

EAGLE SPIRIT



THE ARTISTIC JOURNEY OF



APOLONIA SUSANA SANTOS

by Kim Cooper Findling

When Apolonia Susana Santos was a young girl, she loved to doodle especially sketches of people and faces. She would spend hours pouring over old books to seek out figures, contours, or images to lend themselves to her next drawing. Later in her youth, Susana (as everyone called her) was never without a camera. She captured photos wherever she went, tucking them away for future inspiration. Eventually, Susana went to art school and became a versatile and talented artist. In her lifetime, she worked in oils, acrylics, photography, ceramics, serigraphs, and even poetry, always generating art from one central theme: the culture and healing of her people, The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs. Susana was of the Tygh Band, Yakama Nation, and Umpqua Peoples and a member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.

Apolonia Susana Santos was an incredible artist whose impressive body of work is both inspirational and beloved. But this woman wore many other hats—literally, for she loved her large collection of hats and rarely went without one. She was an activist who fought not only for Indigenous rights but committed herself to the whole arena of human rights. She was an illustrious storyteller with a delightful sense of humor and an infectious giggle. She was an incubator of monumental ideas, many of which she saw through to fruition. She was a powerful public speaker. She was a fisherwoman who caught salmon at Tlxni on the Deschutes River on her Band's traditional fishing site. She fished the traditional native way—with nets from platforms, an

ancient family tradition, which still exists today. Captured through Susana's art, she historically recorded this technique on canvas and spoke passionately about native fishing rights. She was a woman small in stature but with a powerful voice. She was a lover of fine clothes, really good shoes, and Ray Ban sunglasses. She was a victim of an untimely death at the age of 52 from ovarian cancer. Maybe most of all, she was a visionary, a woman who even in her last days worked to craft an initiative for her tribe that would bring both creative arts and healing arts to the People.

Susana was born in 1954, a middle child of 10: five girls, five boys. Her father was Filipino, her mother born of the Tygh Band and Yakama and Umpqua Nations. The family's ancestral homelands were located along the Deschutes River at Tlxni, which translates from the Sahaptain language as Falls of a Woman's Hair, also known as Shearers Falls. The Warm Springs Reservation was their home, but while the Santos family would typically stick to the reservation during traditional hunting and fishing seasons, otherwise they were frequently on the move. "We had no stability," recalls Irene Jimenez, Susana's sister. "We left often to work the fields in Gresham and Madras or to live in Portland. Often pulled out of school, we were nomadic—even on the reservation. Our job as a family was to provide food on the table." As for school, that was hit or miss, too. All of the Santos children were forced to attend boarding schools at one time or another—the standard procedure for Native American kids during that era. While her siblings attended these government-run boarding schools, Susana was sent to private Catholic school where her gift for voice and stage presence began. She was smart and mature, driven and talented. She graduated high school and went on to the San Francisco Art Institute. Evolving from that persona, Susana became a feisty and independent young woman growing creatively more so each day. She was passionate, a fighter and a crusader, and the structure of school didn't always suit her. "She didn't want to be in a box," says Irene. "She wanted to do art her own way."

Susana left school and landed in Portland, where she continued to evolve artistically while transforming herself into an avid activist. "She became involved in many issues. She hit every platform," says Irene, laughing, "I told her so many times, 'you're going to get yourself in trouble.'" Susana fought for the environment, for women, for humanity, for civil rights, for her people. She did in fact get into trouble



Apolonia Susana Santos
High Kamamul's Cure
acrylic/mixed media on canvas
48 × 60 inches

and may have been a target due to her activism, according to Irene. But mostly, Susana made things happen with poetic justice, perseverance, and her infectious laughter. "She had a gift for activism," says Irene. "She was good at it. People listened to what she had to say. And she never gave up."

In the late 80s, Susana co-created the Sacred Earth Coalition, an organization intended to bring together native and non-native people to leverage sovereignty rights against logging and development on the reservation border and leased lands. The immediate issue was a logging initiative aimed at the slopes of Mt. Hood.

