

First American Art

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Alex J. Peña

By Suzanne Newman Fricke

ALEX J. PEÑA'S ART cannot be grasped quickly. His work is subtle, complex, and nuanced. Starting with paper he makes himself, he then prints images on the surface, adding paint and pencil lines to combine abstract patterns with representational figures. With so many translucent levels, Peña's images are difficult to capture in a photograph. The artist says people often tell him his work is noticeably different in person. To properly appreciate his work requires direct interaction with the piece while in a meditative state, with a quiet, long look to grasp the many different elements.

Peña currently lives in Santa Fe, where he teaches printmaking at the Institute of American Indian Arts and the Santa Fe Preparatory School, while also creating his own multilayered works.

Inspirations

Bringing drawing, painting, collage, and now sculptural elements into his work, Peña's art gives the viewer a sense of a long expanse of time—not a momentary snapshot, but something built up slowly, over phases. His prints echo the work of 20th-century American painter Cy Twombly, whom Peña cites as an inspiration. Twombly's drawings have strong calligraphic lines and layered approaches, but Peña describes Twombly's work as looking "effortless. I think that's the real beauty in his artwork, it came so naturally from him. He was able to create a visual language effortlessly."¹ Like Twombly, Peña creates his own visual language with a range of natural motifs, including flowers, birds, and trees, as well as abstract elements, such as the texture of the paper and a mix of straight and swooping lines.

Peña cites the Diné printmaker and painter Emmi Whitehorse as another influence, noting her "use of line, color, and layering. It's all very subtle. Her work is personal; not all of it is divulged. She describes place and its meaning to her, but she doesn't divulge all of it, which I don't feel I have to do either. Sometimes people read that as obscure." Peña's work, like Whitehorse's, indicates place without being literal. He considers different "concepts about how to indicate place. Lucy Lippard describes in *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* how different artists have been



Alex J. Peña demonstrates how to wipe an etching plate at the IAIA printmaking studio, 2014. Photo: Colleen Lucero (Hopi).

able to indicate place. Maybe it's the absence of something that actually indicates the place. Those types of things are interesting to me."

Arts Education

The artist grew up in southwest Oklahoma where in 2006 he earned a BFA from Cameron University, a small liberal arts school in Lawton. At first Peña was encouraged to paint in the prevailing style for Native artists of the area, a style based on the Kiowa Six model: images of dancers and Indians on horses, painted with flat blocks of matte watercolor without background. He rebelled against the pressure to create stereotypically Native art. He felt "an expectation for romantic Native art that I resisted for such a long time. In undergraduate school they pushed me to make 'Native work' or 'Indian work' and that turned me off, because I wasn't being honest with myself. If you're Native or not, your art

1. All quotes in this article are from the author's interview with Alex J. Peña on November 7, 2014, at the Institute of American Indian Arts.

