

Fields of the Future

A Podcast by Bard Graduate Center

Episode 1: Rapheal Begay—Life and Art on the Navajo Nation

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Transcript

Introduction: This is Fields of the Future. An interview series by Bard Graduate Center that highlights the work of scholars, artists, and writers who are changing the way we think about the material world. In this episode anthropologist Hadley Jensen speaks with Navajo photographer and curator Rapheal Begay about his life and work, land stewardship, and what it means to pay attention to the things we take for granted.

Hadley Jensen: Hi. I'm Hadley Jensen, Bard Graduate Center, American Museum of Natural History, postdoctoral fellow in museum anthropology, and I'm thrilled to be talking with Rapheal Begay, who is the photographer and curator from the Navajo nation. Hi, Rapheal. Thank you for joining us.

Rapheal Begay: Hi Hadley Yá 'át'ééh, as we'd like to say. And if you don't mind, I'd just like to provide a quick intro. Again, Yá 'át'ééh, Hello. Shi 'éí Rapheal Begay yinishyé / Honágháahnii nishłj / Kin łichii'nii báshichíín / Tábaahí dashicheii / 'Áshjji hí dashinalí / Tségháhoodzání nasha. So just a quick introduction from me to you, and I'm very happy to be here.

[Translation: Hello, My name is Rapheal Begay, I am the One Who Walks Around clan, Born for the Red House clan, My maternal grandfather is the Water's Edge clan / My paternal grandfather is the Salt clan / I live in Window Rock, Navajo Nation]

Hadley Jensen: Well, thank you for joining us. So to begin, I just like to ask you about your relationship to objects.

Rapheal Begay: My relationship to objects is one centered on imagination and curiosity that stems from my childhood. Growing up on the reservation, I would see my grandfather creating weaving tools for my grandmother who would then spend her afternoons weaving. I have faint memories of those things, but today when I venture back home, I can see those objects. I can understand that there's a certain amount of energy inherently within them. These objects are also informed by family, place, material that would be found within Hunter's Point where I'm from. And as an artist, as a curator, I look at the role of projection within my work and the value that we inherently project on objects, the context in which we present those objects. That is the main interest for me. And as a person who is a creator rather than a consumer in this particular relationship, how do I take ownership of that? How do I take intent into mind with the creation of objects or with the idea of identity represented in objects. And those are the types of conversations that I like to have.

Hadley Jensen: Thank you. I think this provides a nice point of entry to a conversation about your recent photographic series A Vernacular Response. And I'm just quoting from your website, "As a photographic series, AVR is the ongoing documentation of the Navajo nation. Thereby, presenting and representing culture, community, and creation in various forms. Through preexisting aesthetic relationships found within and of the reservation, the series offers an exploration and expression of identity, place, and time." So with that in mind, could you tell me a little bit more about your relationship to place and how this series articulates that?

Rapheal Begay: So within A Vernacular Response, just to provide some contexts, while I was at UNM and pursuing my undergraduate degree. This was at the time when the Dakota Access Pipeline and the social justice around that moment in history was happening. And I thought, within my work, who am I to represent my people? Who am I to represent these ideas? and Adrienne Salinger, my mentor at the time, challenged me to take on those questions. And with that, I returned home again to Hunter's Point where a lot of memories are held. And one thing that I thought about this particular place was, how do I represent the intimacy, the fragility, the fluidity of memory that's inherently tied to my childhood to moments when I returned to my grandmother's home to celebrate, to mourn, to laugh? And thinking about that relationship, I try and look at stewardship of the land. I work with the Navajo nation and just the beginning of this year, before this pandemic started, I attended a regional chapters meeting in the Eastern Agency within New Mexico of the reservation. And there was a delegate, Delegate Daniel Tso, mentioned that we should relate to place by way of L.A.W.S., the acronym being land, air, water, and the sacred. So thinking about that in relationship to place, how does one become a steward of these memories that are inherently found there? The identity, the community. And as a photographer, how do I represent that yet challenge it at the same time and have a conversation that's worth discussing? With reference to the series and place, I imagine that I am creating a place for my people within a contemporary art context. At the same time, representing those emotions, those thoughts, those process, and trying to find a way to have balance of both an internal perspective and an external audience. For example, a lot of the imagery is the documentation of the reservation, right? And it's from a personal point of view and I don't necessarily mean to represent the entire reservation, but this is just a moment. It's a part of my daily experience. It's a part of my life. Now to take that and say, showcase it here in Santa Fe, for example, how does that transform? How does that translate? How does these places of hope, these places of love and life, how do they transform and move? I mean, from Arizona to New Mexico and throughout the Southwest and back again, how do those ideas and my relationship to place transform in that way as well? With respect to place, I do my best to honor it. And one thing that I want to develop moving forward is the incorporation of land acknowledgement within my photography, with respect to the communities that are there and the surroundings, the memories, the history, and projecting an informed future and informed context of what that place can become. And how do you do that as a photographer? And that's something I'm interested in, how do you visually create that?

