

## Mountain Maidu-Pit River-Washoe Painter

## Judith Lowry

By Melissa Melero

*There is one distinction I have to make. I am not a painter. I paint. I am a storyteller.*<sup>1</sup>

**JUDITH LOWRY, A NATIVE CALIFORNIAN VISUAL ARTIST,** activist, and educator, has created art since her earliest days growing up on military bases in the United States, Europe, and Japan. Judith holds a BFA degree from Humboldt State University and an MA from Chico State University in painting. She is one of the few internationally recognized Great Basin artists. Judith has resided in Nevada City, California, since 1996. In Nevada City, Judith is a force, known for exhibiting politically and culturally fueled art and installations. Together with the Nisenan Tribe of the Nevada City Rancheria,<sup>2</sup> she cofounded the California Heritage Indigenous Research Project (CHIRP), which creates community awareness of the harsh history and conflict between the early settlers and California Natives of the Sierra foothills.

Judith's work is a visual storybook of Native stereotypes, historical family figures, and some infamously flamboyant imagery. She has been in many major exhibits at some of the most prestigious institutions in the country, including the Heard Museum, Phoenix, Arizona; National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, DC; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts; Crocker Museum, Sacramento, California; and the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

**Please tell me about your beginnings: where you were born, where you are from, your family connections to art, and childhood inspirations.**

I was born in Washington, DC, to a young captain in the US Army and an Australian "war bride." They met during WWII at a USO dance in Sydney. Leonard Lowry,

my father, was born in 1920 in Milford, California, just outside Susanville, California. He was first educated at Fort Bidwell, a notoriously bad government boarding school located near Alturas. He later went to Sherman Indian School in Riverside, California. His summers were spent at home in Susanville, mostly under the care and guidance of his maternal grandmother Wilis-Kol-Kold, a Modoc-Hammawi woman.

Both of my mother's brothers were killed in that war, and one of them, Jack, as well as my mother's sister Rita, were very fine sketch artists. I still have some of Jack's drawings. My Aunt Rita, knowing I was quite a sickly child and that I liked to draw during my many convalescences, sent me tablets filled with drawings of movie stars like Shirley Temple, and on some pages, little art lessons. She would demonstrate techniques for me, such as how to make a thumbnail drawing, how to draw highlights on hair, creating textures, shading, and things like that. She had five kids, but there was no TV in those days, so drawing was one of the ways she relaxed at the end of her busy day. I was always so happy to receive her packages from Australia and the new drawings. She was my first "art teacher" and a good one.

**How did you start creating? What were your inspirations?**

Initially, I was inspired by my first box of crayons. Lady Gaga has a song, "Born that Way." That's how it is with artists. I was inspired by the beauty of European art during the US occupation. It was dazzling ... the cathedrals and palaces we toured, the cities and their amazing architecture. Sadly, some of it was still in piles of rubble from the bombings. I learned at an early age about the destruction and iconoclasm of war.



Judith Lowry. Image courtesy of the artist.

I started painting as a teenager in Japan. In my military high school, there were no art classes, only core classes. But a service club for the soldiers was on the post and dependents were allowed to use it. It had a darkroom, where I first learned to print photos and an art studio, where I took classes in the evening with a Japanese artist. He had studied in Berlin when he was young. Mr. Terada was kind and encouraging and made me believe I could be an artist.

*After high school, Judith was deciding what school she wanted to go to. Her dad wanted her to go to the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and her mom was against that idea. Judith chose family, holding many different-fine art-related jobs along the way. She had a projectionist job, captured weddings and newspaper stories as a photographer, designed as a graphic artist, and worked as a photography assistant at Chico State College and Lassen Community College in Susanville, California.*

**At Nisenan Heritage Days this past year, I heard you talk about your time**



*American Tobacco Girl*, 1994, oil on canvas, 55 .25 × 69 in., collection of the Peabody Essex Museum, E300428.

**in the Bay Area, Richard Oakes, and the American Indian Movement. Could you speak more about that time?**

After we moved back to the States from Japan, my father was stationed at the Presidio in San Francisco. My folks had separated by then and I lived in Sunnyvale with my mother. On the weekends, I would go to the city to visit Dad, and it was always an adventure. After he retired, Dad bought a bar in the Mission District called Warren's. He liked it because it was a place Indians liked to frequent. He only owned it for a year; bartending wasn't a good fit for him. But during that time, a lot of the Bay Area NDN activists were his customers and he got to know them pretty well. He went to rallies and conferences and sometimes took me along.

He supported the AIM movement, but after the wars, confrontation wasn't his

thing. He was a worker. So he went home to Susanville after that year in the city and began organizing for our tribes. He earned a teaching credential and taught Native American studies at Lassen College. He also guest lectured at Feather River College; D-Q University; University of California, Davis; Sacramento State; and numerous other venues. He led the Native American element of the Lassen County fifth graders' "Day at the Lake," a learning experience held each year at Eagle Lake.

I was in my early twenties at the time I met Mr. Oakes at the Pit River occupation up near Burney Falls. The civil rights era was in full swing, with minorities, women, and young people demanding equality and fair treatment.