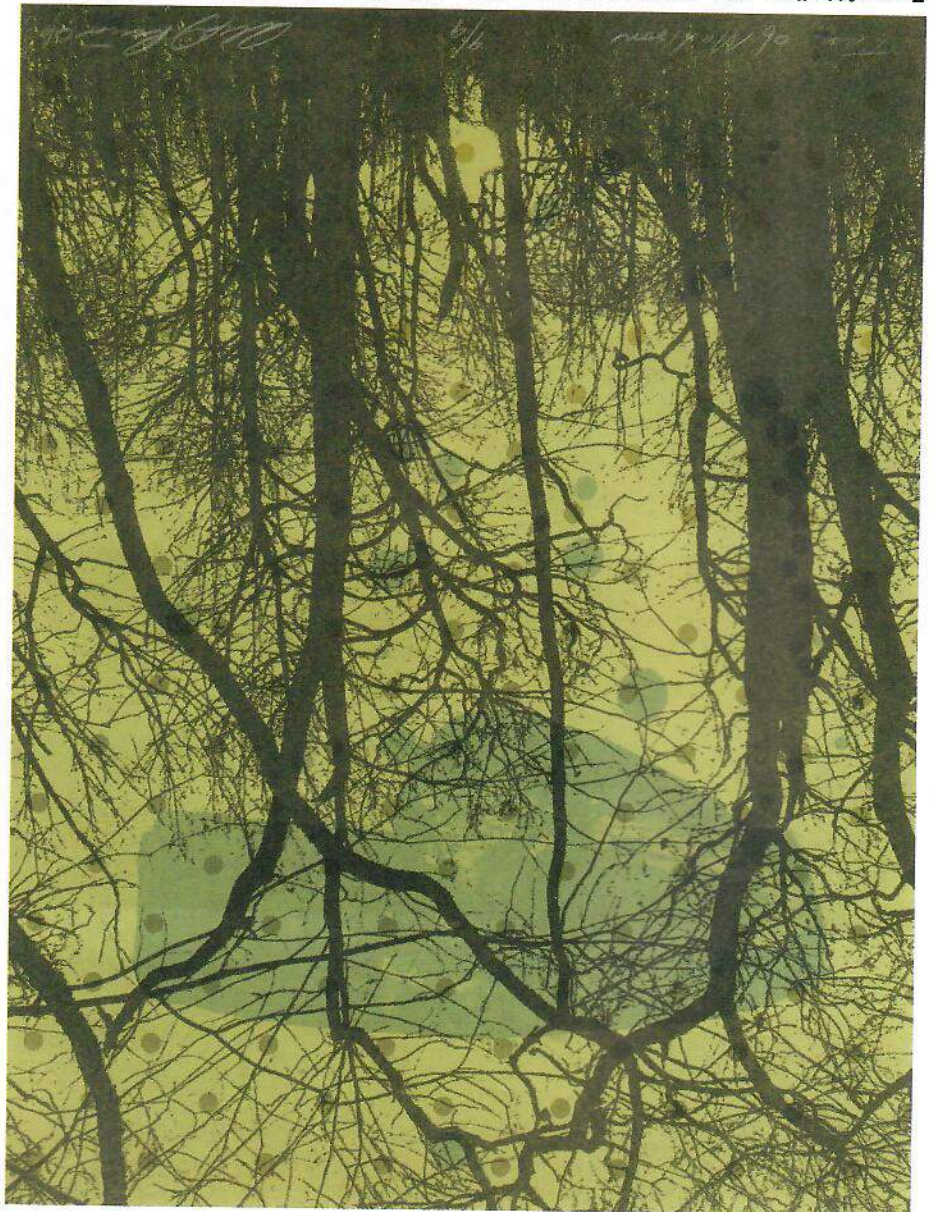
degree in 2008, and an MFA, with a printmaking emphasis in 2009. Peña studied lithography due to the media's similarity to drawing. He enjoys "the amount of detail and subtlety that you can get with it. To make a lithograph, you must know a whole lot about chemistry and about little, tiny nuances." Peña describes lithography as a very technical process.

Lithography is based on the fact that water and oils don't mix. The printer draws an image on a limestone matrix with oil- and wax-based crayons, pencils, or paints. The stone is then processed with gum arabic and a nitric acid solution that's spread over the entire stone, chemically changing the state of the drawing and stone. After this chemical transformation, the drawing or painting is embedded or etched into the stone in a relatively permanent state. The original drawing materials of wax and grease can be removed. Water is sponged over the surface and the original drawing will attract the oily ink as the water is repelled. Paper is then laid on the stone, and both are run through a press to produce a lithographic print.

While the process is highly technical, it is also "both mystical and methodical," says Peña. "You have to be very patient, very detail oriented, and you have to keep making the little leaps of faith that, yes, if I remove the drawing, the image will still be there." He describes how the method is "like a mystery, because once you erase the drawing, how are you going to get the image? You've got to know all the little steps."

The Warmth of Paper

At the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Peña studied other forms of printmaking including the intaglio processes of etching and engraving. The focus on printmaking over other media stems from the artist's preference for paper rather than canvas. He describes paper as warm, different from



Trees of Madison, 2006, lithograph on paper, 11.5 × 16 in. Photo: Alex J. Peña. All images courtesy of the artist.

is always going to be informed by who you are, what culture you are. I felt a more organic, more natural thing informed my art."

Cameron University instilled a meticulous attention to process in Peña. His education was "very academic. They insisted on teaching the foundations very, very thoroughly, and they expected us to use that throughout our whole art education. That really stuck with me, because it wasn't just play. It was really learning art."

