Janet Dees, Jordan Poorman Cocker (Kiowa), and Kathleen Bickford Berzock

Building a Foundation for *Woven Being* at The Block

Fig. 1.1

Fig. 1.1 Kelly Church (Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi/Ottawa, born 1967), *Native Land*, 2024. White cedar bark, black ash, ribbon, wood, and laminated black construction paper, 13½ × 41¼ × 6 inches. Collection of the artist. Photograph by Holly Trevan.

Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls decolonization "an urgent, necessary, challenging yet hopeful journey beyond colonialism: Decolonising is only partly about dismantling colonialism. It is also partly about restorative processes for addressing and healing the past. It is partly about the reclamation of Indigenous sovereignty. These things then create new spaces for imagining a different future."[1] The work of imagining a different future in the context of The Block Museum of Art began with an institutional awareness of positionality, or an understanding of institutional responsibilities to place, the land, and the site-specific context of historical and ongoing colonialism, with special attention paid to institutional commitments and responsibilities as forms of reparation and restitution.[2]

The prompt to begin the research phase of *Woven Being* with a consideration of The Block's place-based positionality, encompassing the museum's relationships and responsibilities to Indigenous lands and people, came from guest co-curator Jordan Poorman Cocker. This was especially important because at The Block we are committed to deepening our relationships to contemporary Indigenous art and artists, and this starting point would provide a strong foundation for our work. We focused on three areas of our institutional identity: The Block's historical and ongoing relationship to place, beginning with site-specific understandings, including relationships to land and US treaties with sovereign Indigenous nations; The Block's relationship to Northwestern University; and its responsibilities as a museum.[3] We explored many narratives across these facets of The Block's positionality and researched how they are connected through the use of Indigenous-informed research methodologies including oral histories and polyvocality. We also considered them through Indigenous conceptions of time that weave together past, present, and future.[4] Northwestern University's land acknowledgment recognizes that the ancestral and treaty territories of Zhegagoynak—the Chicagoland region—are the homelands of the Council of Three Fires, comprising the Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa; and of the Menominee, Miami,

