

# At Urbano Project, artist Erin Genia ties together ‘everything in the universe’

Her work addresses the Dakota concept of ‘mitakuye oyasin’ — we are all related

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, Updated November 7, 2019, 12:01 a.m.



Artist Erin Genia has an installation of sound, paintings, and video projection at Urbano Project through Dec. 21. (Jonathan Wiggs/Globe Staff) JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE

In the studio at Urbano Project, a nonprofit art space in Jamaica Plain, teens are filling in pastel outlines of their bodies with rivers, animals, and forests. Benard Nina’s drawing has a tropical green landscape and a cooler blue one.

It's a world where animals and people are united. We treat the animals like family. We don't destroy the land. We embrace everything the land has for us," said Nina, 18.

Urbano's youth artists are paid stipends to spend six hours a week in the studio working with the agency's artist in residence. This fall, that's Erin Genia, a Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate of the Dakota tribe, who also has artwork on view.



Benard Nina, 18, worked on a painting at the Urbano Project Gallery. (Jonathan Wiggs/Globe Staff) JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF/THE BOSTON GLOBE

Identifying with the land and all it offers is central to her aesthetic. Genia bases her art, and her lesson plan, on Dakota philosophy. "Okonwanjidaŋ," the title of her exhibition, is a Dakota word meaning oneness. The works in the show address an ethos of "mitakuye oyasin" — we are all related.

"On its face it's a simple idea," said Genia, 41. "We're related to families, to animals, to plants. To everything in the universe."



The artist believes the philosophy counters the divisive thinking that drove the colonialism, land grabs, and resettlement of tribes that devastated Native American populations. If we could embrace *mitakuye oyasin*, she argues, we could begin to address the most stubborn problems of our time, such as climate change and social and political polarization.

The art in “*Okonwanjidaŋ*” tackles the idea incrementally and from different angles.

Genia’s “*Sound Vessels*” installation features ceramic sculptures channeling sounds including the artist’s heartbeat, a crackling fire, birds, and Dakota and English spoken word. Their forms recall open pit mines and crystals. The piece ties the earthy materiality of clay with the immateriality of sound.



Erin Genia's "Sound Vessels" (2019) is in the foreground with "After Powhatan's Robe" (2018) in the background. (Photo by Erin Genia) FAIZAL WESTCOTT

The video projection “Earthling Takes a Walk” features Genia in performance as Earthling. The character, who looks like a human globe, suggests that rather than being separate from the earth, we *are* the earth, and is a clear progenitor of the conflation of land and self in the body maps the Urbano student artists are making.

Genia, who this year completed her Master of Science in Art, Culture and Technology from MIT, learned of Urbano through her son, Sam, now 18, who spent two years as a youth artist with the agency.

Urbano executive director Stella Aguirre McGregor had seen Genia’s work at MIT but hadn’t made the connection that she was Sam’s mother. When she did, she urged Genia to apply to the residency program. Genia took the position for the fall. Rachel Allen, a Nez Perce artist, will step in for the spring semester. On Nov. 14, Allen and others will

join Genia for an artist panel at Urbano about using air, sound, and earth as materials.

“It’s important to understand [Native American] history for where we are now with immigration and displacement of people,” McGregor said. “You have to understand the resettlement, the colonization, the way they expressed themselves. To get a glimpse of another culture and see it in a deep way is important.”

For Genia, spreading the word about Dakota philosophy is a kind of mandate. “The year I was born, 1978, the Religious Freedom Act passed,” she said. “Mine is the first generation allowed to practice our cultural traditions.”

“Many of us have grown up without these traditions and philosophies,” said the artist, who spent her early years on a South Dakota reservation near her father’s family before moving to New York with her mother, who is of European descent.

“My story is similar to many tribal people,” she said. “We leave a lot.”

But she kept feeling drawn back. “Knowing I have this lineage,” she said, “I have a responsibility to do this work.”



Erin Genia's "Reverberations" at Urbano Project. (Photo by Erin Genia) FAIZAL WESTCOTT

Genia has always been an artist, but her path has been circuitous. She studied at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. Then, at Evergreen State College in Washington, she got a Master of Public Administration in Tribal Governance.

“I’ve always had a double pull, always wanted to do community-based work with tribes and work on indigenous cultural issues like genocide and assimilation,” she said.

In August 2017, just after the total solar eclipse darkened portions of the United States, she and Sam packed her car and drove across the country so she could study at MIT. There, she honed her focus on Dakota philosophy, and her work has garnered international attention. This year, her art is included in “Personal Structures — Identities” presented by the European Cultural Centre at the Venice Biennale.

“At MIT, I started to think about connections between myself and materials,” Genia said,

walking toward the pieces in “Sound Vessels” that look like open pit mines. “These ore materials fuel our existence. We benefit from mining. Clay, glaze, electronics, copper in the wires. I couldn’t escape from that reality.”

These are the problems she keeps circling back to. “I wanted to express the beauty of Dakota philosophy, but also the difficult reality, as well,” she said.

Okonwanjidan and mitakuye oyasin may seem like utopian concepts to non-indigenous thinkers. Genia says the ideology is older than capitalism, older than colonialism.

“These philosophies go back thousands of years. They have always got us through difficult times. It’s a flexible worldview about surviving and thriving,” she said. “And why shouldn’t there be hope, if we are able to let these views revive?”

### **ERIN GENIA: *Okonwanjidan***

At Urbano Project, 29 Germania St., Jamaica Plain, through Dec. 21. 617-983-1007, [www.urbanoproject.org](http://www.urbanoproject.org)

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