Peña was interested in art that reflected a close attention to seeing. Peña credits Cameron University for its excellent art program. He states, "I always go back to my drawing professor, because she taught us how to see. How I look at things is different [from other artists] because of specific training where my perceptual skills were honed . . . that, I think, has affected my artworks. To see the subtlety, you've got to really look at



Too Many Ways to Say Nothing, 2011, intaglio, chine-collé, pochoir, and serigraph on paper, 15 × 11 in.

the “coldness of canvas. That’s what I don’t like about canvas. It’s plastic, where paper has that feeling like it’s more in my control.” Whitehorse has also expressed a preference for paper, a media that feels better on her hands than canvas. She often paints and prints on paper then affixes the sheets to a canvas rather than working on the canvas directly.

Peña takes this preference further, making his own paper. Handcrafting paper requires a meditative state. “It is another process I enjoy. It adds another element of the hand to the art. It’s laborious, very laborious. It’s repetitive, just one thing after another, one thing after another. You’re not creating anything new, so it lets your mind ease out a little bit.”

Behind the Process

Layers in his images highlight the various techniques used in the works. Peña describes his pieces as an exploration of “process and the layers behind it.” For him, these processes are demanding, but almost like a rite. He found that with “etching, it’s the same type of ritual with so many multiple steps that you have to do. It is very ritualistic. There’s something very mystical about it. You print it, and you get the results, and if you don’t like it, you’ve got to figure out how to fix it.”

Though he enjoys making these prints, Peña still struggles with the public reception and lack of knowledge about the medium. “I still have to educate people about what traditional printmaking is. They ask, ‘Is this a copy?’ because they think it’s a reproduction. When I say, ‘No, it’s a

print,’ they don’t know what a print is. I’ve always had to explain what ‘multiple original’ is. The audience needs to be educated about what’s behind the process—that it is still an art form, that it still takes creation, it’s still an original.”

Most viewers understand and consequently appreciate media such as painting, drawing, photography, and digital imagery more than prints, since they already know the mechanics and the aesthetics behind them. He notes, “People tend to like digital photography and painting, because they understand it and because there’s an instant gratification in it. Once you finish a painting, it’s done. Once you finish a drawing on the stone for a lithograph, it’s not done, since you still have to print the edition, which requires additional knowledge about how to get this image to come out correctly.”

rehearsed actions, another ritual. He describes their formation as difficult but satisfying. "I find it gratifying to see the lines emerge as straight," he says. "At the end of drawing those lines on a big sheet of paper going all the way down to the end, it has a gratifying feeling to it." With straight red, gold, and black lines, *Untitled Lines #25* embodies the idea of presence as Peña saw in the work of Ellsworth Kelly, who "helped people see the presence art can have in a space. Just by using color on a large canvas, people felt a presence because of that painting. Art needs to have a presence to it."

In addition to the images and the straight lines, Peña adds looped calligraphic lines to the surface, lines that look like the handwritten word, as seen in *Too Many Ways to Say Nothing #2*.

"The loopy lines indicate language, but they can never be read," says Peña. "It isn't my intention to ever make actual words, but to create an obscure-looking language that promotes reflection. It's a retrospect of idea when I work with it. I may be thinking about a certain place, and my work gives a sense of that place, metaphorically as well as physically. I create a type of scribble language I want to be personal and obscure. In that way, it's kind of selfish. I'm keeping people from knowing certain things I feel. At the same time, if you just look at it from an aesthetic point of view, I feel like it's very beautiful, knowing it or not."

For Peña, the curved lines refer to form and aesthetics of Japanese calligraphy. He says, "I really enjoy Japanese calligraphy, because it can be conceptual and at the same time beautiful. People stray away from beauty; it's like a four-letter word in art school or in academics. If you want it to be beautiful, it's as if you're cutting off the potential of conceptual exploration. When you use your hand in the work, you have both of those possibilities available to you. I make certain things more legitimate, but still at the same time, for the enjoyment of looking at it."



Untitled Lines #25, 2010, graphite, enamel, and metallic ink on hand-inked paper, 15 x 22 in.

Power Lines

Peña explores the potential of the line, both straight and calligraphic. He often adds thin-hatched lines, drawn close together, cloud-like forms on the paper's surface. The lines sometimes run parallel, sometimes crosshatched, striking in their unrelenting straightness. These lines are very formal, showing space and intention, along with a larger concept of place. The artist started drawing repetitive lines in graduate school. "I think I've always loved the simplicity of the line," says Peña. "A straight line can have so many meanings for different reasons. It can point for direction. It can indicate place. When you group lines, it can mean a pattern or something more precise, like a graph. A straight line is something so simple that we often take for granted. We take for granted the theory behind using line and the richness of exploration of something so simple. It takes me back to my foundation courses to realize how important the line is." These lines form the surface for many of Peña's 2010 works, such as *Untitled Lines #25*. Like the printmaking process, the lines require careful,



Too Many Ways to Say Nothing #2, 2013, digital, acrylic, enamel ink, and gold leaf on board, 8.5 × 11 × 2.5 in.