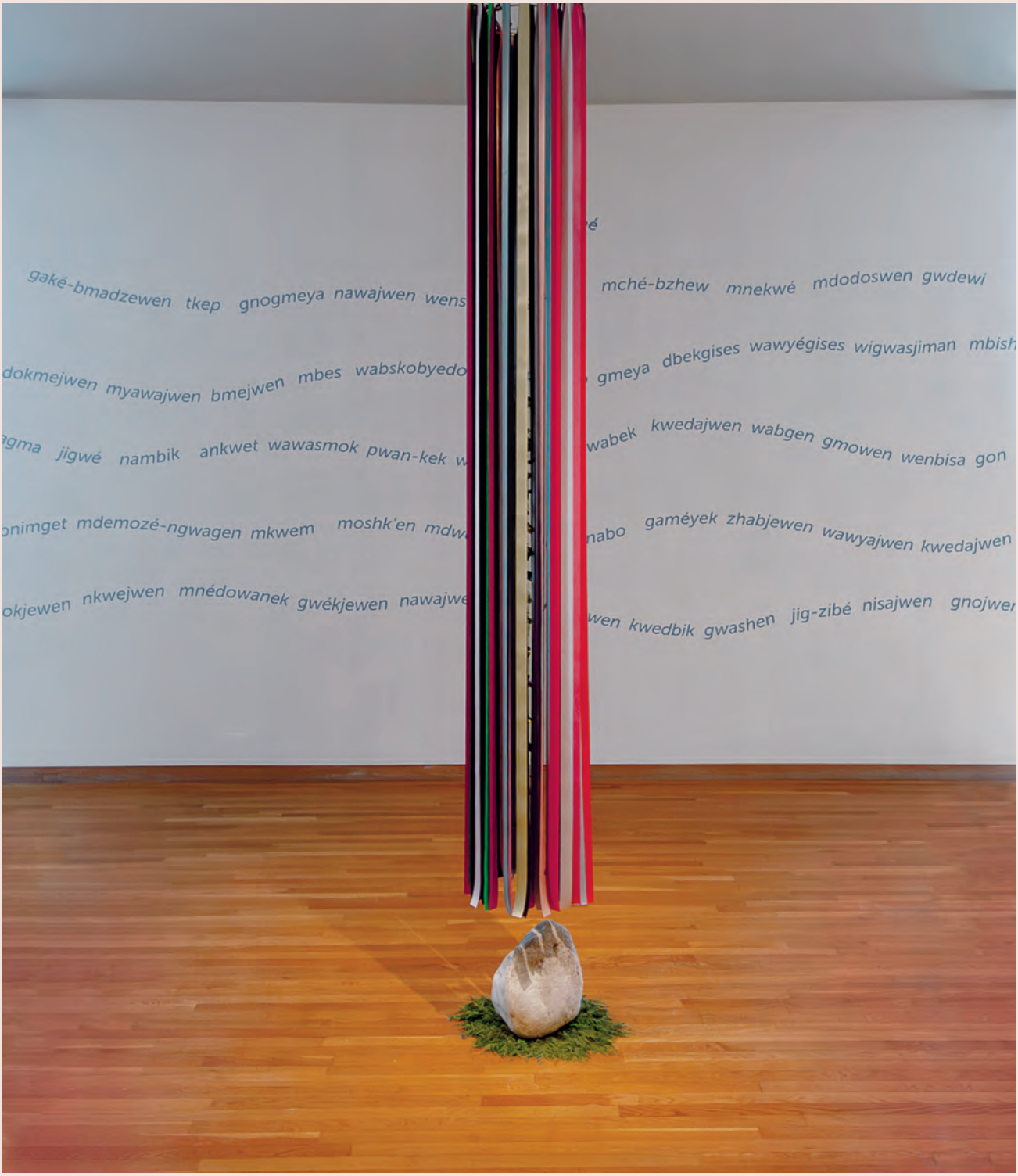

Fig. 1.2

Fig. 1.2 Jason Wesaw (Pokagon Band of Potawatomi, born 1974), *Wabshkya Sen*, 2023 (installation view, South Bend Museum of Art, Indiana). Polyester ribbon, cotton cloth, artificial sinew, tobacco, cedar, and stone, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist.

and Ho-Chunk Nations and many other nations whose ancestors were the original stewards of this land. Zhegagoynak was a site of gathering for over a dozen other nations, and Illinois is currently home to over one hundred thousand tribal members from different communities. This has been Indigenous land since time immemorial. Through our positionality research, we see how the location of The Block is connected to the violence of settler colonial histories, including forced removal and the forced ceding of lands to the US government through the 1821 and 1833 Treaties of Chicago. Opened in 1980, The Block is built on a Lake Michigan landfill that was constructed in the 1960s on unceded territory. Indeed, in 1914, the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi sued for the return of Chicago's landfill in a case that went all the way to the Supreme Court.[5] Northwestern University and The Block also are linked to the Cheyenne and Arapaho people through the actions of Northwestern's founder, John Evans. As territorial governor of Colorado, Evans established policies and issued orders that led to the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre, in which over two hundred Cheyenne and Arapaho people were murdered by US soldiers.[6] Starting in 2012, Northwestern's Native American and Indigenous Student Alliance (NAISA) began to advocate for acknowledgment of Evans's culpability in the Sand Creek Massacre and increased structures of support and visibility in a campus environment characterized by Native absence.[7] The Block's commitment to Indigenous art and artists stems from those efforts.

At The Block, we are mindful of the ways in which museums have historically harmed and continue to harm Indigenous artists and communities by perpetuating a mindset that relegates Indigenous life to the past, flattens Indigenous experiences, and justifies keeping Indigenous objects separated from their communities of origin, among other forms of colonialism. The Block's efforts are focused on engaging with contemporary Indigenous art and artists. The Block does not have historical cultural belongings in its collection. Its earliest work by an Indigenous artist is currently a print by Aaron Leonard Freeland (Diné) made circa 1989. *Woven Being* uses Indigenous research methodologies to center Indigenous voices in telling stories through art. This is just one step The Block is taking to strengthen our support of Indigenous art and artists. We also act on this commitment by building relationships with Indigenous colleagues, peers, artists, and communities in our region; acquiring artwork by contemporary Indigenous artists for The Block's collection; including work by Indigenous artists in exhibitions; presenting programs that highlight Indigenous artists and other knowledge sharers; using Indigenous-informed methodologies; aligning with and supporting the strategic initiatives of Indigenous-led efforts on campus; and supporting the work of arts and cultural initiatives developed by Indigenous organizations. Our positionality research led to the definition and refinement of the scope of *Woven Being*, couched in a situational context, along with a deeper institution-wide understanding of Indigenous relationships to place through the lens of tribal sovereignty across ancestral and treaty territories [fig. 1.1].

