



## TUCSON MUSEUM *of* ART

WESTERN ART PATRONS

### **SPECIAL EDITION NEWSLETTER: Spring 2025**

Tucson Museum of Art and Historic Block  
140 N. Main Avenue, Tucson, Arizona 85701

## **WESTERN ART PATRONS Proudly Presents Twelfth Annual COWBOY CANTINA featuring Cara Romero**



Christine Brindza and Cara Romero in-conversation during the Cowboy Cantina Event

**O**n a warm April 16 afternoon, the Tucson Museum of Art's Western Art Patrons (WAP) held their 12th annual Cowboy Cantina in the museum's Mooney Hall. The multi-faceted event began with a champagne toast to the renowned Chemehuevi

photographer Cara Romero (b. 1977, Inglewood, CA) and her large photograph, *Last Indian Market*, followed by an “Artist-in-Conversation” dialogue orchestrated by the museum’s Senior Curator, Dr. Christine Brindza, and ending with a celebratory dinner at the museum’s Café à La C’Art.

## Background



Christine leads a toast to Cara and *Last Indian Market*

In 2023, the Western Art Patrons’ trip to Santa Fe included a visit to the studio of Cara Romero. The group was enchanted by the artist and her work, resulting in the purchase of a monumental 36” x 119” photograph titled *Last Indian Market* for the TMA collection (now on view in the museum’s *Divergence of Legacy* exhibition through June 22). Subsequently, WAP invited the artist to come to TMA so that they could honor her and her groundbreaking photograph.

## *Last Indian Market*

After a rousing champagne toast, Ms. Romero stood in front of her photograph and explained that it was created in 2015, the Sunday after Thanksgiving, at the Coyote Cafe in Santa Fe. She said she had passed out images of Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*, “to, artists that were pivotal in my career . . . ones that had helped me find my voice,” and the participants included a who’s who of Native American artists, including Ms. Romero’s husband, the celebrated Cochiti Pueblo potter Diego Romero (self-cast as Judas). As a Santa Fe Indian Market artist herself since 2009, Ms. Romero said, “I really wanted to portray the people of our time and this photograph is part parody, myth, and homage; an assemblage of 12 “disciples” framing a Buffalo Man as its charismatic centerpiece, a kind of a pop icon for contemporary Native artists living and working in Santa Fe.” She said that the models were “really in to participating,” and came dressed

as if they were going to Indian Market, with the result being in a compellingly complex metaphorical image that begs for multiple interpretations.



Cara Romero, *Last Indian Market*, 2014, archival photograph on Legacy Platine paper, PP 2/2, Museum Purchase. Funds provided by Western Art Patrons

## **Artist-In-Conversation** with Senior Curator Dr. Christine Brindza and Cara Romero

The artist and the museum's senior curator took their place in front of a seated crowd of approximately 65 guests. Dr. Brindza opened the dialogue with a warm welcome to the WAP members and Cara Romero. Together they discussed the artist's work and examined examples of her photography culled from the museum's vault and local collections.

As a preamble, Ms. Romero began by saying that she is a contemporary fine art photographer who was raised between the urban setting of Houston, TX and the rural Chemehuevi reservation in Mojave Desert, CA. As an enrolled citizen of the Chemehuevi Indian Tribe, Ms. Romero stated that her work is informed by years of exploration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural memory, collective history, and lived experiences from a Native American female perspective.

While studying anthropology at the University of Houston and spending the summers with her dad's side of the family on the reservation, in her junior year she stumbled into a black and white photography class and said, "I fell in love with the mad science of the darkroom." It was through that medium she found a never-ending wellspring of storytelling and, "did what 21-year-olds do and ran off to Santa Fe to study art." It was there she said, "I learned about my culture's artistic history, which proved to be very unique and important."





Representations of Cara Romero's photography from local collectors on view during the program

As a black and white photographer, with the advent of digital color photography she wasn't sure what (or how) to do her work. She found herself struggling with the technical aspects of this new medium and, to her chagrin, in fine art school they were little help saying, "do whatever you want; just give us 20 images at the end of the semester." So with that, she decided to study color photography at a technical college, but found most of her peers were interested in commercial photography, while her work focused on fine art and the beauty of her community. She stated that her photographs today are in color and as much as possible done "in camera," and reflect her native history and culture, which she absolutely loves.

Ms. Romero shared that her work often starts as autobiography, stating, "As a child I was really shy and didn't make eye contact with people, and I found that working with close friends and family was more comfortable." She said that the people in her photos often include those she has known her whole life, and that she draws inspiration from stories of her community. "I lean into tradition — bringing our historical ways into global dialogue, representing our community. I want people to understand our humanity, and how our cultures are changing through time."

"I was always the girl who loved math and science. While I never met a native person at the University of Houston, I learned to not have a set idea. My work is more jazz and improvisational. I have to be flexible and pivot very quickly, otherwise I may suppress the artwork and what happens. Sometimes the art leads you." Ms Romero explained that her photos often represent the changes in our landscape, especially in the Mohave desert with the introduction of wind and solar generators. There is a sense of imminent domain, an intrusion onto the landscape. She said that, "I take a painterly approach to postproduction, and print all of my work myself, which takes the most time, sometimes requiring days and days in the digital darkroom to get everything just right."

Regarding Indigenous Futurism, Ms. Romero explained that it is a movement in Native American art that appeared to her about a decade ago. It is a mantra that, “we as Native art makers are a living, not a vanishing, race and are to be seen as real people.” She wondered how she was going to participate in the movement, as she has already seen the apocalypse in many ways. She stated her concern is, “how we live in the landscape, and about the way we will protect the very first things into the future. In my mind it is less about AI or how fast our computers are, but more about what is going to happen if we can’t grow corn. I think in art, people bring their own experience to it. If somehow, I open peoples’ minds to Native cultures, I’ve earned my way.”

In closing, Ms. Romero said, “I have my own gallery and studio in Santa Fe and I am a mother to three (or four, if you count my husband). And I have a lot of support from my husband, friends, and mentors. My grandmother taught me that we are strong and take up space. I work really hard and want to do as much as I can do before my body gives out, and by doing all this I think it makes me a better mom and artist.” She said her future includes getting back to the darkroom, making a book, and working on mythology.

“Every time a person or museum collects a work I am so moved that they want to live with it. I am so appreciative of their support — I make the work because I love it — it’s an exchange of love.”

With that, the formal presentation ended with group enthusiastically thanking our gracious artist and senior curator, followed by a delicious dinner at the museum’s Café à La C’Art.



Louise Glasser and Judy Betty rabble-rousing

## Who We Are

WAP is an affinity group that supports exhibitions, programs, and art acquisitions for the Tucson Museum of Art and Historic Block, focusing on the celebration and exploration of art of the American West and Indigenous arts.

The Cowboy Cantina was established as a yearly fundraiser to aid WAP’s mission to continue to underwrite projects at the Tucson Museum of Art.

## For More Information

The entire program is available to view as a podcast on the Medicine Man Gallery's website under their "Art Dealer Diaries," hosted by Dr. Mark Sublette.

## More Photos from the Event



Thank you to Robert Knight for authorship of this newsletter and Tony Garcia as photographer.