**Did this era help form the activist you are today? Have you always been so outspoken? Is that from your dad?**

That whole era was formative. Yes, my dad was outspoken but calm and with great authority. He was a military officer and it always showed, even after he retired.

*In her mid-thirties, Judith enrolled at Humboldt State University in Arcata in Northern California by the suggestion of friends and family to do something she enjoyed. She focused on graphic arts and photography and was considered an outspoken student at the time, with opinions on feminism and cultural identity.*

**After Humboldt State University, when did you start to seriously paint and exhibit?**

I worked as a graphic artist for a couple of years and realized that if I was to teach, I needed to get an advanced degree, so I applied to Chico State and went there to earn my MA. It was immediately after that I began seriously exhibiting.

1. Frank LaPena and Carla Hills, "Images of Identity: Judith Lowry," *Sacramento State University*, 2004, web.

2. Federal recognition for this group was unilaterally terminated by the United States in 1958, under US Termination Policy.



**Red Ribbons**, 1997, acrylic on canvas, 60 × 48 in., collection of the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian. Photo: Neebinnaukzhik Southall (Rama Chippewa).

### How did you determine and develop your fantastical, narrative style?

My style came about by letting go of any preconceived notions about what kind of painter I would be. I was mainly a photographer, and I had painted pictures, but once I started telling stories with paint, I let my inner child take over.

This was also the time when Jean LaMarr (Paiute-Achomawi), a former IAlA professor, approached Judith and stressed how badly serious Native women artists were needed.

Jean LaMarr was one of my first mentors. She used to say, “We need you, it’s just me and the boys.” The boys she was referring to were the male artists,

Dugan Aguilar, Harry Fonseca, Frank LaPena, and Alan Wallace.

In 1998, Judith illustrated *Home to Medicine Mountain*, a book about her father and uncle finding their way home on summer break from Riverside Indian Boarding School in the 1930s. Chiori Santiago wrote the text, and Heyday published the book. Heyday also publishes the renowned magazine *News from Native California*.

### How did this project come to you?

The publisher had seen my exhibit at the American Indian Contemporary Arts (AICA) show in San Francisco and came to my opening to meet me and invite me to do the book. I thought it might be an interesting way to simply honor my

father’s heritage, so I agreed to do it. I was asked to think of ten stories I would like to tell and then choose one for the book. It did not dawn on me until years after the book was published that it would also be a useful book. I get comments all the time about how it makes that part of Native American history easier to explain to young school children. It was also wonderful to embed an empowering lesson in this little story of two brothers guided by love, who found their way home from a dispassionate institutional environment.

### At what point in your career did you get the Joan Mitchell grant?

The Joan Mitchell grant came out of the blue. In 2002, I used it to build my installation for *Continuum 12* at the National Museum of the American Indian in Manhattan. It was just post-9/11 and I needed to say something to the people of NYC from a person of Native heritage. My roundhouse was filled with sound of a cry song.

My public program and talk was about forgiveness. I read Shauna Covey’s poem “The Return of Ishi’s Brain” to the audience at the end, and I think that last line really had an impact. You can tell, you know? A lady came up to me later and asked for a hug and said a friend had told to her come to the exhibit to get her out of the house. She hadn’t wanted to because she was still grieving the loss of her son, a firefighter lost on 9/11. She told me that she felt very affected, in a good way, by what I brought to New York and what I spoke of. That just made me feel all the work was worth it and that I had honored my Joan Mitchell grant in the right way. I had done my job.

Judith’s body of work is rich in narrative as well as color, and she does not shy away from difficult issues like the boarding school experience, California Native history, and Native American stereotypes. Her exhibition in Nevada City, California called *Indians, Irony, and Identity* is an entire gallery filled with stereotypical items from a time when the romanticized “brave” image was commonplace. The exhibit, curated by Judith, displays wall-to-wall product labels, romance novels, bottles, and collectibles, which she describes as “kitschy.” The exuberance of ignorance is displayed in a humorous manner.



**Shopping**, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 82 × 68 in., collection of the Peabody Essex Museum, E300526.

I have been collecting NDN kitsch for a few years. Some of it is funny, some not so much. Jean LaMarr also has a large collection of NDN kitsch and for years we often talked about mounting an exhibit of these objects. I hope one day to include Jean’s collection and curate a comprehensive exhibit or permanent museum installation of these cultural novelties.

As with most of what we do at CHIRP, *Indians, Irony, and Identity* helped us explode some stereotypes of Indian people. We hosted a tour of the exhibit for a Sierra College class, the Nevada County Landmark Commission, our local newspaper, and others, and drew positive responses. Our aim was mainly to provoke thought about the way in which our formative experiences shape the way we

view other cultures. I asked Alan Wallace to take his group of young artists through the exhibit before it opens at the Maidu Museum in Roseville and offer their thoughts and feelings about these items for placement in the interpretive wall text.

### As the curator, what were your intentions? Desired impact on the community?

The exhibit was all about exposing stereotypes and how they are rooted in common, everyday items we use, like kitsch, clothing, housewares, and entertainment.