Building on our work to better understand our positionality and our unique responsibilities to Indigenous communities and artists, we conducted a series of community forums, which we framed as "visioning sessions": meetings with Indigenous knowledge sharers and non-Indigenous allies designed to imagine together the possibilities for the project. We also undertook one-on-one conversations and studio visits with artists, visits to museums, and conversations with museum colleagues as part of our research [fig. 1.2].[8] The focus of this research was to understand what stories The Block was best situated to tell and what approaches would be best suited to an exhibition about Indigenous art in Chicagoland. The visioning sessions were intended to engage community members in a way that was specifically defined: starting with Indigenous Northwestern faculty, students, and staff and expanding to include a selection of Chicago-based or displaced Indigenous arts and culture practitioners, scholars, and other knowledge keepers. In addition to imagining together what would make a successful exhibition, we presented and tested the emergent themes of landways and waterways, material kinship, and Indigenous time as potential organizing principles for the exhibition.

Multiple measures of success for the exhibition were identified in these meetings. Participants expressed the desire for an exhibition that was intergenerational in its content and welcoming to visitors of all ages, including through the offering of food. Participants envisioned an exhibition that sparked joy, laughter, and engagement and noted the importance of visitors hearing and seeing Indigenous languages throughout. Participants also envisioned a museum

Fig. 1.3 Andrea Carlson (Grand Portage Ojibwe/European descent, born 1979), *The Indifference of Fire* (detail), 2023. Oil, acrylic, gouache, ink, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, twenty-four panels: 11½ × 30 inches each, overall: 46 × 182 inches. Gochman Family Collection, New York.

