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An exhibition by Indigenous North American artists making work today draws attention to relationships across time and landscape. *Ellen Mara De Wachter* tells the story



Above: Marie Watt, *Skywalker/Skyscraper (Twins) Flint & Sapling*, 2020; facing page: Rose B Simpson, *Tonantzin*, 2021 (detail)

Tribal art today

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For nearly 50 years, Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP) has connected visitors to the local landscape and to contemporary art from around the world. Its new exhibition, 'Hold to this Earth: Works by Contemporary Indigenous North American Artists from Tia Collection', gathers more than 60 works by nearly 40 Indigenous North American artists. Between them, the artists represent at least 35 tribal nations, each with its own cosmology and nuanced understanding of the relationship between living beings and the earth. Drawn from works in a private collection based in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with a focus on the work of Indigenous American artists, the exhibition – mostly in YSP's Underground Gallery – also includes several newly commissioned works and an accompanying programme of talks, workshops and other events. For YSP's senior curator, Sarah Coulson, the exhibition is meaningful against the wider context in both the UK and the US. 'There are complex conversations happening around how people relate to land, who belongs, migration and people being moved forcibly off land, including Indigenous people in America,' she says. 'These conversations are timely and urgent.'

Although the many artists represented in the show come from tribes with different histories and stories, which are articulated in various ways in their work, the exhibition also aims to highlight the commonalities between many Indigenous Americans. This includes shared experiences of the effects of industry on land and communities – themes that resonate powerfully in Yorkshire, a place marked by the history of coal mining where its communities, identity, economics and culture have all been affected by the rise and the later decline of that heavy industry.



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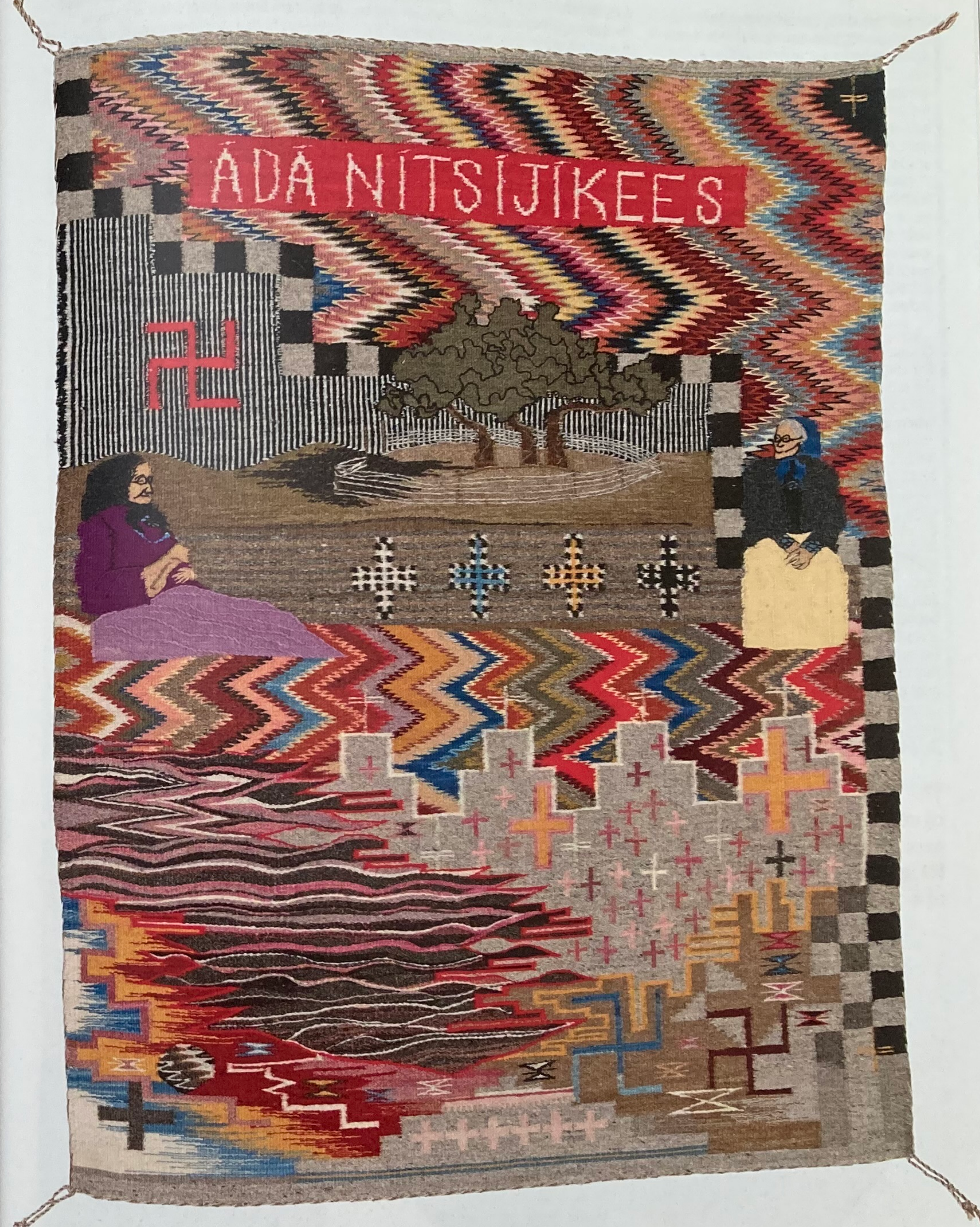
But while it acknowledges the weight of historical events and influences, the exhibition has a thoroughly contemporary focus on Indigenous American artists making work today, and at the cutting edge of contemporary art. In preparing the exhibition, Coulson adopted a position of cultural humility (which involves respecting and understanding the cultural identities of others while not viewing oneself as an expert in them), and worked with artist Del Curfman, cultural liaison for Tia Collection, who has Apsáalooke, or Crow Tribe of Montana, heritage. Curfman helped link the team at YSP with the artists in the show, to ensure communications were culturally sensitive, and artists' needs met.

