

Love Letters to the Collection
Guest curator selection #6



John Hitchcock (Comanche/Kiowa/German/Dutch), *Flatlander: Red Cloud Rd*, Screen print with handwork, 2017, 30 x 22". MAM Contemporary American Indian Art Collection, Gift of MATRIX Press, copyright the artist, 2017.20.07. Image courtesy of MATRIX Press.

Selected by Cory Walsh

Walsh fled the long winters of Alaska where he grew up for the relatively mild winters of western Montana. When he's not covering art and culture for the Missoulian, he enjoys music, reading, and hiking.

The layers of grids, patterns and symbols in John Hitchcock's "Flatlander" prints at first overwhelm the viewer with so much color and line happening simultaneously. Once you've grounded yourself, you'll likely keep staring, admiring and trying to untangle the minute parts of their expressive beauty and density.

Some of the imagery is drawn from the artist's Comanche ancestry, including Plains Indian beadwork, and other sections are improvised. His inspirations are historical and contemporary, from indigenous art to rock 'n' roll, so at a certain point you have to accept that it's all part of a piece, regardless of where it came from.

He uses it all, and that's probably why his work feels so vibrant. The past and the present are flowing together, never separate.

Today, indigenous artists often talk about how the distinction between "traditional" or "modern" and "contemporary" art from the European way of thinking is strange and inapplicable to their work — most "traditional" art was innovative and adaptive to new materials and the shifting circumstances of the genocide on indigenous people enacted by the U.S. government.

He reaches back to beadwork, a nod to the artisanship of grandmother, his initial inspiration to start drawing, and to European contemporary art like abstract expressionism — dots that could be from a bead pattern bleed down the paper like a 1950s painting from New York. His ways of creating these are just as resourceful, with some technology thrown in along with the traditional printmaking. Many of the patterns were sketched in a notepad from archives and then blown up on a computer and made into print transparencies, then layered and layered, sometimes with hand drawing, in a freewheeling, improvisational way.

The prints were created in a collaboration with the MAM, Matrix Press at the University of Montana, and a group of indigenous artists who visited for residencies to produce new work. Selections were shown for the public and went into respective collections.

Hitchcock's work is one piece of a trove at MAM that's continuing to grow, providing us with a long view of what contemporary indigenous artists were thinking and how they were working over the course of time.

To me, the cumulative beauty Hitchcock finds in all these images and methods that sometimes overlap or sometimes cooperate, makes them feel especially relevant in a time of cacophonous information.

Like a good loud, piece of rock, Hitchcock's prints find something individual and human in all the contradiction, chaos and noise, and turns it into art.