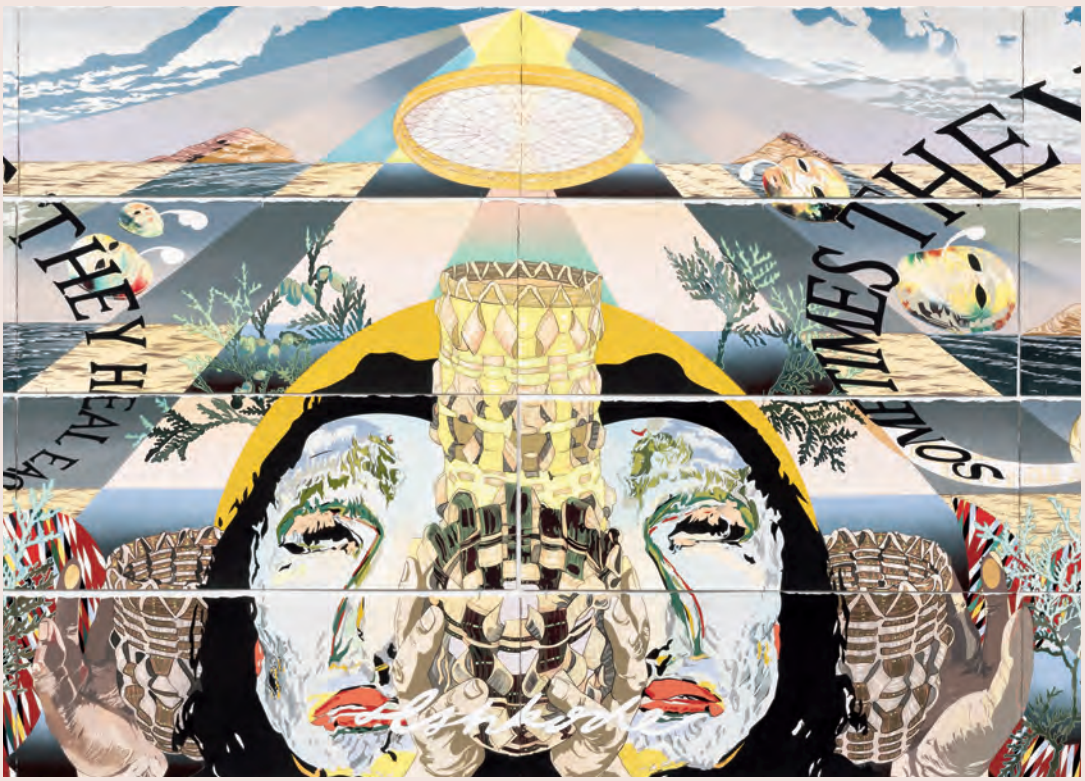

Fig. 1.3

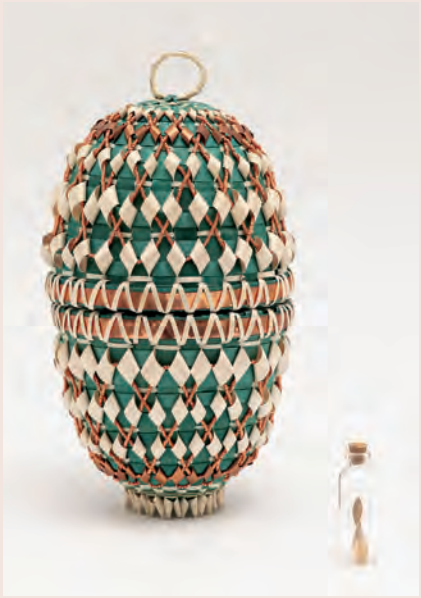

Fig. 1.4

Fig. 1.4 Kelly Church (Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi/Ottawa, born 1967), *You Can't Drink Oil*, 2024. Black ash, Rit dye, silver beads, sinew, fine silver strips, black velvet, vial containing Lake Michigan water, and vial containing containing oil mixed with Lake Michigan water, 9 × 4¾ inches. Collection of the artist. Photograph by Holly Trevan.

permeated with the sounds of the natural world, including Lake Michigan, and the smells of sweetgrass, cedar, sage, and tobacco. Additionally, the exhibition should be of benefit to Chicagoland's urban Indigenous communities and to descendants of the Council of Three Fires and other communities who have called this place home. The exhibition should reinforce feelings of pride and resilience and evoke memories. Finally, through its presentation of contemporary art, the exhibition should connect to the past and present and envision futures, challenging people to think differently.

The themes of landways and waterways, material kinship, and Indigenous concepts of time are currents, rather than strict organizing principles, that flow through *Woven Being*, connecting the artworks and stories included in the exhibition. These currents emerged early in our research and became refined throughout our consultative process. Starting with the land, as discussed above, it was important to ground the project in the specificity of place. This took the form of recognizing the Indigenous peoples who occupied and continue to occupy this place through engagement with our land acknowledgment, treaty histories, and the diverse urban Indigenous community that has more recently developed over the last hundred-plus years in the Chicagoland area.[9] We reflected on how the regional waterways, particularly the lakes and rivers, have linked and continue to link this region to many others, making Zhegagoynak a place of confluence and connection. This theme is also about "ways"—that is, how Indigenous people have related to and continue to relate to the land and water of this region. For example, these streams of thought are poetically engaged within the installation piece *Water Carries Memory*, by Jason Wesaw (Pokagon Band of Potawatomi, born 1974), which invokes Lake Michigan and its shores within the space of the gallery [pls. 7, 8]. Blaire Morseau discusses the multiple resonances of this work in her chapter in this volume [pp. 44–47].

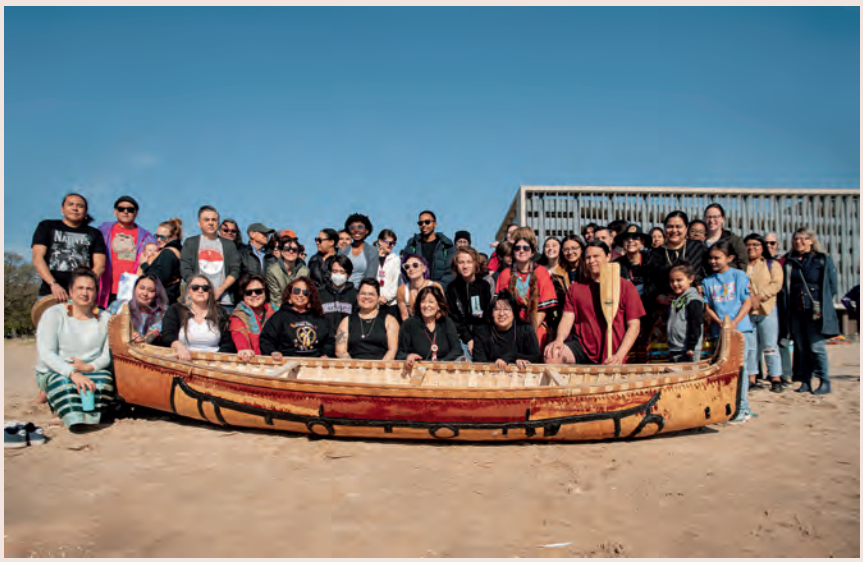

Fig. 1.5

Fig. 1.5 Community members pose with the birchbark canoe built with CNAIR 2021–22 artist in residence Wayne Valliere (Lac du Flambeau Ojibwe), 2021. Photograph by Anthony McCray/Northwestern University.

