



## Spirit Lake Dakota/Diné Painter & Ledger Artist

# AVIS CHARLEY

By Paul Niemi

**A**VIS CHARLEY FOUND SUCCESS in the Native American art world later in life. While generational Native artists have learned pottery, beadwork, silversmithing, and painting, Charley has been living a busy urban life, building community and finding connection and inspiration on the streets of Eastside, a neighborhood in Long Beach, California. Far from her mother's birthplace, the Spirit Lake Dakota Reservation in North Dakota, Charley began to cultivate an art career on her own terms, armed with passion and a spray paint can in her hand.

A Native woman sits on a bus stop bench. She wears a ribbon skirt, beaded earrings, sunglasses, suede ankle boots, and a denim jacket. She's cosmopolitan, hip, and exudes cool as she sits and observes whatever it is she sees. Her destination doesn't seem to matter as long as connection is made along the way. Maybe the journey is simply to remain seated, firm in her being, telling her story through her body language and fashion. In actuality, she is the subject of Charley's figurative oil painting *Think Long, Think Wrong* (2021). It hangs at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) and alludes to the 1977 T.C. Cannon (Kiowa/Caddo, 1946–1978) lithograph, *Waiting for the Bus (Anadarko Princess)*, which also depicts a postmodern Native American woman. Charley drew inspiration from Cannon's work to shed light on her "belief in the power of setting aside distractions and staying in the present moment."<sup>1</sup>

Upon meeting the artist, it's immediately clear that she is emotionally strong, confident, and proud of her Indigenous and Angeleno identity and her Indigenous heritage. It's not uncommon for artists to follow a nonlinear career path filled with setbacks. To listen to Charley tell her story, it seems that she has found a way to remain calm, cool, and disciplined, always boldly staying the course while thwarting the detrimental distractions that can hinder success. No doubt the ability to laugh at and embrace life's challenges has been instrumental in bringing her to where she is today.

"I have the type of sense of humor where I make myself laugh in conversation," Charley muses. Besides funny, *intentional* might also describe her. Her artistic progression seems to be the result of setting her sights on a goal and working hard to achieve it. This strategy has paid off for the creative triple-threat. In a field where artists compete against each other for top honors at art markets, Charley says that she never worries about the critics and remains fully focused on the work. "You don't listen to the praise," she says. It makes it "easier to ignore the negative." Charley prefers to let her art speak for itself.



**ABOVE** Avis Charley, 2023. All images courtesy of the artist.

**OPPOSITE** *Think Long, Think Wrong*, 2021, oil on canvas, 40 × 30 × 1½ in., collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2021.80, gift of Funds From Mary and Bob Mersky.

## THE SEED IS PLANTED

**HER UNIQUE ARTISTIC VOICE** made itself known unexpectedly when she was a young teen. Growing up in a big city, school field trips took Charley and her classmates to the opera and art museums, but she never even knew that a career in art existed. Raised in a low-income, single-parent household in Los Angeles County, Charley got involved with making street art in and around Long Beach at age 13 and quickly earned acceptance into a graffiti crew. The highly organized group of teens composed of kids from similar backgrounds became a tight-knit family that protected its members. Charley calls them her

1. "Think Long, Think Wrong, 2021," Minneapolis Institute of Art, web.



“first community.” The group nurtured an environment of belonging and gave Charley the tag name P.O.E.T., short for *Putting Out Every Toy* (in local street slang, a *toy* is someone who can’t write or draw). Inexperienced but motivated, Charley found creative inspiration and honed her skills. Access to empty alley walls plus practice runs armed with cans of spray paint helped ignite her artistic fire. It laid the foundation for her career as an artist, even if she did not know it at the time. When Charley held a can in her hand, she sensed a creative force working through her. “I felt like I was releasing [this force], and at the same time I was filling myself up.” Making art was an urge she felt compelled to satisfy.

Avis Charley’s family circumstances reinforced what she describes as a feeling of invisibility. Her ability to toggle between multiple styles using varied materials as a tagger, however, steadily helped her build a following in her community. Her tags were frequently spotted on city walls and buses, and strangers from her peer group began to approach her with positive feedback. Charley relished the validation. “For the first time in my life, that made me feel seen.” The recognition allowed her to join the now-famous Homeland Cultural Center in Long Beach in 1991, founded in 1989 by California artist and activist Dixie Swift. Just blocks from Avis Charley’s home, the center provided spray paint cans to participants and walls to practice on. Charley also received her first sketchbook and was introduced to pastels and other materials

that allowed her to further experiment with art. She credits working at the center with saving her life during a difficult time. Things for Charley took a sudden turn when she became the teenage mom of a little boy. Her focus shifted away from art to parenting, at least for a period.

