



Sarah Sense

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INTERTWINED, Artist Statement

Like photographs, stories are a recorded history, merging time and memory repeatedly both orally and visually. These works in *INTERTWINED Stories of Splintered Pasts* focus on history of family and the placement of self in a community and also as an outsider. An architect once told me, “always be an outsider,” I think that this was his way of understanding international socio-political circumstance when creating community dwellings. I understand it now as a way to think differently, to understand something that may not be within reach emotionally. My life’s journey in the last five years has lead me through thirty-five counties which originated as a means to learn of Indigenous arts internationally. It was a bold and at times lonely path, but as my steady determination to meet Native artists and learn through my own “field-search” about constructs of colonization in the Americas, I began to live the art. Life changed constantly and the one thing that remained the most consistent was family and land. Going home was unlike any other joy in my life, except for engaging with nature. Trekking and diving became an inspiration for creating and living, and photography became a record of the beauty of the landscapes that I so luckily encountered. My weaving practice which begun with Chitimacha reservation landscapes (2004), evolved into interpretations of Hollywood appropriation of the Native experience, most simply explained, the real with the fake, most accurately explored with my personas of the Cowgirl and Indian Princess. Such images were also intermixed with familial archives, and movie poster, commenting on reality and misconceptions of idealizing culture. As my travels began landscapes grew into my work beginning with the Weaving the Americas series (2011), mostly landscapes of deserts, mountains and jungles; then with Weaving Water (2013), which focused on underwater scenes, the sun and the moon. While away, meeting with Indigenous communities, I became more intrigued with my own family again, in many ways, being that outsider encouraged me to grow closer to my origins. As travel and life merged into one, making connections between family, research, and landscape became more natural. Talking to people about their stories and experiences now feels like talking to an old friend. Long ago, when encountering my travels, I assured myself that I would not attempt Europe, I’ve done it before and it is not relevant to my work on Indigenous communities. My journey had another idea, and so I was brought to the UK and then stayed. Returned and then stayed again. Like I said, these things were just happening, and stories were unfolding to me while circumstance created new realities. When I realized that Europe would hold me for longer than I would want, I begun to consider various research that could be important, and there were a few, but the most exciting was an old story that my Grandma Chillie told me long ago about the Choctaw Irish relationship, and the Choctaw community gifting money to the Irish during the Irish

famine in the 1840s. My Grandma Chillie is Choctaw and grew up in Broken Bow until her first marriage in her early twenties. She is a storyteller, photographer, world traveler, basket collector and writer. She told me a few years ago, "Sarah, you are living the life that I always wanted." I told her a few weeks ago, "Grandma, I am more like you than any one I have ever known." She agreed. Just then she pulled out a document that she had written in August 2014, called "The Choctaw Irish Relation." I moved to Ireland in November 2014.

At ninety-one she is recording her stories of family, traveling, love, and disappointments in a creative writing class at the local university. The text that you see in this series is her words, re-written by me. I recount history in two different countries, and different communities to bring perspective to an old story, turned legend that still holds social relevance with compassion and empathy. The story goes: shortly after the Choctaw were removed and displaced in Oklahoma on the *Trail of Tears*, word reached the community that there was starvation in Ireland. The Choctaw gathered funds and sent it to Ireland as a gift to help. This gift had such a profound impact on the Irish that the story lives strong in Ireland today. In telling one Irishman that I was Choctaw he got tears in his eyes. It is a recent past and still remembered. Learning of this story from my Grandmother, and to then move to Ireland feels like a closed circle.

To re-write and re-record her experience is like breathing her life into her old home of Oklahoma. The Choctaw basket patterns are from the two baskets that she gifted to me in the summer of 2012 and the Chitimacha basket weave is consistent to the one that I bought from one of the last living Chitimacha basket weavers, our Chairman and my friend, John Paul-Darden. Weaving has been my most natural process of communication. While my grandmother was never a weaver, and I never knew my Grandfather, I am grateful that my Chitimacha community has given me the blessing to weave. In this series of work, I am showing my gratitude to my ancestors for guiding my journey, bringing me here to Oklahoma and for giving my grandmother an opportunity to share her stories.

- Sarah Sense (Chitimacha/Choctaw)