It was a great way to connect with our audience, which included a good cross section of the community. The comments were positive, and in many cases people

spoke of having their eyes opened for the first time to this subject. We think we made a change for the good on our local level. Now we are taking it on the road to the Maidu Museum in Roseville where it will reach an even bigger audience in 2015.

Judith founded the California Heritage Indigenous Research Project shortly after she moved to Nevada City, California to be close to her father. CHIRP started as an unofficial organization to gather information about the original residents and their history and culture.

The research of the area turned into a full-scale unfolding of layers of history and stories of the Nisenan people, who had been nearly forgotten by the current dominant community. It is a hard story to tell, one of much horror and sadness, but Judith has stood up to the locals’ practice of ignoring and whitewashing this history.



Details of *Indians, Irony, and Identity* installation view, 2014, found objects. Maidu Museum and Historic Site. Images courtesy of the artist.

**Please tell us more about how you founded CHIRP. What is in the works for the future? What do you think the effect has been the community with the advent of CHIRP?**

I moved to picturesque Nevada City in 1996 hoping for a peaceful and productive artistic life in the Sierra foothills. I was not looking for controversy or drama, but in the way that things sometimes unfold, they simply fell into my lap.

It began when my father asked me what Indian families lived here. He had enjoyed visits with old boarding schoolmates and friends from Sherman at my home in Arcata, so he was interested in who might still be living in this little gold rush town. I couldn't find anybody. Dad asked me to check for a tribal council or rancheria, or anything that might help me locate the local Indian people who I thought of as Southern Maidu. I had my father's teaching map and saw that they were referred to as the Nisenan. I did not know at the time that they

were essentially hiding in plain sight, intimidated into silence by a tribal corporation bent on seizing Nisenan lands and resources in order to bring a gaming facility to our county. This could not have happened except for a perfect storm of circumstances, the opportunity to profit by local developers, coupled with Nevada County's complete ignorance about the Indigenous history of this region.

For legal reasons, I cannot yet elaborate too much, but I can say that after a great deal of time, effort, and money, that ship has turned around. Of course, this doesn't make me a very popular person among the white power brokers in this county. Ask me if I care.

What I have learned from working with the Nisenan is that it takes a steady and concerted effort to prevent a culture from being "disappeared." Cultural appropriation, stereotyping, and racial bias will always exist. Like rust, they never sleep. Add to that the last 30 years or so of gaming tribes, and we have fresh ground

for those forces to breed. Nobody wants a successful Indian. That is why the Native artist/writer/activist must continue to work diligently against those forces.

*Judith is currently in talks with James Luna to exhibit next year at the gallery of the Powell House in Nevada City during the 6th Annual Nisenan Heritage Day at Sierra College, Nevada City campus. This year's Heritage Day was a success with the Indians, Irony, and Identity exhibit, language and Native history talks, and cultural food, song, and dance.*

*James Luna is curating an exhibit about the Mission Schools, also known as the Indian Boarding Schools. He has asked Judith to write an article on the exhibit for the News from Native California magazine as well as participate in the exhibit. Judith's description of the show:*

**Mission Family Values**—The remodeling of the American Indian lifestyle through the indoctrination of the Mission network and further institutionalized by the government boarding school system,



*High Rollers: Eye in the Sky*, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 60 × 80 in., collection of the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian. Photo: Neebinnaukzhik Southall (Rama Chippewa).

*which was based heavily upon the Mission model, was purported to be an attempt at humane acculturation of the Indigenous savage, when in fact it was a campaign of total cultural assimilation that began with the youngest and most impressionable. Assimilation is partly defined as consumption or digesting, the act of absorbing something. But like stubborn lumps in gravy or troublesome knots in tangled hair, the humorous core of the native soul persisted through the many decades and kept the spirit alive.*

I was privileged to participate in the exhibit *Indian Humor* at the National Museum of the American Indian.<sup>3</sup> I see other programs throughout the country

based on the "Laugh Until You Heal" message. It's a good one.

With the help of my computer collaborator David McKay, we placed the comical visage of grinning Chief Wahoo of Cleveland Indians fame upon the faces of models, dressed in fringed Nubuck, plastic pony beads, and Tandy craft moccasins. The models are supposed to represent the Indian family unit. In products, sports brand, and costume sewing pattern, we see the American Indian as commodity, as trademark, as goods to be stereotyped, trivialized,

and ready for consumption. "Mission" complete. Yet, there stand the NDNs, grinning through it all.

*Another project simmering for Judith is to one day open a community cultural center in Nevada City modeled after the celebrated Pacific Western Traders, located outside of Sacramento. It was a well-known Native supply store, fine art gallery, and cultural gathering place that recently shut down after being a community hub and institution since 1971.*

More information on Judith Lowry can be found on the website:

[www.greatbasinartists.com](http://www.greatbasinartists.com)

3. *Indian Humor* was a traveling exhibit, curated by Sara Bates (Cherokee Nation) and organized by the American Indian Contemporary Art (AICA) gallery in San Francisco in 1994–1995.