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Rich stories color Nevada Museum of Art exhibit

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Paiute artist Melissa Melero stands near her work on display at the Nevada Museum of Art. / Liz Margerum/RGJ

Written by

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Melissa Melero has fond memories of going fishing at Pyramid Lake with her father and taking long walks near their Hungry Valley home, a reservation for the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony.

Those memories are the narratives in her abstract mixed-media paintings. She uses willows, pine nuts, cattails and river rocks — all important staples to the Paiute people — to help tell the story.

“My images that I put on there, sometimes underneath my objects, are my personal petroglyphs,” she said. “If somebody asks me, I can tell them the story. Some people like to look at them and see their own story.”

Three of her works — “Tommo/winter,” “Yubano/fall” and “Tamano/spring” — are part of ‘The Way We Live: American Indian Art of the Great Basin and Sierra Nevada’ exhibit currently on display at the Nevada Museum of Art through March 3. She is one of 18 artists in the show that Ann Wolfe, curator, considers “the largest survey of contemporary American Indian art from the region in at least the past two decades.”

“The Great Basin is often overlooked,” Wolfe said. “I think there is an interest, intrigue and desire across the country to know what’s going on in the region as it pertains to contemporary art.”

In 2010, Wolfe began working with Ben Aleck, an artist and collection manager at the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe Museum & Visitor Center, and sent out a call to American Indian artists to submit artwork. They received very few submissions, confirming their suspicions, Wolfe said, that an impersonal request for artwork would not work.

“We found that wasn’t the way to build trust,” she said.

Building trust would happen over time and after visiting with the artists.

She said she called Frank LaPena, a painter and printmaker who also is professor emeritus of ethnic studies and art at California State University, Sacramento, and asked him to revisit the years he spent with his sister at Stewart Indian School, a federal boarding school for American Indians that was located in Carson City.

His painting, “Stewart Indian School,” of the landscape includes a photograph of the class of 1945-46. Two large hornets flying above the sagebrush seem out of place, but have an integral part to LaPena’s story.

LaPena was the one called out and paraded in front of his peers after he and his buddies found a hornet’s nest.

“He was the example of not how to be the perfect model citizen,” Wolfe said. “I think it was a very difficult piece for him to make.”

The exhibit includes many established artists, like LaPena, as well as emerging artists who are exhibiting for the first time. Among the established artists is Judith Lowry, a Nevada City resident whose paintings are in the collection at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.

Melero, a 39-year-old graduate of Portland State University and the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, N.M., said her work fits the museum’s request to address issues relating to changing environments

“I totally felt like I fit in perfectly,” she said. “My work is very environmentally conscious.”

Wolfe said they kept the theme broad to include a variety of works. Because the Great Basin spans a vast area between the Sierra Nevada and southern Cascades to the west, the Snake River plains to the north, the Wasatch Range and the Colorado Plateau to the east and the Mojave Desert and Colorado River to the south, she said it is one region comprised of multiple cultures and voices.