Hadley Jensen: Yeah. Well, I also wonder how your vision for this project has progressed over time and how your own relationship to AVR has shifted or transformed.

Rapheal Begay: Initially it began as just documenting my home. That was the first step. And I started to realize the value that was found within this everyday experience of being able to revisit my home, revisit my childhood place and being, and relate to my journey as not necessarily an artist, but as a human being. Growing up when I was younger, there was a lot of internalized racism, being too dark, being too rez. And taking on this series, this moment of documenting my home, has allowed me to embrace my identity in ways that I never thought was possible. And to honor my home, my family, and the community that has created me that continues to inform and inspire me and use that energy and those concepts to project and have conversations about visual sovereignty, indigenous storytelling, Diné contemporary storytelling at that. And since I've been on this journey, now I look at it, my work specifically, AVR, not necessarily it's just a photography series, but a theoretical framework to my life and therefore A Vernacular Response. And as I continue to grow, I would imagine that it will teach me ways of valuing the smaller moments in my life, whether that's a piece of twine on the sheep corral that has a certain gleam and glisten under the setting sun. How do I visually represent that to harken back to my childhood and playing with those actual twines and tying things and trying to make a rug out of it. And it's allowed me to also go back to that first initial challenge of representing my people and creating a place for the visual representation of community. And I look at it not necessarily as a one-off gig, but my life's work, and I'm committed to that. And moving forward, how do I create stewardship in mine, allow for informed consent as a photographer, and how can I bring along my colleagues and my friends and fellow creatives to have this conversation? Because I'm just one person. And it would be amazing to see this process, this approach, implemented, say, on the reservation, in schools. How would that look like? Back in the mid-'90s, there was a group of photographers who visited the reservation and provided cameras to the children. It's called Shooting Back. And it was really interesting to see the value that these young children were giving to their daily lives by capturing it through photography. And lo and behold, sure enough, my neighbor up the street was a part of that project. And so I had this book in-hand and I literally walked out my front door and walked up the street and I said, "Did you're a published photographer?" And she said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "Look right here." And she began to cry. And she said, "I never knew what happened with those photos. I never knew what was going to happen with it." And I said, "Isn't it beautiful that you took a moment out of your day, out of your life, to put value to something that is so banal?" And I would just want to remind people that we inherently have that power to give value, to give positivity, to project meaning, belief, revolution, love. And as the series continues, I'm also learning that in the process and how do I combine photography, curation, installation, academia, and put it together and have those conversations. Because I think it's endless.

Hadley Jensen: Thank you. That series is so powerful because you positioned it as a form of contemporary Navajo storytelling. And I was wondering if ... we've touched on this a little bit, but if you could speak more about this intersection between life and art in your photographic and your curatorial work.

Rapheal Begay: Sure. And to begin, with my curatorial work, it has stemmed from my creative work as an artist. Because again, putting value and projecting and empowering fellow creatives is something I inherently love to do. But within my work, I am also doing that to reservation-

based aesthetics that don't necessarily have a sheen or are a product, but are rather an experience. And as a photographer, we have the option of documenting moments for ourselves. And sometimes I forget the value of an image because I'm so used to churning it out. And my fear is, I don't want to become a machine. I want to be able to value what I'm creating and not haphazardly project these ideas out there without understanding them, without accepting them to begin with. But moreover, when I'm walking out, say on the reservation and I see something that is so beautiful, that is worth a photograph. And sometimes that's just for you. And I like to refer to that as "visual blessings," thinking about photography and the inherent depth that it has when you take. I mean, we say we take an image, we take a photo, we shoot something, we capture it, we document it. It inherently has a depth to it. And we don't necessarily live our lives that way. I mean, there is this exchange of energy, of ideas, of community, past and history and stories, but our lives aren't necessarily aligned that way. So lately I've been thinking as an artist, as a member of the Navajo nation, as an employee of the Navajo nation, how do I do just to the image that represents not necessarily just me, but this journey? And I believe that's what's inherently powerful and universal about the series, it's about home. It's about self, it's about community, it's about land, and it's these simple aspects of life that, in a fast-paced world, we forget to take a moment and really acknowledge it and take care of it. It's interesting to see how my life and the art that I create begin to mirror one another. For a lot of Indigenous artists and creatives, I believe it's an extension of who they are and not necessarily a product.