Through Sacred Earth, Susana met Cheri Hyde, another Oregon native, though Scottish in descent. Cheri recalls seeing Susana before a crowd. "She had the ability to wake an audience up, start them out laughing, tell a story that needed to be told, bring everyone to tears, then bring them right back up to roaring laughter before she was done."

The Sacred Earth Coalition, wanting to extend activism to the arts, opened a nonprofit art gallery called Culture Shock on Hawthorne Boulevard in southeast Portland to exhibit the artwork of Indigenous, women, and other disenfranchised artists. When the art gallery closed, Susana and



Apolonia Susana Santos
Rodeo Sisters
acrylic on canvas
36 × 48 inches

Facing page:
Apolonia Susana Santos
Indian Heaven
diptych I of II
oil stick on paper
15 × 22 inches

Cheri became business partners forming a small company initially called Culture Shock which morphed into Indigena Designs and finally in the mid-90's to SantosHydeStudios. This business continues today and is owned and operated by Cheri. Along with business partners, Susana and Cherie were life partners spending 16 years together until her passing. "I just thought she was exquisitely beautiful," says Cheri. "We were soul mates. It was a wonderful time in my life." Long after, Cheri would tease Susana about her crusading personality, the way they met, and the Sacred Earth Coalition. "You just wanted to get a bunch of white people together and tell them what to do." Susana laughed, conceding the point.

For the People

In 1998, Susana enrolled in the Oregon College of Arts and Crafts (OCAC) in Portland, where she would ultimately graduate in 2001. After she graduated from OCAC, Susana and Cheri moved to the reservation and Susana became the cultural liaison for the Warm Springs Tribes—more of a calling than a job. "She really wanted to help her people," recalls Cheri. Susana threw herself into nurturing and showcasing native artisans by way of the Kah-nee-ta Gallery of Art and other art programs and exhibits, some at The Museum at Warm Springs. While she encouraged all artists, Susana's focus was always on native youth, who she hoped most to motivate and inspire. "Susana believed 'you have the power, but you have to find that power,'" says Irene. With her alma mater, Susana founded a program that would bring Warm Springs youth to the OCAC for summer camp. The program eventually expanded to include youth from other reservations; it endures today as the A. Susana Santos Journeys in Creativity Art Summer Program.

In her free time, Susana worked to maintain a connection to traditional native ways of getting things done: mat weaving, canoe building, and always, fishing. Photos show a small woman in blue jeans and a headscarf hauling an enormous fish onto a wooden scaffold over a raging falls.

While she was living on the reservation, in 2004, Susana became ill and was ultimately diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Even while enduring chemotherapy, she did not stop painting or working to better the tribe. Both Irene and Cheri report that Susana never complained about her suffering, demonstrating a strength of spirit each found humbling. "She handled illness with such dignity," says Cheri. Adds Irene, "I could not be where she was going to in her spiritual walk, even in death." In the two years before she died, Susana completed six paintings.

A Legacy of Art

Many of Susana's last paintings as well as previous works were on exhibit at The Warm Springs Museum this past summer, in an exhibit titled, "Indigenous Elements: The Life and Art of Apolonia Susana Santos." Large canvasses, vibrant with color and movement, depict subjects from indigenous dancers to the aurora borealis to women dressed up for a rodeo to her own vision of a healer poised above her as she lay ill. Each painting is unique, spectacular, but united in theme. "Susana's focus was very specific," says Cheri. "She aimed to capture, rekindle and stimulate cultural pride and memory for young people."

"Our people have suffered," explains Irene. Through ill-



Apolonia Susana Santos

The Source

acrylic and oil stick on paper

22 x 30 inches

ness, disease, and the forced reservation system; this entire historical trauma haunts Native Americans today by way of alcohol and drugs, environmental destruction, illness and obesity. Susana saw her people losing their way. "Susana wanted to heal our people through art. All of her work in some aspect had impetus from her personal, familial, indigenous experience," says Cheri. Susana felt that her work came through her: that she was the conduit for a message that the world needed to hear. Yet, she never took herself or her work too seriously, and was always ready to laugh at herself or the world she lived in. "She believed that humor and love, together, could change the world."

