



COLORFUL GEO NEPTUNE
SCULPTURAL POLLY JACOBS GIACCHINA
BASKETS UNLEASHED AT THE RACINE ART MUSEUM



GEO SOCTOMAH NEPTUNE: RECLAIMING TRADITION

BY **CARRIE ANNE VANDERHOOP**

Geo Soctomah Neptune, a two-spirit Passamaquoddy basket maker of Indian Township, Maine, is well known for creating powerful, vibrant statement baskets that combine traditional Passamaquoddy weaving techniques, fancy basket designs, and the artist's own personal vision, executed with purpose and fine detail.

Indian Township is the largest Indian reservation in the state, situated along the West Branch of the St. Croix River. The Passamaquoddy are one of the few tribes on the Eastern Seaboard that haven't been removed from their homeland. They have lived on the lands of their ancestors for over 12,000 years. The Passamaquoddy are part of the larger Wabanaki Confederacy, which includes the five nations of the Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, Abenaki, and Penobscot, whose territories spread out across the northeast region of North America from Maine up into Canada.

"We have an uninterrupted presence here. I think that it's something that is very important for us and for our history. We still have our language intact. We are one of

the only tribes on the Eastern Seaboard that still has language speakers where the Passamaquoddy language is their first language. According to our oral histories, we have been here since time immemorial. You can't even measure how long our people have lived in this place, lived along these rivers and tributaries, and the lakes that are attached to them," Neptune says.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
LEFT: Three berries,
Strawberry,
Blackberry, and **Blue**
Raspberry; brown/
black ash, sweet grass,
commercial dyes;
cokihqis (curly) weave;
each 2.75 x 2" diam.

RIGHT: Piyaasss-
komon: Gaize;
2017; brown/black
ash, sweet grass,
commercial dyes;
cokihqis (curly) plaited
weave; 12" (6" without
husks) x 1" diam.

THIS PAGE
TOP: **Microberry;**
2013; brown/black
ash, sweet grass,
commercial dyes;
lidded basket with
cokihqis (curly) weave;
1.5 x .75"

BOTTOM: **Trinket**
Baskets; 2012; brown/
black ash, sweet grass,
commercial dyes;
various sizes, "pillow"
basket is 2 x 2 x 1"

Neptune is not a fluent speaker of the Passamaquoddy language, but is learning. As in many indigenous families, the artist's grandmother chose not to teach her children the language because she believed it would help them be successful in school to speak only English. For generations indigenous children were taken from their communities all across North America and sent to boarding schools where their language, culture, and identities were taken from them. They were taught that their culture was wrong. Children were punished for speaking their language. Grandparents and parents who went through these experiences wanted to protect their children, so they purposely withheld the language and parts of the culture. But that is changing in communities today. When not weaving, Neptune is teaching language and traveling around giving cultural education presentations for children and youth.

"Our language is the heart and soul of our culture. It is who we are. With our language we can learn about any aspect of our culture that we need to, even the lost aspects, lost ceremonies—it's all within our language. But the same isn't true with basket making, or quill working, or bead work. They are all related but [do not contain all of our culture]. The one thing that contains all of those elements, contains the very element of who we are as Native people, is our language. So twice a week I go to teach our language at the language immersion preschool and I do so in my skirt, and if I wake up early enough, I do it in my makeup," Neptune says.

Neptune identifies as non-binary and non-gender conforming, thus fulfilling the traditional role in the Passamaquoddy culture of a two-spirit person. As a two-spirit,



IMAGE COURTESY OF FOUR DIRECTIONS DEVELOPMENT CORP.



ABOVE: Lidded basket in memory of those still shrouded in the darkness of "the closet." **Spirit Road**; 2017; brown/black ash; sweet grass, glass beads, commercial dyes; Four Directions weaving pattern; 6 x 12" diam.

BELOW: **Spirit Road** (detail).

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: Geo Soctomah Neptune and their grandmother, Molly Neptune, harvesting sweet grass.

BOTTOM: **Sewing Kit**; 2012; brown/black ash, sweetgrass; 7 x 2 x 5"



the artist uses gender neutral pronouns they, them, and theirs. Neptune's connection to the land, the reclamation of language and culture, and their role as a two-spirit basket maker and storyteller are tightly intertwined and articulately woven throughout our conversation. As the artist tells the Passamaquoddy creation story, Gluskap, son of Sky Woman, created the first people. Gluskap first attempted to create humans from stone, but the stone had no heart. For his second attempt Gluskap shot an arrow into the center of a brown ash tree and it split in two. Inside there were then two spirits that had previously been one. Gluskap made a trade with the spirits, giving them the breath of life for their promise to take care of the Wabanaki homeland and to teach the people how to live and to survive, and to pass this knowledge on to future generations. Gluskap made many more people from the split ash tree.

Neptune says that later in their life, in their role as a storyteller, they were given a piece of the creation story they hadn't heard before. In this part of the story, to make the last person, Gluskap took the remaining pieces of those two spirits that had been separated and reunited them, creating the first two-spirit person to help connect the Wabanaki people back to their origin.