Hadley Jensen: I mean, you've spoken a little bit about this, but I just wonder what process means to you and also how the current pandemic has changed your artistic process.

Rapheal Begay: Again, looking at my life as art and art as my life, the process itself is just living and it's sort of blunt in that way, but we live in a very beautiful world and we can consume things and we can curate our own experiences and our own life ways, right, with the things that we inherently value and put into our lives. As Diné, as Navajo, as a Navajo man, that comes first within anything I do. And then my role in society or community, or my job comes second. So looking at the process and the way that I create, I believe that it is one of acceptance. It is one of reflection. And is one of activation. When I travel and walk around the reservation, I'm not necessarily looking for a photograph to represent an idea. I go in with no expectations and I allow the land and the visuals and the aesthetics and the ideas to formulate on the spot and speak to me. I think there's an inherent power in that. And in that moment, you can really relate to your surroundings. And as I'm walking and I see these visual blessings, I look at the light and how it touches certain aspects of the Sagebrush, how it hits off the sheep corral. And slowly but surely, this inherent value that's found within our cultural landscape starts to show itself. And I'm not necessarily trying to take, I'm trying to document that particular moment. I mean, a hundred years from now, if you were to look up historic Navajo photography, is it going to be me or Edward Curtis or whoever? And I'm curious about this legacy that's inherently found within photography that is synonymous with memory, with identity, with resiliency. And with that in mind, during this pandemic and the world is watching Navajo and wanting to document this particular moment. I took a step back, personally. Because one thing that came out of that poverty porn was this questioning of, why are we allowing others to dictate our

experience? Why are we allowing others to represent us in this fashion? And now with this pandemic, it has awakened this new found goal of mine to empower my colleagues. And with this pandemic in mind, it allowed me to really go home, reflect, and think about what I really value and why I create. And so now, intent is at the forefront of what I do, and respect, and allowing that and looking through a lens of love and art to navigate this world that we live in. And moreover, taking ownership of what I create, how I speak about certain things, my own understandings. We look at the social justice movements that are happening at this moment. A lot of it is about reflection, about acceptance, about challenging your own sense of comfort.

Hadley Jensen: Thank you, I think that is really powerful. One thing that struck me in this conversation is that it seems like the act of paying attention is also important to you. And that is something I think we are all forced to do or maybe invited to do in this current moment more than we have been. And I was talking with a friend recently about this, this time of deep uncertainty, when it feels like it's impossible to really plan for anything or predict anything, and how do you find a way forward in the midst of that? But I do feel like it's important to put points on the horizon in a way that you can still visualize and move toward. And so, I wonder in this current moment where you're finding inspiration.

Rapheal Begay: What inspires me right now? I would say light. And I think about where I'm from, light plays a major factor in the way we move around throughout the day. And we have four sacred colors: white, blue, yellow, and black, which are the byproduct of the light that is inherently available, I guess, throughout the day. For example, when the sun is rising, it's a white sky and eventually leads to blue. And as the sun sets, leads to yellow, and as the sun eventually does set it's black. And that's where those colors come from. And I think about light as prayer, light as projection, and interestingly enough, How does that add to the conversation of Navajo contemporary photography with respect to the development of an image? And to try and take that and to really embrace it. I'm taking time now to really switch over to analog photography, which is where I initially started back in sixth grade for the school newspaper, and trying to, again, find that value in it and understand it. And how do I harness that magical quality that is found in the documentation of a moment that will last forever if you really want it to?

Hadley Jensen: Well, in thinking about what I wanted to talk with you about today, I came up with a list of questions and they felt like big questions and open-ended questions, but I think that this time that we're in really invites big questions. So thank you for being willing to take those on. Just in reference to what you were speaking about in terms of light, I think for anyone who's spent time in the Southwest, light is different here. And it's pervasive and you sort of live with it and alongside it. I think it animates a lot of things and that feels very specific to this landscape. But for people who may not have traveled to the Navajo nation, you spoke a little bit about the importance of the four colors, which correspond to the four sacred mountains. And I just wondered if you could talk a little bit more about Indigenous ways, specifically Diné ways of seeing and knowing the landscape and the fact that there are these features of geography that provide some orientation for the way you live.

