the uniqueness of being different, and that makes your choices different. 1 The building of two hundred cones by hand was as much a part of the art as the visible result. Both Transitions and In the Landscape of the Same are culminations of Naranjo-Morse’s constant evaluation of her environment. Like her Tewa ancestors, she looks at building, farming, ceremony, and family with a sense of art. Her contribution to this experience is expressed in her translation of these daily activities into conceptual art forms.

Naranjo-Morse looks at the way Tewa people lived hundreds of years ago and the way they live today, and responds with artwork that comes from a respect for both. By using the clay process as a base for conceptual ideas that are often manifested in different media, she asks difficult questions of herself and her people. Pushing creative boundaries and testing the physical limits of clay through experimentation, she moves into an abstracted sensibility that expresses concept through size, different approaches in process, and the build up and melt down of the clay. Naranjo-Morse continues to plaster her mud oven, and as she involves herself in Pueblo ceremonies, she connects an ageless sense of continuum with a contemporary way of life.

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National Museum of the American Indian


cover photo: greg morse

nora naranjo-morse
transitions, 2003. clay columns, 198.12 x 27.94 cm each

february 14 — may 9, 2004

nora naranjo-morse is a participant in continuum 12 artists, an exhibition presenting new work by twelve contemporary native artists in a series of six paired shows at the national museum of the american indian’s george gustav heye center from april 2003 to november 2004.
Clay—both in its origin and in its potential as a versatile medium—defines the work of Nora Naranjo-Morse. The clay she has collected and processed her entire life is part of the tradition of the Santa Clara people, a group of Tewa Pueblo Indians living along the Rio Grande in Northern New Mexico. The Tewa people have an encompassing sense of the earth in their lives. Houses are traditionally built by coiling mud bricks and plastering with clay, baking ovens are made with mud bricks, and pottery for centuries has been used for cooking and storage. Beyond the usefulness of earth as a building material, its presence in Tewa religious life and emergence stories expresses its absolute importance. Naranjo-Morse has spent her life creating a dialogue with clay that expresses the same curiosity and respect for the material that was present in the Pueblo mind when creating from clay was a cultural necessity.

Before the influx of tourism into the Southwest in the late 1880s and the resultant tourist market for Pueblo pottery, the Tewa sense of creativity and continuity was based on adaptation, experimentation, and change. Tewa people created not for a competitive market but for their own use with no restrictions on size or design motifs. In the Tewa experience, farming, plastering adobe walls, religious ceremonies, and making pottery all held the same sense of creating a relationship with the organic materials present in the local environment. Experimentation and progression in systems, styles, process, and aesthetic were constant. These elements define the Tewa sense of continuum.

When Naranjo-Morse and her husband began building an adobe house on the Santa Clara reservation in 1984, they spent four years coiling 8,000 mud bricks into a 2,000-square-foot space. The walls were plastered with local muds, reflecting the earth upon which the house sits. Like traditional cookware made of micaceous clay, the walls of the house glitter with flecks of mica. Pi’i—a red earth material ground into a fine slip and polished over most traditional Santa Clara pottery—was added to the earth plaster, giving several rooms in the house a strong red hue. The small indentations where hands pressed into clay can be felt when running one’s fingers along the walls. The same organic materials used in making Pueblo pottery were consciously employed in building the house. Naranjo-Morse created the home as she would form an enormous clay vessel.

Building a Pueblo home of traditional materials speaks to the aesthetic values Tewa people hold in high regard. It also expresses an understanding of the way Tewa people thought before the concept of producing one’s culture on demand for an income became a reality. In her 1993 installation,
of producing one's culture on demand for an income became a reality. In her 1993 installation, 
Naranjo-Morse has spent her life creating a dialogue with clay that expresses the same curiosity and respect for the material that was present in the Pueblo mind. Naranjo-Morse is very aware of the relationship between process, audience, and material. As she works with different clay combinations, surface designs, and firing techniques, Mass Producing a Tradition comments on the relationship created between the tourist, the tradesman, and the Tewa people in the selling of their culture.

Naranjo-Morse takes a step further in the 1995 film, What Was Taken...And What We Sell, by asking, “At what cost? At what cost to the sense of continuum and tradition are our cultures being produced and sold?” She juxtaposes archival film clips of Native dances and people with recent footage of Pueblo dances being performed hourly at an Albuquerque tourist center and music by a contemporary Native American rap group to contrast images of traditional culture and the selling of this culture. Naranjo-Morse takes a step further in the 1995 film, What Was Taken...And What We Sell, by asking, “At what cost? At what cost to the sense of continuum and tradition are our cultures being produced and sold?” She juxtaposes archival film clips of Native dances and people with recent footage of Pueblo dances being performed hourly at an Albuquerque tourist center and music by a contemporary Native American rap group to contrast images of traditional culture and the selling of this culture. Naranjo-Morse has consistently moved toward larger conceptual clay forms. In Transitions, one of two recent works debuting in Continuum: 12 Artists, Naranjo-Morse manifests her sense of continuum in six-foot columns made from a mix of micaceous and Santa Clara clay. The columns are paired, making four arcs that create a walk through space. Transitions describes a milestone in the evolution of her work; the pathways of these columns metaphorically lead to the next phase in her artistic process. As she works with different clay combinations, surface designs, and firing techniques, Naranjo-Morse is very aware of the relationship between process, audience, and material.

In the Landscape of the Same, also in Continuum, is an installation piece consisting of one simple, black clay ball surrounded by two hundred earth-colored clay cones. The ten-inch high cones create for the audience an experience in multiples. Naranjo-Morse explains that the work speaks to the idea of being different in a landscape where everything is the same… The ball represents
the uniqueness of being different, and that makes your choices different.” The building of two hundred cones by hand was as much a part of the art as the visible result. Both Transitions and In the Landscape of the Same are culminations of Naranjo-Morse’s constant evaluation of her environment. Like her Tewa ancestors, she looks at building, farming, ceremony, and family with a sense of art. Her contribution to this experience is expressed in her translation of these daily activities into conceptual art forms.

Naranjo-Morse looks at the way Tewa people lived hundreds of years ago and the way they live today, and responds with artwork that comes from a respect for both. By using the clay process as a base for conceptual ideas that are often manifested in different media, she asks difficult questions of herself and her people. Pushing creative boundaries and testing the physical limits of clay through experimentation, she moves into an abstracted sensibility that expresses concept through size, different approaches in process, and the build up and melt down of the clay. Naranjo-Morse continues to plaster her mud oven, and as she involves herself in Pueblo ceremonies, she connects an ageless sense of continuum with a contemporary way of life, passing on a sense of Tewa culture that in its progressive nature adapts to today’s world.

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