
EVOLVING STATES

Michael Elizondo Jr. and the Reemergence of the Bacone College School of Indian Art

By Cedar Marie (Standing Rock Lakota descent)

BACONE COLLEGE'S INFLUENCE on Michael Elizondo Jr. has evolved over time. The oldest continuing American Indian college in what is now Oklahoma, Bacone College was chartered in 1880 and its campus was later established in Muskogee within the Muskogee (Creek) Nation. Unlike many schools for Native students of its time, Bacone College supported expressions of Native identity, cultures, and visual arts. Its storied School of Art was directed by Native artists and gave birth to the Bacone school, a form of Flatstyle painting that flourished in the 20th century and continues today. Michael Elizondo Jr. (Cheyenne/Kaw/Chumash) now serves as the new art director of the Bacone College School of Indian Art.

Elizondo's family lived down the road from artist Dick West (Southern Cheyenne, 1912–1996), who served as the art director of Bacone's School of Indian Art from 1947 to 1970 and returned to teach from 1979 to 1986. West, an alumnus of Bacone, studied under another influential artist, Acee Blue Eagle (Muskogee, 1907–1959), who painted aspects of Cheyenne ceremonial life and gatherings that Elizondo had witnessed during his own life and that remain a part of Cheyenne culture today. Painter, printmaker, and former Bacone art director Ruthe Blalock Jones (Shawnee/Delaware/



ABOVE Michael Elizondo Jr. (Cheyenne/Kaw/Chumash) in front of his mural. Photo: Dayrah Elizondo (Alabama-Coushatta).

OPPOSITE Ataloo Lodge on the Bacone College campus. Photo: Matt Jarvis (Osage).

Peoria) depicted images and stories of the Native American Church, a regular and important influence for Elizondo's family. As a young man and art student, Elizondo looked to these artists for inspiration. He wanted to express himself in his own way while also keeping his culture as the central subject matter in his artwork. Even though he did not attend Bacone's art school, when Elizondo researched artists and artworks that he could relate to and learn from, his research nearly always led him back to Bacone College and the art department's history of prominent directors.

Elizondo received his BFA from Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU) in 2008 and his MFA from the University of Oklahoma (OU) in 2011. At OBU he met artist Tony Tiger (Muskogee/Sac & Fox/Seminole), who visited there when Elizondo was planning his senior art show. Tiger, Bacone's art director from 2010 to 2015, showed the younger artist how to lay out a gallery space and hang his artwork, and later, how to navigate the mainstream art world. In graduate school, Elizondo continued to create artwork specifically related to his Cheyenne culture and heritage. His early paintings, such as *Subsisting*, *Esevóona*, and *No-Wa-Wu*, were relatively formal and abstracted studies where both artist and materials seemed to enter into a heavily textured and deeply charred



landscape. Once through that desolate space, something new began to grow. During this time he began to focus on “constructed paintings,” and merge ancient Cheyenne influences with current cultural themes in his artwork. I was on his thesis committee and became his thesis mentor during his final year at OU. I remember Elizondo sharing that he was close to his grandmother and took inspiration from her stories and artwork as a beadworker and cradleboard artist.

“My grandmother would tell me that every design has a story,” says Elizondo. “Some of the artworks in my MFA thesis show were influenced from the designs she used to bead. I began to think about what new elements I could bring to my story and my history and create my own designs and stories. Nothing stays the same; someone creates something new at some point; beads were once new.”

The artist continues: “I began to experiment with forms, shapes, and patterns, and create what I call constructed paintings. I would move a pattern in a new way, take it apart or separate it by creating a small diamond in the middle or expand the outer edges of the frame [such as in the painting, *Transcendent II*]. I was focused on personal identity themes as a Native American, [and] as an individual continuing on this creative path, [I was]

trying to also hone my craft. Form and color became a way to merge together my life and Indigenous influences to explore our evolving state and larger cultural experiences.”¹

During his second year of study, OU art faculty encouraged Elizondo to take a teaching assistantship. He was a little hesitant about it at first because he wanted to focus as much time as he could on just being an artist. Yet he began to shadow his painting mentor, Tommy White, and often worked with students on one side of the classroom while his mentor worked with students on the other side. He also became a woodshop monitor in the sculpture area, so he could help undergraduate students make their own panels for painting. At the time, he did not know that much about power tools but soon learned how to use them. What he discovered from this experience reinforced the notion that art-making doesn’t just happen in the studio; it happens with the conversations and experiences an artist has with others, in the different ideas that are shared, in listening to personal stories, and in helping others learn. When his mentor left OU after Elizondo’s second year of graduate school, School of Art Director Dr. Mary Jo Watson (Seminole) asked him to teach two painting classes during his final year of study. That

teaching experience prepared him for what happened next: teaching Art Appreciation and Native American Arts and Crafts courses at Bacone College in the fall of 2012. Elizondo and his wife and new daughter were living in Oklahoma City at the time and had to figure out how teaching 140 miles from home was going to work.

