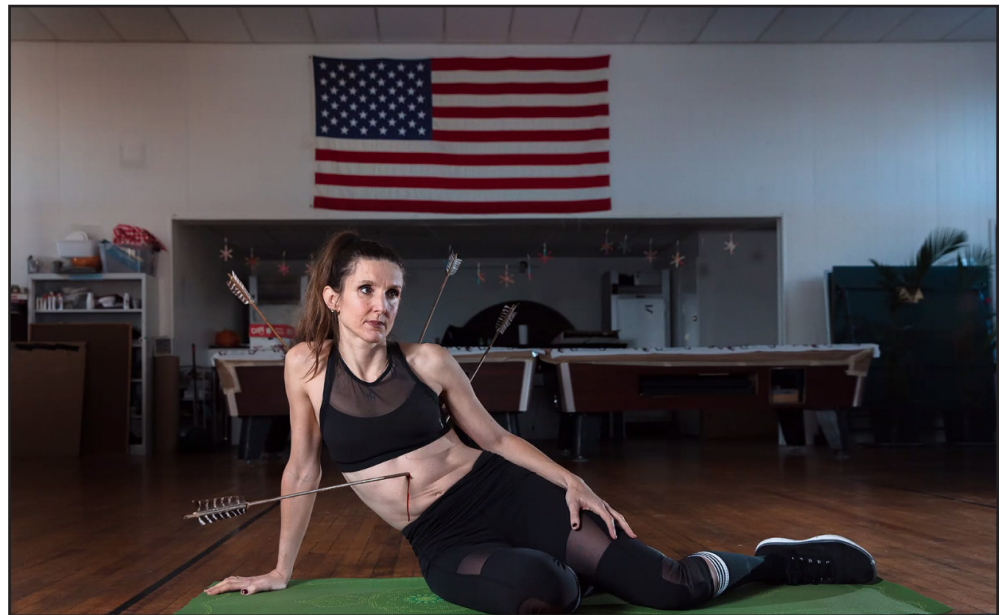
Jeremy Dennis, *Choknanipok, Man of Flint* (2015)
Image from the artist's lecture

In his photograph *Choknanipok: Man of Flint* (2015), for example, Jeremy explains that the actors featured are two powwow dancers who were not originally in the landscape of the image, but whom he had previously photographed in the backyard of

his parents' house, then cropped and edited to place them in the scene. All of this was done with the idea of recreating an epic mythological scene. This action sought to tell a dreamlike or mythological story that could be placed, implying that these events are still alive and timeless.

This practice of telling a story from the images while using a digital frame is what characterizes the work of Dennis. In his words, "the process is to plan these stories, make a sketch of how I imagine the scene to be, and try to represent it in the world with my camera, some props, maybe myself in a self-portrait, or working with a volunteer."

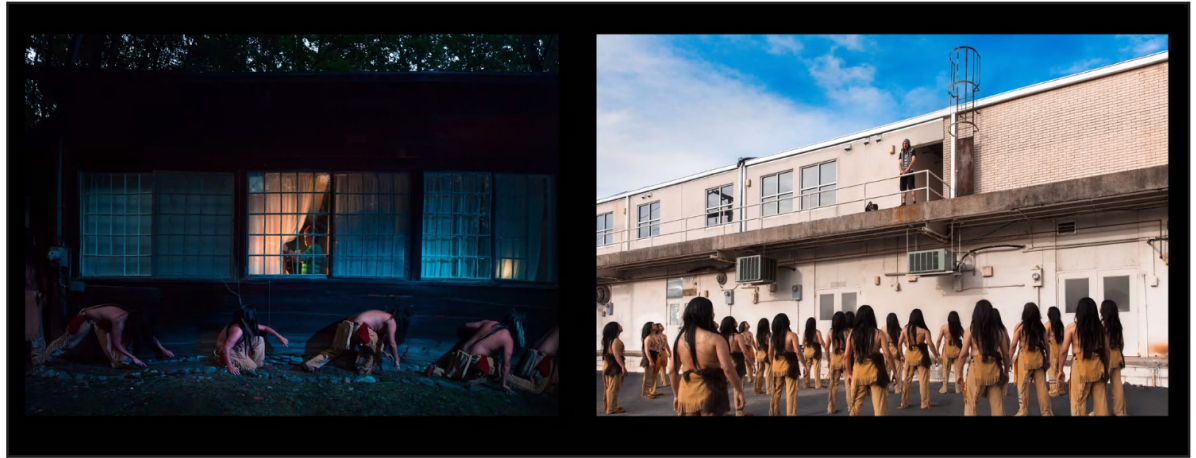
One of these modes, for example, is seen in *On This Site* (2016), in which he used interactive maps to trace different histories and narratives of the Native Americans of Long Island, thus raising awareness of places sacred and historically significant to them. This project is also intended to denounce the destruction and oblivion experienced, as Indigenous communities have been displaced by urban development.



Jeremy Dennis, *Nothing Happened Here* (2017)
Image from the artist's lecture

The inclination to make the forgotten history of his tribe visible is also reflected in the images Dennis presented in his talk, as we see different stories about the construction of the tribe's identity,

as well as the omission of their culture and the violence—not only physical, but also economic and symbolic—that has been inflicted upon it. These photographs also remind us that Indigenous people and cultures are not invisible, that they are here, have always been here, and will continue to be here.



Jeremy Dennis, photography series *Rise* (2018–present)
Image from the artist's lecture

In these images, for example, we can see how the artist creates a contrast between the contemporary places and the presence of indigenous people. This is further reflected in an anecdote Dennis shared with us:

I remember when I was in high school, for better or worse, we had a Native American speaker in class. And the whole class got together in an auditorium. They had the Native American speaker on the microphone. And as he was speaking, one of my classmates said, "Who cares about Native American history? They're all dead. I heard that and I began to wonder why these people think we are so irrelevant. Why don't people think we exist or that we're important? So I started making maps.

Dennis thus motivates us to recognize Indigenous representation and to defend their territorial rights through a kind of art that celebrates memory and seeks to give a narrative to voices that are constantly invisible.

Finally, I would like to highlight the work he showed us regarding *Ma's House*, a project launched in 2020 in which Dennis has transformed his grandmother's family home on the Shinnecok Reservation into a community space for Black, Indigenous, and

People of Color (BIPOC) artists. It serves as an artist residency, exhibition space, and home to educational and cultural programs. This has created a space of visibility and support for artists who may have previously been unnoticed because they are outside the traditional “margins” of the arts.

Through all of this, Dennis teaches us that mapping Native American histories, narrating through images, and highlighting culture and spirituality allows us to preserve and resist the threat of disappearance imposed by colonial structures; structures that manifest themselves not only in the United States, but in many regions across the globe where Indigenous people and cultures have been victims of dispossession and displacement.



Me and sister Kelly

Jeremy Dennis, *Ma's House & BIPOC Art Studio* (2020–present)
Image from the artist's lecture

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