As an undergraduate Peña studied Romance languages. “Language has always intrigued me. The language aspect is very apparent in my work.” As the title *Too Many Ways to Say Nothing #2* suggests, words can have multiple meanings, or no meaning at all. “Learning languages is part of communication, but it’s more lyrical, more beauty behind the communication. You’re communicating something digitally and thoughtfully, but it also can be done beautifully.”

Images from the Natural World

When Peña combined images with the lines, his work moved from the analytic to the emotional. In *Volatile Certainty* (2011), Peña placed carnations next to hatched and crosshatched thin, gold lines. The flowers suggest various emotions and ideas. Flowers decorate homes, but also memorialize and comfort mourners. After his grandmother died, Peña began to use flowers in his art. “I started exploring why flowers are used in so many different aspects. For instance, at the funeral, why are flowers used as a symbol of consolation and for grieving?

It is a reminder that the beautiful can give comfort when something is very hard to deal with. Using those things that have that dichotomy within them is very interesting to me. I’m still trying to figure out why I’m using flowers other than just for mourning.”

The flowers and the lines, two different elements in Peña’s work, create an internal dialogue within the piece, rather like a discussion between different parts of the brain: the analytic and the perceptive, the thinker and the observer, the logical and the intuitive.

The title *Volatile Certainty* suggests a scientific study. Peña often uses words like *volatile*, *certainty*, and *uncertainty* in his titles. As an undergraduate, he studied sciences, including biology and psychology, which appealed to him because, as he says, “I like principles, theories, ideas. That’s why there’s number 1, 2, 3, 4, whatever [in the artwork’s titles], because there are multiple ways of looking at one thing. I have a certain viewpoint towards what is certain and what is more certain, what is less certain, and so there’s a volatile sense to it. That is working on the principle of more psychological,

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communication point was.”

Like a scientific research study, Peña explores the possibilities of printmaking, painting, and mixed media in variations. He believes, “There is no one solution to anything. If I am exploring something, it can disappear and dissipate at any time.”

As a Native American artist, Peña shows his work in different galleries and has only recently joined Native-only shows. His work often does not fit with the established categories of Native art. The year 2014 was “only my third time participating in the annual Santa Fe Indian Market. I thought it would be nice to have the juxtaposition between my work that’s very contemporary” and more established styles of art.

“There’s a lot more going on than what people expect to see. That’s my way of showing the shifts that continue to happen in the Native art world. Yes, what I like about it is how people will come from one booth and they’ll say, ‘This is so different.’ It takes them aback for a minute, and then they start to look and they say, ‘I like this. It’s so different.’ I like how it makes them reflect a little bit. I like that little shock that they have, since it is more of a contemporary voice.”

In more recent works, as in *A Temporary Foundation of Certainty #3* from 2013, Peña uses plaster with found objects such as dried flowers and wire to make a three-dimensional version of his layered art, complete with calligraphic lines. “My work is not overt in any way. There’s no mention of any type of politics or social issues. I want my art to be more personal,” he says. “Sometimes it’s not always read easily by the viewer, but then if you get to spend more time with it, study it, then it becomes a lot more evident of what the

Ongoing Experiments

emotional types of things. In that way, it does relate, not directly to science, but something like my own science.”

In addition to flowers, Peña repeats images in his work, including trees, birds, twigs and branches, and chamisa. “All of these have a specific, concrete meaning for me.”

An earlier lithograph, *Trees of Madison*, combines a garbled, silhouetted forest with a matrix of olive and moss green dots. For Peña, the trees are “an element of place. I find around anthropomorphic, so they represent the way you feel around people that you’re comfortable with—that engrossing feeling.” The silhouetted image may be a literal representation of a site, but the dots and shapes overlay a sense of narrative, offering a view of the site along with its history.

A Temporary Foundation of Certainty #3, 2013, plaster with mixed media, 8 × 11.5 × 1.5 in. Two views of the same piece.

