

## Landscape, Memory and Myth: An Interview with Native American Artist, Jeremy Dennis



**Fiona Cashell** (Interviewer)  
Visual Artist/Educator  
Dublin

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### Abstract

*Jeremy Dennis is a photographer and visual artist living and working in Southampton, New York. He is a member of the Shinnecock Indian Nation; a federally recognised tribe of historically Algonquian-speaking Native Americans based at the eastern end of Long Island, New York. He received his MFA from Pennsylvania State University in 2016, and in the same year, was one of only two artists in the USA awarded the Harpo Native American Residency Fellowship.*

*In his work, Jeremy channels his experiences as an indigenous artist to explore and expand upon issues relating to identity, assimilation and post-colonialism. Through a combination of digitally manipulated photography, site-specific installation, performance and documentation, Dennis attempts to create multi-dimensional conversations around local and broader contemporary Native American issues, whilst also referencing its rich and complex history. [jeremynative.com](http://jeremynative.com)*

FC: *What was it like growing up on an Indian reservation in New York?*

JD: I think the most common feeling of growing up on a reservation is the feeling that we aren't here. Aside from the Powwow, it can feel as though we are a forgotten or invisible people. Since we live on the eastern edge of Long Island, not many people pass through the area, so they only have the impression of huge estates and mansions. When people ask about the reservation, they wonder if we have things like electricity for example, but it is not so different from anywhere else. However, there are some differences. We are a sovereign nation with a tribal government.

FC: *What do you consider to be the most important part of your creative process?*

JD: Much of my creative process includes gathering research, oral stories, and other texts as a common starting point to find new meaning and interpretation, often being combined and presented in my photography.

FC: ***Nothing Happened Here** is a provocative portraiture series in which we see a subject pierced in different parts of the body by an arrow; appearing almost indifferent or resigned to any perceivable threat. Can you expand on the symbolism you have used here?*

JD: *Nothing Happened Here* is a series of portraits based upon my own reflections of historical scars between Native Americans and non-indigenous Americans. I wanted to make visible the scars and subconscious guilt's of colonisation, revealing its persistence in both peoples. The indifference to pain in their expressions relates to the indifference to history. I used arrows as a symbol for indigenous people, so that our presence was felt in the images. The images aren't meant to be interpreted as literal violence, but rather, our continued existence as indigenous people creates this violence.



Above: **Nothing Happened Here #7**, part of the *Nothing Happened Here* series.

FC: *In many of your pieces you utilise narrative in contrasting ways, moving between the exploration of Indigenous mythology through visual storytelling (see “Stories”), right through to questioning ethnic stereotyping and representation in mainstream media and cinema. Can you talk a bit about your use of narrative and how it helps you to both conceptualise and create dialogue around Native American culture and history?*

JD: Narrative portraiture has always made sense in relation to the history I wanted to capture and the photos I wanted to create. Often times I am working with partial histories, which inherently are best represented as fragments of visual representations. Presenting myths and historical moments as the same body of work legitimises both, equally; while making them appear more real and present.



Above: **Give it Back** – From the series “Stories”, 2013- Present.

FC: *As we’ve touched upon, the exploration of Native American mythology is a principle feature within your body of work. Why do you think mythology is important? In addition, how do tribes like the Shinnecock Indian Nation preserve them?*

JD: I think I will be working with myth for a very long time because of how I see the future of Shinnecock people. Our historical narratives have many moments that remove us from our ancestral lands in such an excessive way that sometimes it gives the impression that we don't belong in our own homelands. Myth has the ability to remind us of our connection to place, and roots us with purpose. In my own work, I am attracted to origin stories that can relate to every day moments and surroundings, allowing me to continuously find meaning and importance in our environment.

The Shinnecock Nation community preserves its history through oral traditions, written history, and photography. Many families have extensive photo collections of important historical and family photos. From all of this, I believe we collectively have a deep respect for family lineage and ancestral history.

*FC: You have been experimenting with different ways of presenting the photographic image, i.e. via prints and books, via the web and site-specific installation. Is this something you are actively trying to push boundaries with?*

*JD: I feel as though there is much experimentation still unexplored in my work. I constantly move between being overly didactic and ambiguous with texts, but in regards to the photographic image, I concentrate on invoking meaning through the image and not necessarily through the techniques themselves.*



Above: Jeremy Dennis's MFA Thesis Show at Pennsylvania State University was a site-specific installation featuring Johnny Depp as Tonto from **The Lone Ranger**, 2013.





Above: **Lily Pond Site** - part of the *On this Site* project.



Above: **West Woods Site** - part of the *On this Site* project.

FC: *Looking at your work, there is a sense that you are treating landscape and identity as interwoven entities; or at the very least, suggesting that one greatly impacts the other. How important do you think our relationships to place and environment are?*

JD: The greatest challenge of our time is how to prevent further climate change. As an artist, I think that our role is to change our perception of environment - to sway us away from the

acceptance of exploitation and profit, and to promote reminders that we cannot live independent of an uninhabitable planet.

FC: *In what ways do you think we can improve cross-cultural dialogue and participation in our communities and institutions?*

JD: Institutions are becoming more conscious of their limitations, and are expanding their programming and collections to be more inclusive to indigenous people. Offering more support and encouragement to artists is important in order to improve cross-cultural dialogue.

FC: *What future projects do you hope to begin?*

JD: There are many projects I want to continue and start. I'll continue to share and represent oral histories and post-colonial narratives, but I have many plans for new conceptual work that will come from the research I have been gathering. Perhaps visiting other coastal towns will inspire these ideas to become tangible works.

FC: *In three words, what or who inspires you?*

JD: Community, History and Storytelling.

FC: ***Studies in Arts and Humanities Journal** is an open access, peer reviewed Irish journal that brings together work by undergraduate and postgraduate students, alongside that of academics and professional artists. Thank you so much for participating in this special issue on Minorities and Indigenous People!*

JD: Thank you!

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For more information, visit: [jeremynative.com](http://jeremynative.com)

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