For many Indigenous North Americans, the interconnectedness of all things is fundamental. This is expressed in the respect and preservation of ecology and ancestry, and in an awareness that the moment 'now' is composed of past, present and future, which coexist in a non-linear way, and are often layered in the land and in stories. Nicholas Galanin, who is from the Sitka Tribe of Alaska, alludes to the importance of interconnectedness in his work *Ancestral Map of Return* (2023), a sculpture comprising a deer hide dotted with a firmament of tiny white painted stars, each of which stands for the remains of an Indigenous person held in a museum or university collection somewhere in the world. Those human remains were taken and continue to be withheld from the communities to which the individuals belong. Galanin's work operates as a metaphorical map, guiding us towards the restitution of ancestral remains, its stars illuminating the possibility of healing some of the historical trauma that continues to affect Indigenous American communities.

Resilience is a central theme of the show, and many works of art demonstrate how Indigenous tribes celebrate and uphold their identity and cultural traditions despite the legacy of genocide, forcible removals and extreme social injustice. The Diné, or Navajo, textile artist Tyrrell Tapaha uses traditional weaving techniques and organic materials to create tapestries with dynamic imagery and striking symbolism. A sixth-generation weaver who works primarily as a shepherd, Tapaha forages the dyes and uses hand-spun wool from their Churro sheep. Their wall-hangings, such as *Adá Nitsijikees: Think for Yourself* (2022), feature portraits of family members, geometric patterning and signs including the ancient Navajo emblem of the Whirling Log, a dynamic cross that stands for balance, healing, protection and the four cardinal directions, or winds. These pieces foreground diversity, honour ancestors and convey the intense experience of modern life in a material that is profoundly and directly connected with nature.

Other works are equally tactile and textural, qualities that coexist with a deeply embodied relationship with land. In the sculptures of Rose B Simpson, a Tewa of Kha'p'oe Ówíngéh (or Santa Clara Pueblo) artist, the earth is conceived as a sustaining force, not just the material out of which the sculpture is formed. Simpson sees her works as tools to heal and even cure the violent impact of contemporary culture including the objectification, stereotyping and disempowerment she has experienced. Her sculptures also honour the matrilinear tradition of the Santa Clara Pueblo people. These include figures such as *Tonantzín* (2021), a pre-Columbian Aztec mother goddess – rendered in ceramic, steel, leather and brass – that holds in its hand a morsel

Above: Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, *Places of Healing*, 2020; facing page: Tyrrell Tapaha, *Adá Nitsijikees: Think for Yourself*, 2022



of clay formed by Simpson's daughter. A sculpture by Simpson's mother, the artist Roxanne Swentzell, is also included in the exhibition. Swentzell's *Making Herself* (2000) is a figure sitting on the ground and intently focused on the act of fashioning the lower half of one of her legs from a coil of red clay. Here, earth is literally the substance out of which the artist is constituted.

For Dakota Mace, a Diné artist based in Madison, Wisconsin, the land is the basis for one of the exhibition's new commissions, and engages with YSP's 500-acre estate. Mace refers to her large-scale abstract wall-based work, which employs cyanotype photography and will also incorporate clay and painting processes, as a collaboration

with the land in Yorkshire and Madison. 'I wanted to create a piece that looks at the deep significance of the complex cultures within Yorkshire, the communities that call it home,' the artist says, speaking on the phone in March, having recently arrived in Yorkshire on a research trip. 'But also to look at how these two different locations, although separated by thousands of miles, hold a lot of weight in terms of places of change or places where multiple communities existed.' In Mace's work, the land is not just the backdrop but an active participant. 'These locations specifically become activated as we listen to their fragmented and faded narratives,' she says. 'So these pieces represent a temporality

that doesn't adhere to what we understand of Western linear history, but embraces a place as both a storyteller and a subject. The stories and the histories and the land itself continuously hold and renew us.'