That sensibility is revealed in her artworks. In her painting "Rodeo Sisters," four women are decked head to foot in native regalia, from feathered and beaded western hats down to playfully decorated cowboy boots (one woman's pair is adorned with horseshoes; another sports the Ace of Hearts). The women lean to the right in unison, as if they are dancing. The joke is in the playfulness of the imagery but more so in the pronunciation of the painting's title: it's Ro-day-o, as in Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles, the famed ritzy shopping destination. "She wanted to show that indigenous women can dress just as fancy as the women on Rodeo Drive," says Cheri. Susana often gave her paintings amusing titles, in fact, even when the subject matter wasn't particularly humorous, including "Let Us Spawn" and "Stands His Ground with Backup."

Some paintings are simply very powerful. "Creation BCT (Beginning of Ceremonial Times)" is one of Susana's darker works, both literally and figuratively. It depicts smoke, fire, meteors, hurtling birds, reeling figures, volcanic eruptions. "That's where she captures the death and birth of the world. It took a year to paint," says Cheri, who also notes the painting's size, '66 by '84 inches, and recalls Susana, only 5'2", standing before it during its creation.

In contrast, Susana's early Catholic teachings innately may have been deeply rooted in her own visionary quest for spiritual guidance and fortitude. This personal quest had taken Susana on a lifelong journey which was infused with strong family ties and her tribal religious upbringing. Susana was a deeply spiritual person, connected to the earth and the sky, and the idea of natural healing. In "High Kamamul's Cure," the point of view is from a sufferer over who hovers a



Apolonia Susana Santos. *Kamamul's Moon Shadow*, oil stick on paper, 22 × 30 inches.

healer, in human form but with an eagle's face. The colors are earth-based, light and bright. The eagle's hands float at his side, his eyes are intense, scrutinizing the observer. It is striking, intense, and incredibly lovely. Susana painted it in her last year of life.

Eagle Spirit

Eagles, and in particular eagle medicine, were a lifelong pivot point for Susana. "She practiced and had the eagle spirit in her life," says Irene. Cheri once bought Susana a flute with an eagle on it; when Susana played it, eagles would often appear.

Towards the end, Susana told Irene she was ready to go with the eagle spirit. This expression encompassed a dire need to complete her journey full-circle spiritually, artistically, and holistically. She died in November of 2006 with Cheri and Irene at her side.

Susana's funeral was held on a cold, grey day. Traditional native flutists played, sun-dancers performed. The entire Santos family was there, as was Cheri and many of the people whose lives Susana had touched. Towards the end of the ceremony, the clouds began to part and the sun came out. It was then that two eagles appeared.

"They came close enough that we could clearly see them, and we knew it was her," recalls Cheri.

"The eagles danced and gracefully circled and went up into the clouds," says Irene. "It was the most amazing thing. It was as if they took Susana's spirit with them." If anyone

needed to have it done this way, Susana would have wanted us to know 'there would be no other way' but to leave this earth as evidenced by this spiritual enlightenment for all to bear witness to in meeting her creator.

Before her death, Susana had completed and delivered an initiative to her tribe, presenting her ideas on providing opportunities for healing through art and natural medicine to native youth. Her dream was for an artists' village to be built on the reservation, including a medicine lodge. Many of her ideas live on in spirit and in practice on the reservation today.

And, there is the legacy of her art. None of Susana's original large-scale art works are for sale; instead, each is protected by the Apolonia Susana Santos Foundation from which they may be made available for all to see. Though it was native youth who most inspired Susana's art and its message, she always intended for it to be experienced by everyone, native and non-native, says Cheri. "The vision that never left her was that of the rise again of the indigenous world, that we would all return to that knowing of what is truly sacred—water, fish, the earth, knowing who we are, remembering who we were." <HDJ>

Apolonia Susana Santos' website
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Several of Apolonia Susana Santos paintings will remain on display at The Museum at Warm Springs throughout this winter.