

A large rectangular area with a textured, mottled red background, serving as a backdrop for the title text.

# ***White Indian 2020***

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Integrative Project  
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## *White Indian 2020*

I have always been aware of the color of my skin. I am half Navajo (Diné) but I am white passing. At a young age I proclaimed “*Dad and [my brother] are black Indians. Mom and me are white Indians*”. I am proud of my heritage but I have been guilty of romanticizing it. It’s easy to do when all I ever saw was the beautiful, stoic, and brave American Indian on TV. In reality, I was never truly connected to my culture. I look white, I don’t speak Navajo, and I barely even know my father’s side of the family. Both of my Diné grandparents died before I was born and I seemingly had so many Aunts and Uncles whom I saw so infrequently that I never bothered to try to get to know or memorize who was who. My heritage became more of a fun fact. It was a box I checked in college applications. Here lies the issue I have been grappling with for my entire life. Can I really call myself a Native American with a straight face? My thesis project acts as a personal journey of self-discovery as I dive inward to answer a nagging question and discover who I am as a person and where I belong.

My thesis project entitled *White Indian 2020* explores my perspective, the perspective of a multiethnic Native Americans living in America today. Indigenous people have been tirelessly fighting for survival and recognition while adapting to the modern world. Even today, the popular image of the Native American is as an equestrian headdress-wearing people on the frontier. Having grown up in the age of the internet, I have been lucky to have been exposed to different and refreshing images of contemporary American Indians. I chose to name my project *White Indian 2020*, because I have found a community of people who share similar experiences, and that the future of Indigenous people may actually look like me. My thesis project is an interactive digital collage over an oil

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painting paired with poignant personal experiences.

To probe some of my insecurities about identification, I explored the history of the American Native. To place my own work in context of these histories I also explore indigenous arts and depiction in media, past and contemporary.

### ***Contextual Discussion***

#### *Lessons from past practice*

I am not a stagnant artist. I have worked in a variety of mediums with a variety of subjects. Usually my work is comprised of nature, landscape and natural texture and I have also worked abstractly (again based off of nature). I am also a graphic designer with an interest in brand identity, something I hope to professionally pursue in the future. All of this work has something in common – it's not personal. In the winter semester of 2019 I made a work that changed how I think and influenced what my thesis project is today. I made a small speculative object entitled *Cherokee Blood*.



*Cherokee Blood*

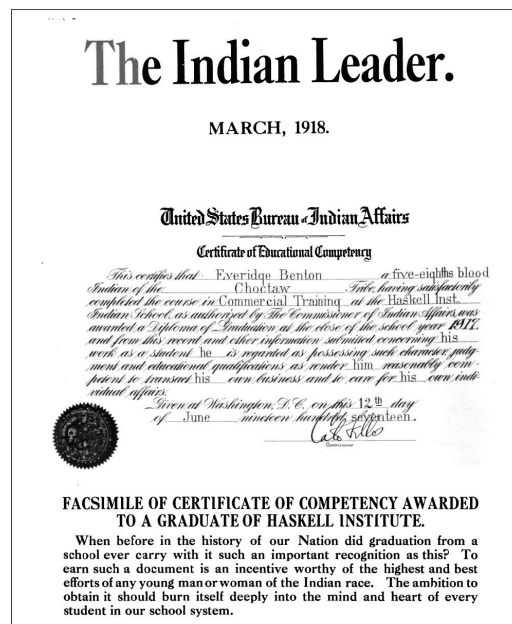
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The project was inspired by a joke that white people often claim that they are distant descendants of ‘Cherokee Princesses’. At the time, Elizabeth Warren was in the news for claiming Cherokee heritage, when she had little to none. This prompted a negative response from the Native American community and provoked a series of racist and mocking tweets from Donald Trump. I personally don’t necessarily blame her for her ignorance. Being told you’re a distant descendant from the Cherokees has seemingly become a part of the American Experience. For me, this project spoke to one of my ongoing struggles. Is my 50% blood quantum enough to claim a heritage? At what point are you an American Indian.

Context for Blood Quantum. Blood Quantum is the precise percentage of Native American blood one has. It has proved to be a complex issue deeply embedded in the Native American story with a tragic history. I have 50% Navajo blood and will often say I am half Native American. If I’m being fastidious about it, I could even count the 1/16th Paiute blood that comes from my mother’s side of the family. Adding it all up, that’s 9/16th Native American blood quantum. While breaking down blood quantum to such a ridiculous fraction may seem unnecessary, Indian Schools have historically documented with such precision, resulting in a lot of internalized trauma. Indian Schools all across the nation shared the goal of creating a ‘civilized man’ by forcefully integrating indigenous peoples into American society. Integration meant two things, destruction of culture and identity. Richard Henry Pratt, the founder of the Carlisle Indian School famously wrote, “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.” (Pratt 1892, 1) My grandfather was a product of such systems. At a young age he was enrolled

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in the Rehoboth Indian School near Gallup New Mexico. There, his traditional customs and language were beaten out of him, and as a result he never passed them on. In addition to the destruction of culture, the long lasting effects of blood quantum were beginning to take hold. Diplomas awarded by the schools included weird and precise blood quantum percentages as a part of their record.