“Oklahoma City is about two hours from Muskogee where Bacone College is located,” recalls Elizondo. “The commute was pretty hard, but I did it for an entire year. My wife took care of the baby during the day while I was out here teaching, and I took care of the baby at night when she was in class. I was still doing my best to keep the momentum of showing my artwork, because that was also helping us keep afloat. As the academic year came to an end, I was grateful to have the experience teaching at Bacone and fortunate enough to be mentored by Tony Tiger.”

“I wanted to continue teaching but needed to work closer to home again so I could be with my family. Spring of 2013, I got an adjunct position at the University of Central Oklahoma, which is closer to Oklahoma City. The art history director asked me to teach a Native American art history class. There was also a Comanche Nation college down in Lawton, and they asked me if I would teach American

1. All quotes from Michael Elizondo Jr. from discussion with the author, January 12, 2021.

DIRECTORS OF BACONE COLLEGE SCHOOL OF INDIAN ART

Compiled by
Frances Donelson (Cherokee Nation)
and America Meredith (Cherokee Nation)

Several people served as interim directors of the art school during the 1940s and mid-1980s.

- 1932–1935: **Mary Stone McLendon** (Chickasaw, 1896–1967) founded the art lodge and taught art courses
- 1935: Bacone School of Indian Art officially opened
- 1935–1938: **Acee Blue Eagle** (Muscogee, 1907–1959)
- 1938–1941: **Woody Crumbo** (Citizen Potawatomi, 1912–1989)
- 1947–1970: **Dick West** (Southern Cheyenne, 1912–1996)
- 1970–1975: **Terry Saul** (Choctaw/Chickasaw, 1921–1976)
- 1975–1979: **Gary Colbert** (Muscogee)
- 1979–1985, 1987–2010: **Ruthe Blalock Jones** (Shawnee/Delaware/Peoria)
- 2010–2015: **Tony Tiger** (Muscogee/Sac & Fox/Seminole)
- 2018–2020: **Gerald Cournoyer Sr.** (Oglala Lakota)
- 2020–Present: **Michael Elizondo Jr.** (Cheyenne/Kaw/Chumash)

Indian Art as Film and another art history class.”

In 2016, the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes invited Elizondo to work with the language department on a three-year master apprenticeship grant, to develop a Cheyenne language immersion program. His grandmother loved to talk in Cheyenne, and she frequently told him how important it was to know the language. It was a challenging decision for him because he had an established routine with his art practice—showing his artwork and teaching, and he was already regularly attending language classes offered by the community. But the Cheyenne language is critically endangered with only about



400 Cheyenne speakers total in Oklahoma,² and only 15 to 20 fluent first-language speakers, mostly elders. Elizondo knew how crucial learning Cheyenne was for his community and his family. He finished up his teaching assignments that fall and began the language immersion program in January 2017. Everything art-related stopped: the exhibitions, teaching, and workshops. After he got more comfortable speaking the language, he could better balance his art practice with his language immersion experience.

Elizondo spoke with his grandmother in Cheyenne; she told him stories about what it was like for her growing up, how Cheyenne was frequently spoken in the house, and how the customs, dances, and songs sung in Cheyenne have evolved during her lifetime and that some of them are now gone. She told him a story about going into town with her grandmother, an all-day event because she did not have a car and did not speak English. They rode to town using a horse and a wagon. He thought about his youngest daughter after hearing that story, and all the changes that have happened in his lifetime, and all of the changes that have happened just in 2020. He told me that he could never have imagined the circumstances our society is currently enduring: the COVID-19 pandemic and the loss of thousands of lives, the racial and political traumas, especially

2. Christopher Moseley, “Cheyenne,” *Encyclopedia of the World’s Endangered Languages* (London: Routledge, 2008), e-book.