## LEARNING & LEDGER ART

**LEDGER ART** depicted life events and evolved from hide painting and pictograms. Through contact with settlers, Western tribes adopted the use of accounting ledger paper as backdrops for their colored pencil-and-ink drawings after buffalo hides were more difficult to acquire due to the systematic destruction of bison herds. Some artists came by the paper while they were prisoners of war. The genre has seen a resurgence since the 1970s and again in the 2010s, and today’s artists such as Terrance Guardipee (Blackfeet) and a host of others have reenvisioned ledger art.

Charley first met Terrance Guardipee and his wife, Catherine Black Horse (Seminole Nation), in 2009, when she hosted the couple at her home for the American Indian Arts Marketplace at the Autry Museum of the American West in Los Angeles. It was Charley’s first time at the acclaimed Native American market creating art full time and making a living at it. So inspired by what she saw, Charley decided she might like to do the same.

Unfamiliar with ledger art, Charley’s interest was sparked as she got to know Guardipee and his work. Guardipee had explained to her that the Dakota people also had a history of making ledger art. He suggested she further examine her roots through the lens of historic ledger art and gave her a stack of ledger paper to experiment with. In Long Beach, Charley attended tribal events and powwows, but her reality was far removed from “rez life.” This pushed the artist to strive for authenticity in her work. She jumped full force into making ledger art and researched its history and historical players. She visited and talked with elders from her reservation about her ancestors as well as pre- and post-reservation period Dakota adornment. A great deal of ledger art depicts imprisonment of Native people. To learn about the atrocities her ancestors faced and how they expressed their anguish in historic ledger art was very painful for Charley. The antique paper, the stylized images, and the stories the artists told are what drew her most to the work, but “knowing that they were in prison creating this art ... it hurt my heart,” she said.

Her quest for knowledge also revealed that a majority of ledger art was very masculine. Many drawings featured buffalo hunts and bloody battle scenes. She found them very unrelatable and wanted to tell a different story in her art. “I tend to make things I don’t see” in most ledger art, she says. She wanted to bring a feminine perspective to her work, which could partially explain why the majority of her collectors today are women.

The tragic death of Charley’s mother in 1998, when the artist was just 22, was a massive blow. She never fully processed her grief, so when she began to make ledger art, her pieces explored mother-and-daughter motifs. Over time, creating ledger art became a healing mechanism for her.

Avis Charley entered the Native American art scene around 2011 when many ledger artists, including other women, were making names for themselves in top galleries and Native American art markets. Seasoned collectors were buying from Guardipee, Darryl Growing Thunder (Fort Peck Dakota/Nakoda), Dolores Purdy (Caddo/

Winnebago), Dwayne Wilcox (Oglala Lakota), Sheridan MacKnight (White Earth Ojibwe/Standing Rock Lakota), Chris Pappan (Osage/Kaw/Cheyenne River Lakota), and others. As a newcomer, Charley had something to prove and worked extremely hard to learn and grow. She was helping to evolve ledger art, but it would not be apparent until much later. "I didn't know that I was bringing a woman's perspective into this male-dominated art form."

The female point of view is evident in works such as *Protectors* (2021). The piece depicts three Dakota women dressed in regalia. The composition is unusual, and the women express the same strength and pride as the women in Charley's figurative works. One needs only glance at her faceless ledger subjects to recognize the artist in her work.

One of her most noteworthy pieces of ledger art, and a sentimental one for Charley, is the serigraph *Another Relocation Story* (2018), which features a Los Angeles RTD bus, a recurring motif in her work. "It's my creation story and how I came to be," she says. For the artist, the bus represents her upbringing in Long Beach. Her mother first met her father after she saw him walking down the street in downtown Los Angeles as she rode by on a bus. Charley and her mother would also make frequent bus trips when they didn't have a car. "I have many fond memories of my mom and talking her ear off as we waited for our next bus," she recalls.<sup>2</sup>

## A FIGURATIVE PAINTER BLOSSOMS

**AVIS CHARLEY'S POPULARITY** as a ledger artist grew over the next several years, but all the while she thirsted to learn more about Native American art. Inspired by her uncle Fred Charley (Diné) and Terrance Guardipee, both alumni of the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), Charley attended the prestigious art school and earned a BFA degree. The experience was eye-opening, and living in Santa Fe around so much art mesmerized her. At IAIA she honed her skills and had the opportunity to learn printmaking, ceramics, and jewelry. The program also



provided a foundation in art history and allowed her to explore artistic possibilities. Indigenous studies opened her eyes to activism, and she was able to ask herself the question, *What do I care about?* While

**ABOVE** *Power*, 2022, color pencil on antique ledger paper.

**OPPOSITE** *Another Relocation Story*, 2018, serigraph with color pencil on antique ledger paper.

2. Avis Charley, "Another Relocation Story," Avis Charley Art, Facebook, July 7, 2020, web.



She asks the question, *What about today's women?*

**ABOVE** *Breathe*, 2020, oil on canvas.

**OPPOSITE** *Reciprocity*, color pencil on antique ledger paper.

it was important to grieve her mother's passing, Charley was ready to move on and use her art as a tool to express something new and equally meaningful.