Fig. 1.6

The theme of material kinship illuminates the complex and interwoven relationships between the materials used to create works of art rooted in plant and animal life, the environments from which they are drawn, related cultural practices, and the artists as creators. This is reflected in Kelly Church's (Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi/Ottawa, born 1967) black ash baskets, made from bark that the artist ethically and consciously harvests from black ash trees, and the stories these baskets contain about the environmental threat caused by the invasive emerald ash borer beetle [fig. 1.4]. It is also reflected in the reference to one of Kelly's baskets by Andrea Carlson (Grand Portage Ojibwe/European descent, born 1979) in her large-scale drawing *The Indifference of Fire*, which also pays homage to several other artists Andrea views as aesthetic relatives [fig. 1.3; see also fig. 4.8 and pl. 9].

The perspective on Indigenous time that has informed *Woven Being* is influenced by the writing of Abenaki scholar Lisa Brooks, who asks us to consider whether "time also operates like a spiral" as a way to free us from the colonial mindset of linear time,[10] as well as the work of settler scholar Mark Rifkin and the teachings of birchbark canoe maker Wayne Valliere (Lac du Flambeau Ojibwe). Rifkin's notion of temporal sovereignty reinforces the reconfiguration of chronological or linear timelines in Indigenous concepts of time,

Fig. 1.6 Nora Moore Lloyd (Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe, born 1947), *Susan Kelly Power (Yanktonai Dakota)*, from the series "Chicago's Native American Community: Our Elders Look Back," 1998–ongoing. Archival digital photograph from original 35 mm negative, 8 × 10 inches. Collection of the artist.

