

Even in the old days, they realised it was a great gift to create art because it came from the spiritual world

Stan Natchez, *Clan mothers*



Balancing Two Worlds

American Indian artist Stan Natchez upholds tradition while embracing progress

Artist Stan Natchez stands in the lower level of the Southwest Museum of the American Indian, his vivid multimedia paintings displayed on the walls behind him. Dressed in an understated grey suit, he talks comfortably with his audience about his artistic visions, the deeper meaning of his underlying themes and the mechanics of his process. Natchez, an artist with high intellect and sardonic wit, is a former art history teacher and magazine editor accustomed to entertaining and challenging his audiences. But today he's not talking to the art collectors who eagerly purchase his works from Tokyo to Copenhagen; he's addressing a dozen young descendants of his local tribe, the Tataviam, a name that roughly translates to 'people facing the sun'.

'You see this Pepsi bottle cap?' Stan asks, gesturing to the Warholesque painting behind

him. 'I'm painting the life I live in. Just because we're Indian, it doesn't mean we don't drink Pepsi or have MTV at home. We're modern. Everybody thinks we live in tipis, but we don't live in the old times. [In this painting] the Pepsi bottle cap represents the world we live in, and the Indian on the horse represents native culture. It's really important to keep our culture, because we live in a time of X-box and Nintendo, so it's easy sometimes to forget that you're Indian.'

Natchez's young tribal members look around at his artwork, squirm and ask him questions. 'Why do you put dollars on the paintings?' one child wants to know. 'Well,' Natchez explains, 'when I paint the dollar bill, I'm saying that the dollar bill is a symbol of the world we live in. When you go to the store, what do you need to buy something? You need money, right? In the 1700s and 1800s Indians painted on deerskin,

buffalo or elk hides. And if you wanted something, hides were your money. So the modern-day hide is the dollar bill.' 'If we bought the painting, would we have to give back the dollars or could we keep them?' the girl asks, sparking laughter among the adults present.

The exchange illustrates the challenges faced by the Tataviam and other tribes native to the LA area. Once thousands strong, European diseases, land grabs, mission slavery and extermination programs decimated their populations, stole their economic base and destroyed most of their cultures. The Tataviam have yet to reap the benefits of federal recognition by the US government that came way back in 1855. Ongoing legal struggles continue, but a new optimism and cultural renewal is dawning, celebrated in part by Natchez's ascent in the art world.

Natchez took a circuitous route to successful, full-time artist. His dad, an intellectual, authored a thesis followed by a book on the connections between Jungian and Native American symbolism. Growing up in the Valley, Natchez was a self-described 'creative' student who didn't always stay between the lines at San Fernando High School. Nevertheless, he went on to earn bachelor's and master's degrees. He then taught humanities at the Orme School, an Arizona college preparatory school on a 26,000-acre working ranch, for 10 years. Later, he served as an editor at *Native Peoples* magazine. All along, he painted, but it was his other education that gave him the spiritual voice that would launch his art career to the next level.

'In the white man's world, if you want to get education, you go to college,' Natchez explains. 'In the Indian way, if you want to get knowledge,



Stan Natchez, *Save the women and children*



Stan Natchez, *Four musicians*