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A breathtaking view from atop Whiteface Mountain, New York, is depicted in Niro’s triptych _Grand View_ (2004). This spectacle of a vast terrain of mountains and valleys is situated on Niro’s map, sited as a place of origin. By manifesting the sublime within the land stretched out below, Niro portrays the traditional Mohawk territory as the heart of power and peace.

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—Ryan Rice (Mohawk of Kahnawake)

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Mohawk artist Shelley Niro, raised in an indigenous society that reveres the earth as mother, proclaims women's vital roles through her work in various media. As caretakers, mothers, sisters, aunts, and leaders, Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) women are concerned with the well-being of their entire community and nation. In the photographic series, *The Shirt* (2003), Niro excavates the collective memory of more than five hundred indigenous nations. Her map unfolds, exposing the landscape—identified as Turtle Island—where she pinpoints the ever-beating hearts of these distinct and diverse communities. Niro locates the spirit of indigenous sovereignty within each nation's vitality and endurance, opposing neo-colonialism and all of its complications and implications. As she observes the enormous shift in territorial borders and boundaries due to colonization, Niro heeds a collective voice that declares, "This land is ours." The incantatory ancestral voice is loud and clear, but only to those who listen. It moves across the land, making noises through encounters with forms of displacement and destruction. It hushes to silence, overwhelmed by development and progress. From a community level to a pan-Indian scope, many have tried to make the collective voice heard of displacement and destruction. It is worn by many.

In bringing matters of concern to light, Niro does not hesitate to question, stir, and educate the nation's memory and belief. *The Shirt*, a Niro work that debuted in the format of a short film at the 2003 Venice Biennale, is a series of nine large color photographs depicting a cool and tough-looking Indian woman who faces the camera directly. Poised against the landscape of "America," she wears an American flag bandanna on her head, dark aviator sunglasses, dungarees, and a white t-shirt. The t-shirt bears a different message in each frame, sequentially revealing a discourse on colonialism. Printed in bold black ink, the shirt first reads, "My ancestors were annihilated exterminated murdered and massacred." The narrative printed on the shirt continues in the following frames: "They were lied to cheated tricked and deceived," "Attempts were made to assimilate colonize enslave and displace them," and "And all's I get is this shirt." By frame six, the Indian woman is stripped of her accessories and left topless, exposed to the elements. This brutal, truthful message speaks of a history of invasion that indigenous people have experienced worldwide. Fulfilling the important matriarchal role, Niro declares that the consequences of colonialism are still with us—an essential reminder in a time of globalization when the experience of the "other" tends to be forgotten. In the seventh frame, the Indian woman is gone, replaced by an all-American white woman wearing the shirt, taking off the other woman's back. The last two images focus on the land, a reminder of the sacred realm that continues to be eroded by global and colonial actions. The Shirt is a souvenir, a memory and legacy of the effects of an intrusion felt by indigenous people and their homelands. It is worn by many.

As matriarch, Niro allows herself the freedom to show strength and compassion in voicing collective concerns. In an earlier work, the *Flying Woman Series* (1994), she uses black-and-white photographic collages, framed by Iroquois beadwork patterns and designs, to construct the role of a contemporary woman. *Flying Woman* is a representation of Sky Woman (from the Iroquois story of Creation), who is situated comfortably in the contemporary, soaring above the diaspora of the displaced, searching for others like her. In the process of re-contextualizing history from a traditional matriarchal perspective, Niro defines the sense of belonging to family, community, and nation on her own terms. Niro is Haudenosaunee, a member of the Turtle Clan, a Bay of Quinte Mohawk from the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario. She was born on the American side of Niagara Falls. Her art practice includes painting, photography, sculpture, and filmmaking. Niro gained national attention by juxtaposing dark humor with historical and social issues pertaining to displacement, colonialism, and the roles of women. Niro’s *Moshuak in Beehives* (1990), a hand-tinted photographic series, parodied and countered female stereotypes in a fresh light, and her 1992 film *It Starts with a Whisper*, continued these themes. Both works carry messages of a reality layered with elements of humor, kitsch, popular culture, and the effervescent presence of plus-size indigenous women must often hidden or removed from the mainstream view. Niro presents images that re-integrate the important roles of women—particularly Iroquoian women—in society.

New works in the *Continuum 12 Artists* show include photographs in which Niro attends to sensitive and spiritual needs of both the individual and the community. *The Journey* (2004) includes nine large black-and-white photographs that chronicle a young man's passage through an emotional course of healing. Niro's words, imprinted on the images, comfort, console, and lead the way through grief by gently consoling and wiping away the tears shed in the process of recovery. Her maternal instinct leads the journey; a universal cycle, beyond pain to a place where peace is recovered.
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—**RYAN RICE (MOHAWK OF KAHNAWAKE)**
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