*Indian School diploma recording  
"five-eighths blood"*

During a time when Americans were trying their best to integrate Native Americans into a white society and eradicate their culture, percentage was tracked and used to separate Natives, from half-breeds, from whites.

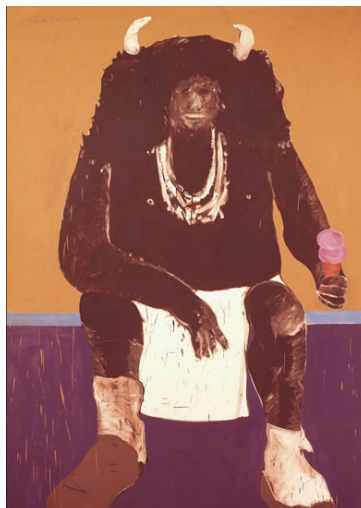
It is still common to receive inquiries on blood quantum when identifying as a Native American, especially when you're like me and look white. The inclination is to believe I'm one of *those guys* who over-inflates their heritage. To register in a tribe, one has to prove their blood quantum. The cutoff is different

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for every tribe, some being more lenient than others, with the idea being that more people self-identifying as a Native American will do good for cultural recognition. Sometimes there is a form of cultural gatekeeping that occurs, but all of this distinction raises an interesting question: At what point can one claim to be an Indian? Now days there are a large number of Natives living outside of the reservation who may no longer identify with their cultural heritage.

### *Inspiration from the Gallery to the Internet*

Growing up in Albuquerque, New Mexico, it wasn't difficult to recall inspiring examples of indigenous arts, but the artist Fritz Scholder always stood out to me. Fritz Scholder is a popular American Southwestern painter, famous for his depiction of Native American people. Such work combines the classic image of Native Americans with modern twists. Some examples include a painting of Buffalo dancer with an ice cream cone, a man standing at a bus stop, and an Indian with a can of beer.



*Fritz Scholder: Super Indian No. 2*

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His figures are often horrifically contorted, similar to the figures in a Francis Bacon painting. Upon further research, I found that Fritz Scholder shared similar questions as I did. Scholder was 1/4th Luiseno, a tribe in Southern California. In the book *Fritz Scholder- Indian/Not Indian* Scholder expressed his issue with being called an Indian, stating, “Most of the time, however, [Scholder] would say, ‘I am not an Indian. I have never been an Indian. I am proud of that one-quarter of my heritage, but a person cannot be something that he is only one-quarter of.’” (Sims 2008, 33) Fritz Scholder doesn’t identify as an Indian for the same reasons I hesitate to. It isn’t so much about blood as it is about culture.

As a young person in the year 2020, I consume more internet memes than I consume the fine arts. In a way, the goal for my thesis work is to create a meme-like experience using my insecurities surrounding race. Similar to art, Internet memes are things that people are meant to relate to. They confirm that those unspoken, surreal, or bizarre thoughts you may have are actually more universal than you think in a satiric way. For inspiration, I searched Instagram for a community of indigenous meme-ers, and what I found did not disappoint. Indigenous memes shed a light on what indigenous kids consider as requirement to identify as a Native American. There seems to be a defined line between who is and isn’t native. The requirements generally seem to be: live on the reservation and speak a traditional language. I couldn’t help but feel that these were very alienating requirements for the majority of Native populations. For instance, the Instagram meme below presents an interesting predicament. It separates Indigenous people and ‘Pretendians’ (pretending to be an Indian), but I question what makes a Pretendian?

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### *Indigenous Instagram Memes*

Many Indigenous peoples do not live on the reservation. Around 78% of Native Americans live outside of reservations (Guardian, 2020), most of them in Urban settings. While I have no problem with the personal expression of these marginalized meme creators, I feel like the urban Indian, or the “White Indian” voice is missing, if not actively excluded, from the conversation.