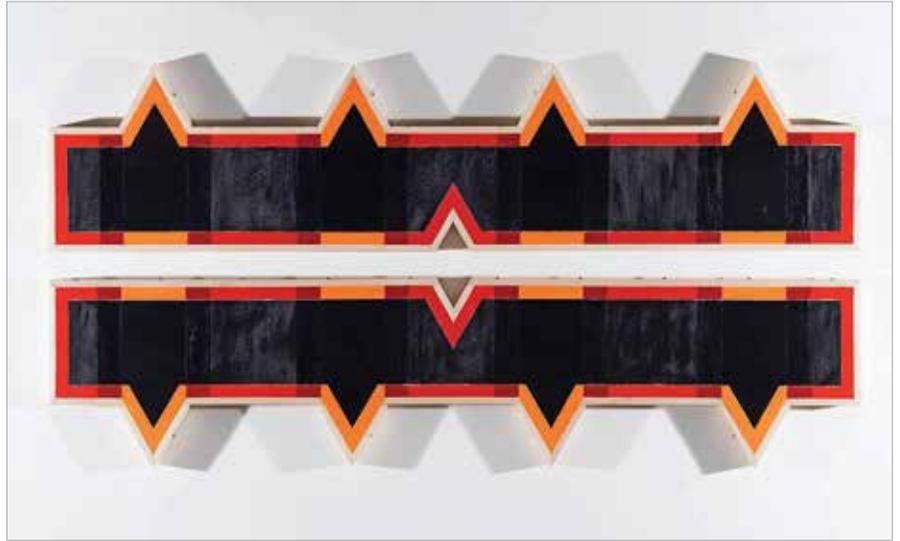
on black, brown, and Indigenous communities, and the economic impact of so much unrest.

But it wasn't just learning the Cheyenne language that was important to Elizondo. Other second-language learners who had gone through the apprenticeship program told him that he had to *think* in Cheyenne as much as possible, not just speak it, if he truly wanted to embody the language. He played Cheyenne language CDs while he slept. Four to five days of the week he visited with and listened to fluent elders, who often laughed as they spoke Cheyenne. Slowly, he began to have small conversations with them that would then get longer and longer. As he began to learn, speak, and finally teach the Cheyenne language, he began to see their worldview and humor. He wanted to take the experience of learning Cheyenne and directly connect it to what was occurring right now in this time, in his life, his community, and in his artwork.

"I would ask, 'How do you say the word *tire* in Cheyenne?'" Elizondo recounts. "One of the elders would laugh and say, '*máhtse'ko*,' and another would laugh and say, 'That just means leg!' I would ask, 'How do you say *get in the car*?' And they would say the [term] which actually means *climb on the car*. I realized that the terms they were using were for riding a horse. Today, many Natives actually refer to their car as their pony. As I began to understand the language more, I also began to understand that the way they were talking was because they were still thinking in Cheyenne. Our language still works in the older terms though society has evolved and is more modern. I decided to pull all of what I was learning together into the artwork *Store Run*, which is a direct influence of the Cheyenne language.

"In the drawing, they are driving a car into town but instead of tires it has horse legs. The driver is holding a depiction of my unemployment card, a direct result of the pandemic. So, this, again, speaks to our evolving state."

Elizondo began to draw more during the pandemic. He created a series of coyote drawings that evolved



from humorous conversations between himself and his brothers. The timing was perfect, because he was invited to participate in *Speak, Speak While You Can* at Living Arts of Tulsa, curated by Tiger that summer.

Elizondo continues to help his community with Cheyenne language revitalization efforts, and he is back to having a strong studio practice. As we continued to talk about the changes in his artistic career, he was humble in reflecting on the shifts that have occurred in his life and his creative practice since

ABOVE, TOP Michael Elizondo Jr. (Cheyenne/Kaw/Chumash), *Transcendence II*, 2017, acrylic on wooden panel, 32 × 67 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

ABOVE, BOTTOM Michael Elizondo Jr. (Cheyenne/Kaw/Chumash), *Store Run*, 2020, Prismacolor pencil on Bristol board, 17 × 14 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

OPPOSITE Mary Stone McLendon (Chickasaw, 1896–1967), whose stage name was Ataloa (Little Song), collection of the Oklahoma Historical Society, Czarina Conlan Collection 1990.056. Image courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society.



ABOVE, TOP Gerald Cournoyer Sr. (Oglala Lakota), *Ravens with Texture*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 36 × 48 in., Image courtesy of the artist. “The work is about weaving stories together with the help of the spirit animal, the Raven,” writes Cournoyer.

ABOVE, BOTTOM Gerald Cournoyer Sr. (Oglala Lakota), Vice-President of Development at Bacone College, former art program director from 2018 to 2020. Image courtesy of Gerald Cournoyer Sr.

graduate school. Each shift, he said, was an important building block for whatever the next phase of his life would be for him and for his family. That next building block arrived in December 2020, when he got a call from the president of Bacone College, Dr. Ferland Clark (Navajo), and Bacone’s art director, Gerald Cournoyer Sr. (Oglala Lakota). Cournoyer had just been promoted to vice president of development to lead fundraising efforts in revitalizing the college. They needed a new director of the Bacone College School of Indian Art who shared their vision for moving the art program forward.