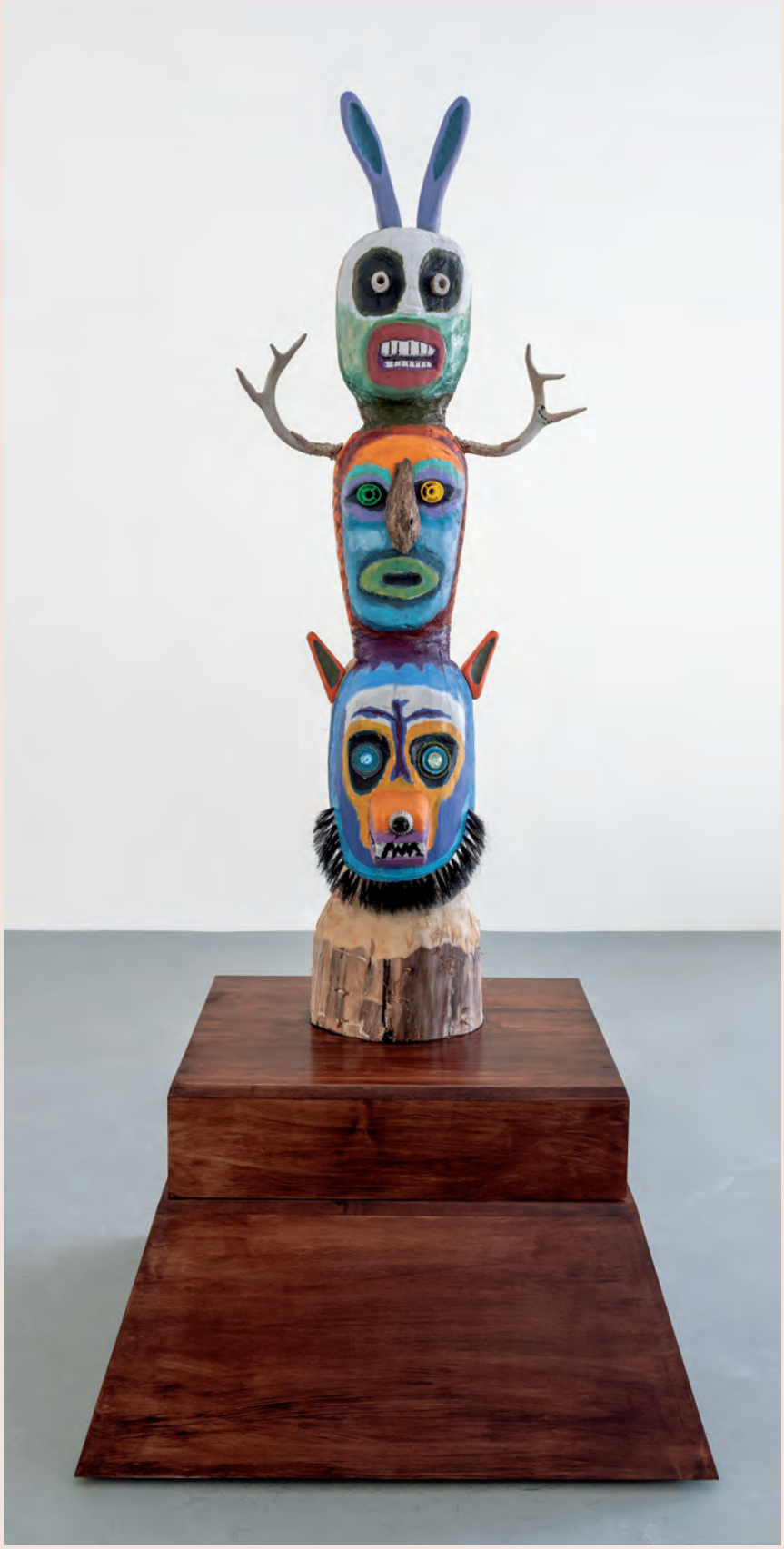

Fig. 1.7

Fig. 1.7 Jim Denomie (Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Ojibwe, 1955–2022), *Totem, Animal Spirits*, 2021. Wood, oil, paint, deer antlers, horsehair, and found objects, 78 × 32 × 32 inches. Forge Project Collection, traditional lands of the Moh-He-Con-Nuck. © Jim Denomie Estate. Courtesy of the Jim Denomie Estate and Bockley Gallery, Minneapolis.

land-based knowledge, tribal sovereignty, and oral histories. This is located, for instance, in the contextualizing of kinship or the relational webs housed within Indigenous art forms.[11] During an artist residency hosted by Northwestern's Center for Native American and Indigenous Research in 2021, Valliere shared that in Anishinaabemowin, the word for a canoe's bow, *niigaan-jiimaan,* translates to "future," and the word for stern, *ishkweyaang-jiimaan,* to "past," reflecting how multiple temporalities are embodied in the same object and in the same moment [fig. 1.5].[12] These multidirectional relationships to time are evident in the exhibition layout, which resists a linear historical narrative, and are latent in many of the included artworks. The exhibition also emphasizes relationality over chronology, recognizing artistic and intellectual kinship across time.[13]

Woven Being has been developed through an in-depth collaboration with and between four artists: Andrea Carlson, Kelly Church, Nora Moore Lloyd (Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Ojibwe, born 1947), and Jason Wesaw. These artists have worked with the project team to develop an exhibition that centers their perspectives without centering themselves. Works by these artists are placed in dialogue with works by other artists, exploring kinship in a capacious sense. The artworks and artists in *Woven Being* are linked by aesthetics and material interests, as well as by community and familial connections.

This curatorial framework relies on Indigenous research methodologies and the vital relationships between Indigenous sovereignty, artists, and art. Collaboration with these artists developed out of existing relationships and new relationships forged through referrals and studio visits. This culminated into a curatorial approach that sought to eliminate traditional hierarchical structures by redistributing the power of decision-making throughout a team of artists and curators. This artist-centered methodology was developed out of feedback we received through the visioning sessions and conversations with colleagues who have been developing best practices in the field. Visioning session participants advocated for a process that foregrounded artists, their voices, and their agency in shaping the context in which their work is presented. They warned against a flattening approach that puts art at the service of an overarching historical narrative. Jordan, in particular, was inspired by Kiowa artist Teri Greeves (born 1970), who co-curated the exhibition *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* with Jill Ahlberg Yohe.[14] During a panel moderated by Anya Montiel (Mestiza/Tohono O'odham descent) and devoted to the exhibition, Greeves shared the importance of having protocols that honor sovereignty and inviting Indigenous artists to "speak for themselves" through artist-led dialogues and their inclusion in curatorial decision-making processes beyond advisory roles, moving toward a collaborative curatorial model.[15] In the same conversation, Ahlberg Yohe emphasized the importance of upending colonial museum practices that traditionally grant expertise and power over decision-making to a single (often non-Native) curator. Accordingly, *Hearts of Our People* distributed expertise through collaborative decision-making processes. As more curators who