Charley found yet another community at IAIA. She along with other students headed to the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota for the NoDAPL protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Indigenous people from all over descended on the site in support of land and water protection and the preservation of sacred sites. The experience changed her life forever, and activism found its way into her artwork.

Charley says that she has finally found peace after her mother's death and has healed from the pain she experienced learning about the plight and history of her ancestors. Her focus has shifted to

contemporary Native women in her art. When she creates and looks within herself, she asks the question, *What about today's women?* Her figurative paintings almost exclusively feature Native American women in 21st-century settings.

Charley laments that as a child, romanticized, sexualized images of Native women were her only exposure to Native people in popular culture. With these memories in the recesses of her mind, Charley sees an opportunity to set an example for generations to come by creating work that speaks of indigeneity and the current female perspective, with undertones of activism, something she is very passionate about. Her work is helping to change the narrative and raise the bar for Native people. Avis Charley hopes that by creating work that she wished she'd seen growing up, it will inspire other talented youth to follow in her footsteps one day.

More than a decade has passed since she first participated in SWAIA's Santa Fe Indian Market, which now feels like home for Charley. She is excited about participating in the 101st edition of the market this year, a time that allows artists to meet collectors face to face, get to know them, and build lifelong friendships. Charley contends that when you purchase Native American art, "You are purchasing a part of the artist's energy as well. When I collect or trade with other Native artists," she says, "their personality or energy is what I'm really drawn to." Longevity in the art world can often be contingent upon museum interest in an artist's work. Charley is grateful that Indian Market allows for exposure and the opportunity to meet and connect with the people responsible for museum acquisitions.

Besides regularly participating in SWAIA Santa Fe Indian Market, Avis Charley also attends the Heard Museum Guild's Indian Fair and Market and has shown at the International Folk Art Market (IFAM). Since graduating from the Institute of American Indian Art, her work has garnered many accolades, including Best of Show at the 2020 Eiteljorg Indian Market and Festival. She completed a residency at Self-Help Graphics in Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles and at her alma mater IAIA. She also guest lectured online at the

University of Washington in Seattle and the Eiteljorg Museum in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The search for community and making connections through storytelling is what drives Avis Charley to make art. Her appeal as an artist is undeniable. It's evidenced by her popularity on the Native American art market circuit, with the collectors who commission her work as well as the museums that have her pieces in their collections. Her passion for experimentation and the humility that pushes her to grow in new ways is apparent in everything she does. Her extraordinary technical prowess as a painter is a testament to her raw talent, her ability to filter out life's distractions, and her strong work ethic. She has made remarkable strides as an artist since 2009. Her use of color, composition, and ability to capture mood are impeccable. Her settings, full of bold blues and accent colors, arouse tentative emotion and curiosity about her subjects in the mind of the spectator. Her work is theatrical as her characters reveal their story on the canvas. The viewer may ask, *Who are they? Where are they? What do they really want?* With every stroke, Charley makes clear that she is just as curious about the women in her paintings as admirers of her work are. The question also arises, *Is the viewer looking at the artist herself?*

Avis Charley has come a long way from painting murals in the alleyways of Long Beach's Eastside, but she never forgets where she came from. Creating in three different media fulfills her dream of supporting herself as a full-time artist. She considers *Think Long, Think Wrong* one of her biggest artistic triumphs because it challenged her to balance all the variations of blues found in the skirt, jacket, and sky. "Crisp and modern," as she describes it, the painting is also Charley's favorite piece in a large, diverse body of work. She hopes that for years to come that it along with her other figurative paintings will serve as research material for Native artists and scholars alike to learn about Native American life today.

So what is Charley up to now? After the 2022 Santa Fe Indian Market, she and her 14-year-old daughter moved to Las Vegas, Nevada, to be closer to family. While the move is temporary until she returns to Los Angeles in 2024, Charley



has delved into the growing Las Vegas art scene and continues to paint figurative pieces, create ledger art, and make dentalium jewelry that mostly attracts Native collectors who have a cultural connection to it. She quickly found a studio space and a new artistic community at NuWu Art Gallery and Community Center, founded by multidisciplinary artist Fawn Douglas (Las Vegas Paiute), and her partner, Dr. A.B. Wilkinson. The collective, right off the Vegas strip, is home to a group of artists who use their creativity to decolonize, and Charley continues to advance as an artist. Currently she is illustrating a children's book about buffalo and is

hard at work on a portrait that honors the courage of two-spirit youth.

This August she returns to IAIA to begin her MFA studies. Moving forward, Charley plans to create a body of work that is stylistically reminiscent of World War II-era propaganda with an inspirational twist. She can be found at the 2023 SWAIA Santa Fe Indian Market at booth 738 LIN-WEST. As she continues her quest for connection through storytelling, Charley ponders how her art will impact Native America moving forward. "I imagine future generations dissecting the details in this work the way I [dissect] black-and-white photos of my ancestors."

[AVISCHARLEYART.COM](http://AVISCHARLEYART.COM)