Bacone, too, has been evolving, and Elizondo joins the program at a challenging time. (In addition to the challenge of operating an institution of higher learning during a global pandemic.) The art school shut down in 2015 due to financial difficulties. President Clark was hired in 2018 when the college was on the verge of completely closing, and he successfully kept it open. He worked with five Oklahoma tribes—the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians of Oklahoma, Osage Nation, Otoe-Missouria Tribe of Indians, Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes, and

Kiowa Tribe—to charter the college to help to stabilize the college’s finances.

President Clark soon hired Cournoyer to lead the art department. Cournoyer worked to repair and upgrade the facilities at McCombs Hall, where the art school is located. The building, constructed in 1935, has not been upgraded since about 1976, and Cournoyer’s priority is to ensure the facilities are up to code and safe for students and for the school to be able to regain its accreditation. These renovations are currently underway at Bacone with upgrades to their HVAC system, plumbing, and ADA compliance.

I spoke with Cournoyer about the direction of Bacone’s art school and his responsibilities as vice president of development. “My new role in development is finding funding for the entire college, not just the art school. We are working on our charitable giving and being more transparent and starting the process of getting donor-advised funding,” Cournoyer says.

“Additionally, we are looking into getting tribal college status. Bacone has always been a private education institution and cannot receive a lot of federal or state funding until it gets established as a tribal college. As a tribal college, we can become a member of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium and then receive funding. It just takes time, but Bacone has a bright future.”³

Bacone College was founded as the Indian University in 1880 by Almon C. Bacone. When Mary “Ataloo” Stone McLendon became an English teacher there in 1928, she immediately set out to raise funds for an art building and developed an impressive collection of Native artworks that was housed in an “art lodge,” later renamed the Ataloo Lodge Museum in her honor.⁴ This humble institution became the earliest Native American art museum in the country. McLendon served as Bacone’s first art department director from 1932 until 1935, a fact that is sometimes left out of research texts about the school. She then

3. Tamara M. Elder, “Ataloo (Mary Stone McLendon) (1896–1967),” *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, web.

4. Gerald Cournoyer Sr. in discussion with the author, January 13, 2021.

handed the reins to artist Acee Blue Eagle, who worked in the Flatstyle of painting and developed what became known as the Bacone style. Many Native American students who came to Bacone back then were influenced by Blue Eagle, Elizondo says, because he showed a common way of painting for not only his people but for surrounding tribes as well, and he depicted different aspects of his culture. The Bacone style paralleled painting styles developed at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, Oklahoma, where Blue Eagle earned his BFA. The Kiowa Six⁵ had established Flatstyle painting at OU in the late 1920s, and a related style emerged from the Studio at the Santa Fe Indian School, following the developments of the San Ildefonso school painters.

Bacone's art department and history of influential directors helped shape a whole movement of Indian art for its time, as it shaped Elizondo. His goal is to continue the work others started and adapt the program to better reflect current times. His immediate goals are to upgrade the curriculum and increase course offerings and enrollment. The school is investing in computer equipment and printers to instruct students in digital art practices. Photojournalist and artist Matt Jarvis (Osage) is teaching the art school's graphic design courses.

A donor recently left \$75,000 to the program just to buy art equipment, and they are looking to secure funding for the Atalua Lodge Museum so that the collection can be preserved and utilized as part of the curriculum. Right now, there is no proper place to store the collection, which has around 3,000 items. The program currently offers a two-year associate degree in art, yet as development plans move forward, the college hopes to establish an accredited four-year BFA degree.

The collective inspiration of Bacone's art directors, past and still living, has prepared Elizondo to help



the next generation of Bacone art students to develop their artwork, tell their own stories, and find their own influences and styles. Like everything, Bacone is always changing and evolving.

ABOVE, TOP Tony Tiger (Muscogee/Sac & Fox/Seminole), *Linking the Past to the Present: Influenced by Ancestry*, 2019, etching, serigraph, ink, water-based paint on paper, 22 × 30 in. Image courtesy of the artist.

ABOVE, BOTTOM Tony Tiger (Muscogee/Sac & Fox/Seminole) and Ruthe Blalock Jones (Shawnee/Delaware/Peoria). Photo: A. Meredith.

Cedar Marie (Standing Rock Lakota descent) is an independent artist and writer.

5. The Kiowa Six were Spencer Asah, James Auchiah, Jack Hokeah, Lois Smoky Kaulaity, Stephen Mopope, and Monroe Tsatoke.