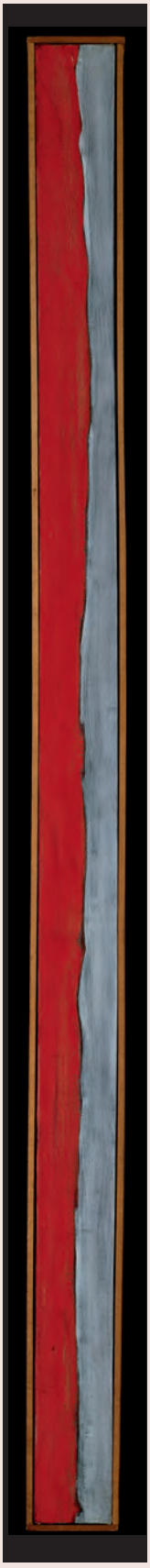

Fig. 1.8

are Indigenous, Black, and/or people of color enter the field, new curatorial frameworks will continue to emerge to better meet the needs of Indigenous artists and communities.

In addition to the previously articulated themes of landways and waterways, material kinship, and time, Andrea, Jason, Kelly, and Nora identified other themes that are integral to their own work and the work of others. For Nora, it was important to honor elder artists within Chicago's urban community. She was particularly inspired by the work of Chicago-based artists Sharon Skolnick (Fort Sill Apache/Lakota, born 1946) and Joe Yazzie (Navajo, born 1942) [figs. 3.5–3.7 and pl. 11]. (Anne Terry Straus's chapter in this volume goes into detail about these artists' importance within the Chicago community [pp. 68–69].) Moreover, Nora's series "Chicago Native American Community: Our Elders Look Back" features portraits of twelve elder community members [fig. 1.6; see also fig. 3.4 and pl. 10]. Andrea depicts a dream catcher created by her relative Raymond Duhaime (Grand Portage Ojibwe, 1909–1986) at the pinnacle of her work *The Indifference of Fire* [fig. 1.3 and pl. 9], and, along with Jason, she selected a work by her friend and mentor Jim Denomie (Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Ojibwe, 1955–2022) for inclusion in the exhibition [fig. 1.7 and pl. 10].

The inclusion of work by Barnett Newman (American, 1905–1970) and Josef Albers (American, born Germany, 1888–1976) reflects Jason Wesaw's interest in exploring a dialogue between American modernist abstraction and abstraction in Indigenous art forms, highlighting, from an Indigenous perspective, how Indigenous art and American art influence each other [fig. 1.8]. Jason draws inspiration from artists whose work encompasses a range of media, including Woodrow Wilson "Woody" Crumbo (Citizen Potawatomi, 1912–1989), Jeffrey Gibson (Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians/Cherokee, born 1972), and Daphne Odjig (Odawa/Potawatomi, 1919–2016) [figs. 2.4, 2.5, 2.11 and pl. 11]. Among its multiple themes, Kelly's constellation draws upon relocation histories to and from Chicago. The city is and was a place of connection and confluence for many Indigenous communities as a result of removal, relocation, and other processes. Kelly chose to signal this sense of movement by including works like Teri Greeves's *My Family's Tennis Shoes* [fig. 5.6 and pl. 12].

In this companion publication to the exhibition *Woven Being*, Denise Lajimodiere, John Low, Blaire Morseau, and Anne Terry Straus introduce and expand on the collaborating artists' contributions from their own disciplinary and artistic vantage points. Their chapters are interspersed with eight selections of poetry and prose from the late nineteenth century to the present day, which were chosen in dialogue with the artists to expand their narratives. Following these chapters, a resource guide by Jacqueline Lopez, a PhD candidate in history at Northwestern University, sheds light on the underrecognized work of Chicago-based Indigenous artists and institutions from the mid-twentieth century to the present. Based on primary source research Jacqueline undertook across the city, the guide opens with brief summaries of key Chicago organizations and initiatives that

Fig. 1.8 Barnett Newman (American, 1905–1970), *Untitled 3*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 56 × 3 inches. Art Institute of Chicago, through prior gift of Mr. and Mrs. Carter H. Harrison, 1989.3. © 2024 The Barnett Newman Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

have supported the work of Indigenous artists, beginning with the American Indian Center, which opened in 1953 [fig. 6.1]. This is followed by a timeline of select exhibitions highlighting the varied work of Chicago's Indigenous artists and a list of secondary sources of use to researchers.