Our language is the heart and soul of our culture. It is who we are.

Neptune explains that the Passamaquoddy people make their baskets from the same material that Gluskap used—the brown ash tree. "That's how we knew we could manipulate it in the way we do, because Gluskap did the same thing to create us. When we take that sacred material from which we were created and create something with it, we're actually taking a piece of our own spirit and giving it to that creation, for it to be able to take physical form. In a way, we are giving it our own breath of life."

There are many types of ash trees in the forests of Maine. The black or brown ash that is used to create the beautiful baskets that Neptune's family has been weaving for generations is not common. Finding a tree that is suitable for harvesting can prove to be difficult, as they are increasingly scarce.

Although Neptune has been weaving with their grandmother, Molly Neptune, since the age of four, the artist only recently began learning how to harvest the tree. Neptune has been accompanying a Maliseet Elder who has taught them how to harvest the tree in the Passamaquoddy traditional way and also the Maliseet and Mi'kmaq way. These traditions require the tree to be cut down. The Passamaquoddy then pound the length and circumference of the full, cut tree to force the growth rings to separate to the point that the growth layers can be pulled off the log lengthwise. From there, the material can

be split down into thinner pieces of different widths for weaving. This time-consuming process can take 8 to 12 hours in a day.

Access to the sacred resources of ash and sweet grass, which are used for basket making, is continually threatened. Passamaquoddy people have the right to harvest on their own tribal lands, and also have treaty rights to harvest on Maine public land, but harvesting material is becoming more of a challenge as land becomes privatized. The use of pesticides has also decreased the places where sweet grass grows.

Neptune harvests sweet grass with their grandmother and they also take part in community harvests. The artist explains that the sweet grass is harvested one blade at a time because that is how it grows. If you want it to grow back the next year you have to follow the process properly to have a sustainable harvest. Neptune and their grandmother are participating in a longitudinal study in partnership with Acadia National Park to survey and monitor sweet grass within the park and the impact of the Passamaquoddy harvesting practices.

Neptune earned their Bachelor of Arts degree at Dartmouth College, where they studied theater. At Dartmouth, they became involved in activism and also created the alter-ego Lyzz Bein, who participated in drag shows and competitions. After a difficult time away from their community studying and working, Neptune decided to move back home and shift their focus to what they can do as an activist in their own community.

"The activism that I have been capable of this past year is just being visibly queer in Washington County, Maine. That is what my energy can go toward at this moment—





ABOVE: **Chalice:**
Siqonomeq naka
Mahsus (alewife and
fiddlehead); 2017;
brown/black ash,
sweet grass; cokihqis
(curly) and plaited
weave, fiddlehead
and alewife designs;
7 x 3.5"

BOTTOM RIGHT:
Lidded baskets in
memory of seven trans
women murdered as
of March 2017: Jamie
Lee, KeKe, Jojo, Ciara,
Chyna, Mesha, and
Jacquarrius. **Evolution**
of the Transberry;
2017; brown/black
ash, sweet grass,
commercial dyes;
cokihqis (curly) plaited
weave; 7 x 12 x 4"

"We are living in an economy that has been forced upon us, so we adapted our traditions to survive in that economy because we have always known how to survive," says Neptune. "A lot of sickness that Native people experience across Turtle Island today is because we have been forced into a state of dependency on the state or federal government. History leading up to this point has intentionally put us in a place where we couldn't provide for ourselves in the way that we had before. So whenever a Native person is able to survive by taking our skills and adapting them to this new environment there is something very powerful about that. There is a lot of good medicine in that. If our ancestors could see that we are here and that we are not only just surviving but starting to thrive in this place where we weren't meant to thrive, and we're doing it by practicing the traditions that we were forbidden to practice, I think that would make our ancestors really proud."

K'iinuwaas, *Carrie Anne Vanderhoop*,
is Gawa Git'ans, Masset Inlet Eagle
Clan of Haida Gwaii and Aquinnah
Wampanoag of Neope, commonly
known as Martha's Vineyard,
Massachusetts. She is a weaver of
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being myself and being comfortable with myself in a place where there is almost literally no one else like me, and really doing my best to reclaim that space as a two-spirit, not only within my community, but within the state."

Neptune is a strong role model in their community, not only as a culture bearer and two-spirit person, but also as a successful artist with multiple awards and recognition. This past year they became one of the artists of the B. Yellowtail Collective. Bethany Yellowtail is a fashion designer and entrepreneur who has been featured in *Forbes* and *People* magazines. Neptune's basketry and beautiful woven earrings, made with brown ash, sweet grass, and glass seed beads, can be purchased on the B. Yellowtail website www.byellowtail.com.

Neptune has always seen making baskets as a way to provide for themselves and to one day provide for their family—part of a long tradition. When they were growing up, their grandmother told stories of how her family made as many as 100 baskets a week. Her father would then hitchhike to nearby towns to sell the baskets, returning home with the money for the family.