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Exhibit Review: *Continuity: Cahuilla Basketweavers and Their Legacies*

By Lina Tejeda

On February 14, 2024, the exhibition titled *Continuity: Cahuilla Basket Weavers and Their Legacies* opened at the Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College. In her curatorial statement in the accompanying exhibition catalog used to help shape this review, Guest Curator Dr. Meranda Roberts (Paiute and Chicana) said, “This exhibition honors the decades of work undertaken by Cahuilla women to gain access to ancestral pieces in museums, ensuring that their histories, stories, and lessons are reclaimed for the community’s continuity.”¹ As Dr. Roberts describes, this exhibition shows beyond doubt that Cahuilla basket weavers’ legacies are still influential to present-day Cahuilla community members and artists as signified in the title *Continuity*. According to Google Dictionary by Oxford Languages, continuity means “the unbroken and consistent existence or operation of something over a period of time.”² After viewing the exhibition, it is clear that Dr. Roberts was successful in her goals with this project which she emphasizes was due to the engagement she had with Cahuilla women and artists to help shape and share this legacy.

On February 10, 2024, the Benton Museum of Art hosted an exhibition opening and community blessing that was for

¹ Meranda Roberts, Wendy Cheng, Emily Clarke, and Rose Ann Hamilton, Pomona: Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College, 2024, Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, organized and presented at the Benton Museum of Art at Pomona College, February 14, 2024 – June 23, 2024, p 15.

² “Continuity,” in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, May 20, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/continuity>.

Cahuilla community members and showcased artists. The unconventional portion of this exhibition is that members of the Cahuilla community were invited to touch and hold the baskets displayed without a glass case or protective screen, this alone made *Continuity* the first of its kind by presenting and acknowledging the need for a different approach in museums and institutions alike.

Continuity features pieces by contemporary Native American artists such as: Cahuilla artist Gerald Clarke, and Tongvan and Scottish artist Weshoyot Alvitre, a poem by Cahuilla Poet Emily Clarke, and photography by Chemehuevi photographer Cara Romero. The centerpiece of *Continuity* features various historic Cahuilla baskets by some known and some unknown basket weavers.

This exhibition honors Donna Largo (Cahuilla) who created an exhibition in 1994 titled, *Ways of Seeing/Exhibiting American Indian Art: The Pomona College Collection*. “Continuity pays homage to Donna’s generational commitment to keeping Cahuilla cultural traditions alive by restaging and installation of original baskets that she first selected and exhibited during *Ways of Seeing/Exhibiting American Indian Art: The Pomona College Collection*. ”³ When entering the first portion of the exhibit, the entire back wall is a photograph by Cara Romero of the Cahuilla landscape titled “First Light at Joshua Tree”. Under the photo there is a patch of soil with displays of basket weaving materials dated 1910, historic baskets and a historic basket hat that were featured in Largo’s 1994 exhibit.⁴ This display choice with the Cahuilla landscape and placement of basketry materials was a replica of Largo’s display. In this room was also Tongva/Scottish Artist Weshoyot Alvitre’s piece titled, *The Original Instructions*, a “mixed media, wool, stitching topographic map overlaid with petroglyph to speak of Creation stories, landscapes, and tribal connections.”⁵ The petroglyph she used is the Hemet Maze Stone, found in Hemet, California, which is a large stone with a maze-like

³ Roberts, *Continuity: Cahuilla Basket Weavers and their Legacies*, p 88.

⁴ Roberts, *Continuity: Cahuilla Basket Weavers and their Legacies*, p 100.

⁵ Roberts, *Continuity: Cahuilla Basket Weavers and their Legacies*, 8.

square shape carved into it. According to California State Parks, it “is an outstanding example of the work of prehistoric peoples.”⁶



Figure 1: Basket display, *Continuity: Cahuilla Basket Weavers and Their Legacies*.⁷

The second room or portion had three tables in the center forming the shape of a circle that displayed more than 30 historic Cahuilla baskets from the Benton Museum’s collection (Fig. 1). As stated before, the most notable aspect of *Continuity* is that curator Dr. Roberts chose to display the historic items without a glass or plastic protector. While at the community welcome and blessing event Cahuilla community members and descendants of the weavers were allowed to openly touch and hold the baskets, it was asked that *only* these descendants could touch them and to let staff know so that museum security were informed that they are permitted to touch the baskets.

On the far back wall was another wall-length photograph of the Cahuilla landscape near Palm Springs, California, featuring a

⁶ “Hemet Maze Stone- Historical Landmark,” Accessed April 23, 2024, California State Parks Online.
<https://ohp.parks.ca.gov/ListedResources/Detail/557>.

⁷ This image contains the photograph titled “Indian Canyon” by Cara Romero on the back left wall, “Continuum Basket: Origins” by Gerald Clarke on the far-right wall, and various historic Cahuilla baskets from the Benton Museum of Art collection.

young boy as a “spirit” by photographer Romero titled *Indian Canyon*.⁸ On a second wall was an installation of a basket pattern made out of crushed aluminum soda cans by Cahuilla artist Gerald Clarke titled *Continuum Basket: Origins*. He used silver-based cans as a background and colored cans (blues, greens, and yellows) to create the design for his large installation. On a third wall, the poem *From Beneath the Oak Trees* by Cahuilla poet Emily Clarke was written on the wall. Her poem artistically illustrates how weaving baskets can still be seen by the Cahuilla people in their walk of life even though the tradition has been forgotten due to the forced assimilation of Native people in California. She even makes reference to the pop cans in her father Gerald Clarke Jr.’s *Continuum Basket*.

The exhibition included three artist talks: the first featured Gerald and Emily Clarke, the second featured Weshoyot Alvitre, and the third and final talk featured Cara Romero. Each artist got to talk about what *Continuity* meant to them and how they were able to translate that in the pieces they created and shared for the exhibit and discussed their process of creating their contributing pieces. All four artists were kind and remained after their talk to connect with attendees. It was a great opportunity to get to know the artists’ process and thoughts.

Curator Dr. Meranda Roberts succeeded in her goals for the exhibition. She was able to collaborate with contemporary Cahuilla basket weavers and community members and was able to look back to previous people such as Donna Largo to be successful in her goals. *Continuity: Cahuilla Basket Weavers and Their Legacies* is an important contribution to the field of public history for its unique approach to museum collection display. It is important for curators to be able to look at the design and make changes to future exhibitions, especially ones that wish to display baskets and other items that culturally should not be locked behind display cases

⁸ Cara Romero, “Artist Talk: Cara Romero,” April 18, 2024, Benton Museum of Art Pomona College, Pomona College Claremont, CA.

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Author Bio

Lina Tejeda is half Pomo from her tribal homelands in Northern California and half Mexican. She is a graduate student in the master of art in history program at California State University San Bernardino. Her area of focus is California Indian studies and museum studies/ public history. Lina is passionate about working in institutions to advocate for the return of cultural sacred items to tribal nations from which they belong and telling the true histories of the California Indian people. In her spare time, Lina is a traditional Pomo dancer who has taken to learning about her cultural traditions including basket weaving, beading hats, regalia making, singing, gathering materials, and learning about the traditional ecological knowledge in California. While her passion lies in her own cultural heritage, she finds enjoyment in all areas of history including topics such British history, French history, and social histories of the United States. Lina would like to thank and give photo credit to Adriana Robles and AR NorCal Budget Photography.