### *The “Half-Breed” in Popular Media:*

The popular depiction of the ‘Half-Breed’ in popular media is of a person trapped in a limbo space between cultures. They are neither one nor the other. During my research I took a particular interest in the representation of Native Americans in the classic films of John Ford. As one of the great American directors, he explored themes of the frontier, savagery, civilization, and heroism. His 1956 film *The Searchers* depicted the historically popular American frontier narrative of women being taken away by the Comanche people. These popular



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stories were loosely based on the 1836 abduction of Cynthia Ann Parker. The nine year old girl was taken by the Comanche, later becoming the mother of Quanah Parker, the last free Comanche chief. The event led to nearly half a century of conflict between the Comanche and the United States. (Gwynne 2010, 12) Unlike the Hollywood ending of *The Searchers*, Cynthia Ann Parker refused to return to ‘civilization’, challenging a lot of people’s ideas at the time that ‘savagery’ was inherently bad and less desirable. While there is a clear border between the savage Comanche and the civilized frontiersmen in the film, there is another presence that complicates that narrative. Ethan Edwards (played by John Wayne of course) and Martin Pawley are on a quest to retrieve their niece Debbie Edwards from the Comanche. Ethan is a returned confederate soldier and Martin is what I would call a ‘White Indian’, with some Cherokee blood. This creates an interesting and at some points hostile dynamic between the two characters. I took particular interest in how Martin is treated. He is not white, yet he is not Native either. Ethan often seemingly mansplains Native culture to Martin. Ethan is also hostile, acting violent and unpredictable in some scenes. In the final scene of the film, Ethan is framed in a doorway to a house on the frontier. Martin and the newly liberated Debbie pass by Ethan into the house. Ethan hesitates for a moment and then turns around and walks out into the desert.

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*Final Scene of the Searchers (1956)*

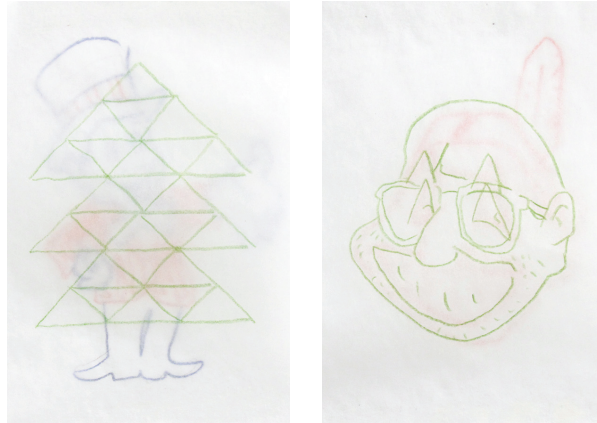
Interpretations of this scene subvert the expectations of savagery and heroism by allowing Martin, the half breed, and Debbie, a girl who lived amongst the Comanche for years, to be accepted and taken in by the white European settlements while the 'savage' Ethan walks off into the wilderness. In a way it is implied that he becomes the new "White Indian" because of his savagery. In complete honesty, I am not a fan of the film, but I was interested in it because it presents a lens into what America deems as a Native American. The story furthers the idea that Native Americans should be integrated while a non-white societal structure has no place in America (*Kill the Indian in him, and save the man*).

### **Methodology**

After settling on the conceptual framework of my work, I began to think about methods of representation that would best equip me for telling my story. Initial sketches I made to visually explore my project were humorous riffs on pop culture icons, as well as some iconography unique to the southwest. They also

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utilized transparent layers, a motif that I thought I would abandon for the final project. Surprisingly, layers returned later in an unexpected way.



Humor was an element that I felt needed to be in my final work. I thought that making work that didn't have a hint of sarcasm or humor would result in being disingenuous since I'm not the most serious person all of the time. My struggle was balancing my humor with my serious thoughts. At first I was thinking about making work that was more narratively driven so I could spell out the issues and stories I was thinking about. I considered how audio and text could be used in a cohesive manner, but this brought a challenge I was not prepared for: writing. I couldn't get myself to write anything I was happy with. Sometimes my writing was too informal, too pretentious, or too artificially introspective. After grappling with this issue for far too long, I decided that my work didn't need to be spelled out. I am first and foremost an imagemaker. Narrative does not come naturally so I decided not to force it.

I settled on painting. Painting has always been a medium that excited me. I made a few small paint experiments revolving around contemporary iconography that I either found online or saw when I was growing up. One of these paint

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experiments I made was a painted version of a popular Indigenous meme. This was a moment where I settled on the medium for my project.



*Skoden: a popular reaction meme amongst Indigenous youth*

In the past I mainly made landscapes of the Southwestern United States where I grew up on a small scale, devoid of meaning or personal depth. I figured that this was a chance to make an image tell a story without words. When looking for inspiration, I stumbled on an image that I thought told a great story. It was an image of me when I was younger on my dad's shoulders in front of a wooden Indian.



*Photo Reference: Posed with Wood Indian*

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I thought that image was interesting because it presented different kinds of Native Americans I saw in my youth. There was me, the “white Indian”, my father, a real Native American, and the statue, a caricature of Native Americans. The image had an irony and a comedic edge that I liked. It was as if these stereotypes had been subtly endorsed in my youth. The image served as a springboard for my work and I got started drafting a composition.