Another new commission is *Bear's Tipi* (2026), by artist and activist Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, of the Cheyenne and Arapaho nations. Installed outside, it will link the Yorkshire landscape with the sacred site of Bear's Tipi, an elevated igneous rock formation in Wyoming, which is revered by many native tribes. There are several versions of the Bear's Tipi origin myth; most revolve around the story of a bear chasing children across the land, who are saved when the rock formation rises out of the ground, lifting them to safety. The children are then transformed into the Pleiades star cluster. In the late 19th century this sacred site was renamed 'Devil's Tower', a forbidding title that evokes the settler violence that is still perpetrated on Indigenous people and land, with Bear's Tipi routinely desecrated by tourists and rock climbers.

Heap of Birds' art, which often employs the language of signage and posters, and from whose 2018 suite of prints *Defend Sacred Mountains* the exhibition takes its title, has long been concerned with the notion of native hosts and the practice of defending sacred mountains. His *Bear's Tipi* sculpture will consist of a circle of eight signs modelled on motorway signage, each announcing one of the many Indigenous tribes that hold Bear's Tipi sacred as 'host' for the state of Wyoming, the present-day name for the land on which Bear's Tipi stands. In each, the name 'Wyoming' is printed in mirror image, as a way of looking back to the past and a reminder of how things as they stand are very much back-



'The interconnectedness of all things is fundamental, expressed in the respect for and preservation of ecology and ancestry'



Left: Teresa Baker, *Infinite*, 2023; above, left: Nicholas Galanin, *Ancestral Map of Return*, 2023



to-front. The artist has made related works across the US and Canada since the 1980s. 'It's subversive but in a gentle way,' Heap of Birds says. At YSP the circle will face east, towards the sunrise. 'We honour that passage and the passage of the stars above us,' he adds. 'We're a circle too, like the sun and the earth are, so we're acknowledging the continuum and all that circularity.'

Protest and activism are also important themes for Indigenous American artists responding to many forms of social injustice, including the disproportionate rate at which Indigenous women and girls go missing. *Placeholder (Relations)* (2024) is a reclaimed red wool blanket embellished with the word 'missing' that is spelled out in tiny white beads, created by Marie Watt, a member of the Turtle Clan of the Seneca Nation of Indians. Watt's work draws on ideas from Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois, political structures, which predate Western feminism, and in which women have foundational political, economic and social power.

One of the most high-profile activist events of recent times was the Standing Rock encampment, which began in April 2016 and lasted nearly a year. Thousands of Indigenous people and supporters, known as the 'Water Protectors', gathered to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline, which runs through sacred land near the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, threatening both the local water supply and ancient burial grounds. Yatika Starr Fields, who is part of the Cherokee, Creek and Osage nations, attended the protest and salvaged tents from a brutal police raid on the encampment, repurposing them as sculptures. In *Tent Metaphor (Standing Rock)* (2017), the brightly coloured synthetic dwellings are marked with Indigenous patterns and inscribed with

slogans. Suspended from the gallery ceiling, they evoke kites and cocoons: lightweight and delicate, but also strong and resistant.

Repurposing modern materials to celebrate the complex identity of Indigenous Americans is at the heart of Choctaw/Cherokee artist Jeffrey Gibson's practice. Gibson, who represented the US at the 2024 Venice Biennale, creates sculptures celebrating Indigenous, popular and queer cultures. For *Everlast (The Quiet One)* (2012), he adorned a found punching bag with regalia including beads and crystals, wool, and nylon fringing. The metaphor of the punching bag is a stark reference to the historical and contemporary abuses meted out to Indigenous people, but the care and attention with which Gibson has elevated it lends the object a sense of power, resilience and pride in traditions that long predate today's dominant culture.

Partway through the run of 'Hold to this Earth', on 4 July, the US will celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence and the so-called 'birth' of the nation. In a land where there are 575 federally recognised Indigenous tribes, this is, Coulson notes, 'incredibly problematic'. 'We are telling a story that was there long before that. Many exhibitions have looked back, with a sense that contemporary Indigenous identity is still completely rooted in the past or has almost been erased,' she continues, 'but we are looking at artists who are very much celebrating what that identity means right now.'

● 'Hold to this Earth: Works by Contemporary Indigenous North American Artists from Tia Collection', 13 June to 18 April 2027, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield. ysp.org.uk, free with National Art Pass



Left: Roxanne Swentzell, *Making Herself*, 2000; far left: Jeffrey Gibson, *Everlast (The Quiet One)*, 2012