Rapheal Begay: The Navajo nation has five agencies and each agency has its own quirks. Yeah. Each region has its own dialect and ways of understanding the world. And the mountains are usually an indicator of being on one side, allows you to live a certain lifestyle based off of the type of soil, vegetation, and landscape inherently there versus on the other. I suppose, on the reservation, in order for you to really have land, you would need to either have livestock or use it in terms of creating produce to be self-sufficient. And that doesn't necessarily happen because we live in a different world and we're transitioning, I suppose, modernizing. And there's a certain nostalgia that's inherently found with that lifestyle. And I recall having a conversation with a friend of mine and he asked me if I were to plant, would I feel embarrassed about it, or do I think it's beneath me? And I said, "No, I don't. But I think I wish I could." To imagine my family coming together to our family plot and planting corn like I was a child back in the day. That is something I hope I see this coming year. And with the land itself though, I mean, I think of these amazing herbalists who can understand and respect the power and the magic that each plant has. To offer prayer to a Sagebrush on the side of the road, and take a piece of it and put it in your wallet so you always have some green in your pocket, is something very arbitrarily that you wouldn't necessarily consider. Or to, say, valuing water in a very desolate landscape and how to use that water to have a twenty-first-century livelihood, in the time when washing your hands was a challenge for a part of the reservation. A lot of the people who were affected in that way had learned to overcome, learn to adapt with what the land was willing to give. And as climate change continues to propel itself closer to our homes, I imagine the environment is going to influence the way we live.

Hadley Jensen: Thank you so much. I think just in bringing our interview to a close, I just want to invite you to share a little bit about some of your current and forthcoming projects. Whether those are photographic or curatorial, I'd love to hear more about that.

Rapheal Begay: I'm the co-creative director for Diné Pride here on the reservation. And we have an annual event every summer. Due to COVID, we were unable to do that, to provide space for recognition, and celebration, and advocacy for the two-spirit LGBTQ+ community. So in light of that, we took an opportunity to create a virtual event. And I've always wanted to try to create and curate the show. So this was the perfect opportunity. And as a plug, Diné Pride, for the remainder of the year has *Sacred Together*, the first indigenous art showcase from our organization, featuring about sixteen artists. Specifically from the Southwest and more specifically from the reservation. And it was really beautiful to see the amount of talent that is just a click away. With a similar intent in mind, I had the opportunity to collaborate with *Fraction Magazine*, an online contemporary photography platform based here in Santa Fe. I've had the pleasure to be a guest curator and to celebrate and acknowledge and empower two-spirit LGBTQ+ storytelling. The issue features some friends and colleagues of mine: Ryan Dennison, Nate Lemuel, Nelson Morales, and Ryan Young. These visual powerhouses that are going to be doing great things. And a lot of my work now is trying to find collaborative initiatives that allows me to use platforms to speak to these ideas of identity, love, art in our everyday lives. And this year in 2020, I have the pleasure to be one of twelve New Mexico Artists To Know Now. And so moving into 2021, I want to invest in my home state and find my own community there and create something on the reservation that allows for the similar

conversations to happen and not necessarily at an external point of view. So with that in mind, I'm pleased to share that I'll be going home in true fashion and working closely with the staff at LOOM Indigenous Art Gallery in downtown Gallup. I'll be having a solo exhibition in December and the show is entitled "Łichíí," which is "red" in Navajo, where I'll be focusing on the intersection of photography and weaving with respect to light, color, value, appropriation, what is inspired form and design. And I think there's something very interesting happening with respect to LOOM Indigenous Art Gallery being based in downtown Gallup where majority of the economy is founded on trading posts and Native art everywhere in glass showcases. And to try and bring a little bit of light and revolution to this space is what I intend to do. The show will open December 5th, which is my birthday. And so it's going to be a gift to myself, but also for my community. One of my boss, Dr. Perphelia Fowler, a fluent Navajo speaker, a true blessing in my life and mentor. She speaks of this traditional, not so much practiced way of celebrating your birthdays is not necessarily receiving gifts but by giving it. By valuing your life and knowing where you come from with respect to your parents. You give them a gift for allowing you to come into this world. And I think that's very beautiful. And I really appreciate this opportunity to share these ideas, and to project this beauty and balance that's inherently found within my heart and my home and my people, and share that. So ,thank you very much, Hadley.

Hadley Jensen: Thank you, Rapheal Begay for joining us today for The Fields of the Future podcast. It's really been a joy and a privilege to speak with you and to hear more about your work. So thank you again.