The collaborative working process between the artists Andrea Carlson, Kelly Church, Nora Moore Lloyd, and Jason Wesaw, and between the artists and the *Woven Being* curatorial team, resulted in a unique exhibition. In addition to loans of existing work by artists whose careers span the period from the mid-twentieth century to the present, the installation included many new works in a range of media, some by the collaborating artists and some by artists they invited into the project. Large-scale works and installations conceived specifically for the project provided anchors around which groupings of more intimately scaled works were clustered. This book includes photographs documenting the installation of *Woven Being: Art for Zhegagoynak/Chicagoland* at The Block, which join with the chapters to recount a story of the project. We are grateful for the knowledge generously shared during and throughout this process.

1 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "Decolonising Cultural Institutions: An Urgent, Necessary, Challenging yet Hopeful Journey beyond Colonialism," in *Uneven Bodies (Reader)*, ed. Ruth Buchanan et al. (Ngāmotu New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2021), 7. For more on Smith's work on decolonizing, see her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2021).

2 Our understanding of the concept of positionality derives from the work of scholar Marisa Duarte (Xixanz/Pascua Yaqui Tribe), who describes it as a methodology that "requires researchers to identify their own degrees of privilege through factors of race, class, educational attainment, income, ability, gender, and citizenship, among others." She continues, "Before researchers can reframe a social problem and diagnose an intervention, they must see themselves and their conceptual universe in relation to the nature of the problem." Marisa Elena Duarte, *Network Sovereignty: Building the Internet across Indian Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 135.

3 Positionality research at The Block was undertaken in part by Lois Taylor Biggs (Cherokee Nation/White Earth Ojibwe) during her tenure as Terra Foundation Curatorial Research Fellow for *Woven Being* in 2021–23.

4 For Indigenous-informed concepts of time, see, for instance, Lisa Brooks, "The Primacy of the Present, the Primacy of Place: Navigating the Spiral of History in the Digital World," *PMLA* 127, no. 2 (2012): 308–16; and Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2012).

5 The court found against the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi. For more on the history of these land claims, see John Low, *Imprints: The Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians and the City of Chicago* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2016), 67–94.

6 See, for instance, the *Report of the John Evans Study Committee*, University of Denver, November 2014, web; and the exhibition *The Sand Creek Massacre: The Betrayal That Changed Cheyenne and Arapaho People Forever*, which opened at the History Colorado Center, Denver, in November 2022.

7 NAISA efforts led to the drafting of Northwestern University's 2014 *Report of the John Evans Study Committee*, and to the reports of the Native American Outreach and Inclusion Task Force (2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, and 2019), web.

8 We visited the following institutions over the course of project development: Cherokee National History Museum, Denver Art Museum, First Americans Museum, Grand Rapids Public Museum, Greenwood Rising, History Colorado, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, Museum of Wisconsin Art, Oklahoma Contemporary, Osage Nation Museum, Philbrook Museum of Art, Pokagon Center of History and Culture,

Pokagon Court and Peacemaking Center, Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site, Sand Creek Massacre Visitor and Education Center, South Bend Museum of Art, Tia Foundation, University of Michigan Museum of Art, and Ziibiwing Center.

9 See, for example, Rosalyn LaPier and David R. M. Beck, *City Indian: Native American Activism in Chicago, 1893–1934* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015); and James B. LaGrand, *Indian Metropolis: Native Americans in Chicago, 1945–1975* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

10 See Brooks, "The Primacy of the Present, the Primacy of Place," 310.

11 Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

12 See "These Canoes Carry Culture," a website developed by students in Dr. Patricia Loew's Northwestern University undergraduate class Native American Environmental Issues and the Media, cnair-canoe.github.io/canoe/index.html.

13 For the concept of intellectual kinship, see Teresia Teaiwa, "The Ancestors We Get to Choose: White Influences I Won't Deny," in *Theorizing Native Studies*, ed. Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 43–55, web.

14 *Hearts of Our People*, curated by Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves, traveled to three subsequent museums after opening at the Minneapolis Institute of Art: the Frist Art Museum, Nashville (September 27, 2019–January 12, 2020); the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC (February 21–August 2, 2020); and the Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa (October 7, 2020–January 3, 2021). See Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves, eds., *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Art; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019).

15 "Hearts of Our People: Curator and Artist Conversation," Smithsonian American Art Museum, October 1, 2020, web.