### ***Creative Work***



*White Indian, Red Indian, Wood Indian*

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*White Indian, Red Indian, Wood Indian* is the most complete work. Utilizing a combination of painting from a reference photo and painting from my own drawings and imagination, I aimed to seamlessly transition between the two styles. I pushed the main figures (my father and me) to the foreground and left the looming 'wood Indian' in the background. The Cigar Store Indian looms over our heads as a dominating representation. Pink is also an important motif in my work. Pink is the combination of red and white and acts as another subtle self-deprecating joke about my skin color.

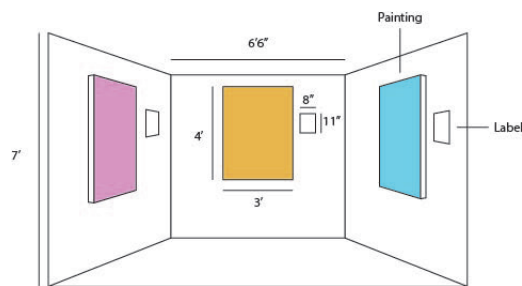
The second work I started and which was never completed was titled *My Favorite Mascot*. Coming from another one of my pictures related to wood Indians, I placed my younger self to the right of another looming depiction of a Native American man.



*Unfinished work: My Favorite Mascot.*

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The side view is reminiscent of some of the popular sports team mascots that are hotly debated due to their controversial depictions of Indigenous peoples. This particular image is made to look like the Chicago Blackhawks logo, a logo that at one time I had on a T-shirt. Speaking of T-shirts, I altered the Mickey Mouse icon to be smoking a cigarette as a reference to my other painting *White Indian*, *Red Indian*, *Wood Indian*. Ideally there would have been a third painting, and all three works would be hung in my studio space, one on each wall. All images would have been accompanied by a label containing a short personal story that I wrote which I hoped would provide a lens into some of the more complex thoughts and feeling that I struggled to imbue into a static image.



*Proposed Gallery Setup*

My goal was to create a clean space where a viewer could be surrounded by imagery reminiscent of places I saw as a child and iconography that most people can probably recall seeing on TV and in the corners of dusty antique shops or ‘trading posts’ scattered around small American towns. I wanted the characters to be recognizable through the paintings to make the work more personal and so that the viewer could start to stitch together a narrative of a contemporary ‘White Indian’.

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Things obviously didn't work out that way, and with the arrival of COVID 19 I was challenged to change my platform. Keeping in mind that only one of three of my paintings was in a complete stage and that our show was now going to be online, I decided to make my work interactive on the web. This would allow me to play with motion and make my work more contemporary. In its new form, a user is able to select a character in my painting *White Indian, Red Indian, Wood Indian* and get a new version of the work and a written personal experience that correlates with each figure. The painting stays the same, but gif images collaged on top change to reflect the story I am telling. The animated gif images reference memes, video games, local landmarks, and family photographs.

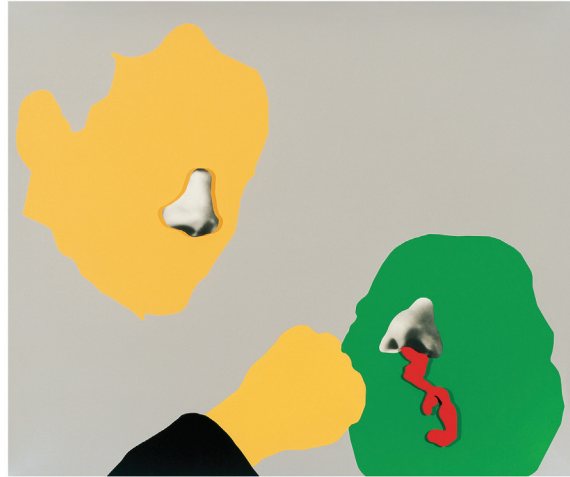


*Frames from White Indian, Red Indian, Wood Indian Digital Variations*

I intentionally obfuscated each image so the viewer never sees the entire painting at once. One of the figures is always blocked out via a large color field. A visual inspiration for this is the work by John Baldessari. One example is the work *Nose & Ears, Etc.: Blood, Fist, And Head (With Nose And Ear)* from 2006.



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*Noses & Ears, Etc.: Blood, Fist, And Head (With Nose And Ear)*

Baldessari's work has a comedic edge and mystery that I like and wish to emulate. My work being presented on the internet gives me the opportunity to do that and have objects animate, becoming more engaging, fun, and contemporary as an art piece.

### **Conclusion**

*White Indian 2020* serves as a personal journey and an in-depth exploration of my perspective as a multiethnic Native American living in America today. Never have I critically analyzed my personal stories and struggles with heritage with its historical implications, nor have I been so open with my work. It turned out to be a surprising and refreshing change of pace I intend to pursue. As a multimedia artist, my work with *White Indian* is far from over. While my work so far has allowed me to begin finding personal acceptance, it is still a journey that I am taking.

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