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“The Return,” a digital illustration/animation by Jonathan Thunder, represents sovereignty, strength and hope.

NACDI and Hennepin Theatre Trust collaborate to launch *We Are Still Here*, an initiative to uplift Native voices in the Hennepin Theatre District

With support from the McKnight Foundation, organizers will create an ongoing framework for ongoing public art and placemaking projects

MINNEAPOLIS (Dec. 8, 2020) — Hennepin Theatre Trust today announced a collaboration with the Native American Community Development Institute (NACDI) to launch *We Are Still Here*, a multi-year initiative to uplift Native voices and stories in Minneapolis. With grant funding through the McKnight Foundation, *We Are Still Here* will bring large-scale, high profile public art by emerging Native artists to both downtown Minneapolis and the American Indian Corridor. The art highlights contemporary Native culture while dispelling stereotypes. The initiative will also establish a sustainable framework for ongoing engagement among Minnesota’s First People, the Trust and other downtown Minneapolis stakeholders.

The 18 to 24 month initiative will be a learning cohort featuring three Indigenous artists. They will work with project mentor Jonathan Thunder to create digital designs, full motion animation, projections and a possible large-scale mural. *We Are Still Here* will promote Dakota storytelling for the built environment along Hennepin Avenue through pilots and prototypes. The initiative will culminate with a final project as a central feature for the reopening of Hennepin Avenue following a four-year reconstruction project and the Hennepin Theatre District centennial celebration in 2022. Organizers with NACDI and the Trust are looking to build social capital among participating artists and stakeholders to ensure that future

collaborations continue to unfold and generate a deeper presence for Native culture in downtown beyond the life of the project.

Engaging with Native artists and community has been the mission of NACDI since its founding in 2007 and the early creation of the “American Indian Community Blueprint” in 2010. Angela Two Stars, NACDI’s All My Relations Arts director shares, “By interweaving contemporary and traditional storytelling, and the allyship of Indigenous communities here in the Twin Cities, we are able to connect the Dakota history of the land and continued connections to our past using the powerful visuals of our contemporary artists.” NACDI’s long-standing commitment to public engagement has enabled them to be a source of leadership and guidance among its network of Native artists and community. “We at NACDI are excited to uplift the creative voices of the selected cohort members alongside their esteemed mentor to continue to highlight the visibility of Indigenous presence through art,” said Two Stars.

NACDI promotes economic improvement by emphasizing capacity building at the community, organizational and individual levels to support Native people to build a future they envision for themselves. As a community leader, NACDI guides the community's vision of establishing a Native-led economic engine called the American Indian Cultural Corridor on East Franklin Avenue in South Minneapolis with Native arts and culture being key strategies. They also own and operate All My Relations Arts Gallery, one of the region’s premiere contemporary galleries that has launched careers for many Native artists and arts professionals. NACDI is Native-run and led with over 80% of its staff and board of directors having Tribal affiliations.

In the Hennepin Theatre District, the Trust transforms the spaces along Hennepin Avenue to a more vibrant and inclusive environment through its public art projects and programming. “We are looking forward to collaborating with NACDI to broaden the awareness of Native truth-telling and working together to create a system enabling continued public art and placemaking efforts,” said Mark Nerenhausen, president and CEO for the Trust. Nerenhausen said that *We Are Still Here* will be a catalyst to weave Native culture back into Hennepin Avenue, connecting the District’s community to arts and cultural experiences in unexpected places.

As the Trust prepares to celebrate the District’s centennial in 2022, Joan Vorderbruggen, director of Hennepin Theatre District engagement, envisions a future that recognizes the significance of Hennepin Avenue as a Dakota foot trail that predates the city from the river to the chain of lakes. She said, “Ushering in the next 100 years provides a meaningful opportunity to celebrate the history of Hennepin Avenue, not just as a theatre district, but also its origins on Dakota land so that a more inclusive history can be shared.” *We Are Still Here* enables a collaborative energy to spark creativity and reflection among local artists to share their voices, cultures and life experiences.

NACDI and Hennepin Theatre Trust selected local Native artist Jonathan Thunder as the cohort mentor for *We Are Still Here* through an open call for artists. “As a culture-bearer, working in contemporary media, Jonathan is the ideal mentor for this group as he brings a wide range of skills from large-scale painting to digital animation and installations,” said Angela Two Stars, All My relations Art Director. Thunder (Red Lake Ojibwe) is a multi-disciplinary artist known for the surreal imagery he uses to address the subjects of loss and recovery of Indigenous sovereignty, environmental welfare and humorous social commentary through his paintings, animated and experimental films, installations and illustration work. He has attended the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and studied visual effects and motion graphics in the Art Institute International in Minneapolis.

His work has been featured in state, regional and national exhibitions, as well as in local and international publications since 2003. He is also a 2020 Pollock-Krasner Foundation grantee. "Working with NACDI and Hennepin Theatre Trust is an exciting opportunity in itself, given their roles in the Twin Cities," said Thunder. "And what is even more exciting to me is the chance to work with like-minded artists with the goal of discussing and developing themes, imagery and intent, implemented through digital processes of design and animation."

All My Relations staff, along with Thunder, reviewed artist submissions and selected three Native artists to complete the cohort. The artists are Ray Janis, Sheldon Starr and Missy Whiteman.

Raymond Janis (Oglala Lakota Tribe) goes by the artist name of Ray Rock Boy. Rock Boy is an enrolled citizen of the Oglala Lakota Tribe on the Pine Ridge Reservation. He grew up in the Medicine Root District also known as Kyle, South Dakota. Rock Boy is influenced by his Lakota heritage and western society blending the two cultures and letting his art develop and move where it wants. Rock Boy is a student of the Graphic Design major program at Oglala Lakota College. He is studying from two masters in their respective fields Keith Brave Heart and Marty Two Bulls Jr.

Sheldon Starr (Oglala Sioux Tribe) is a painter, graphic designer, comedian and guitarist. Graduating from Oglala Lakota College with a degree in Graphic Arts, Starr continues to utilize his graphic design experience in the freelance and commission-based fields, creating custom graphics, logos, and text for clients. Sheldon sows his creative freedom through abstract paintings based on geometric subjects and the female form, paying homage to the traditional Lakota geometric designs and the aesthetics of the 1980s. Sheldon's home center was the He Sapa Center in Rapid City, SD.

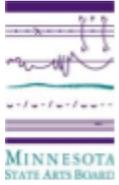
Missy Whiteman (Northern Arapaho and Kickapoo), an **Emmy**-nominated writer, director, producer and multi-media artist. Whiteman understands her work to be a voice for her ancestors, their stories and ancestral wisdom. Her late father, **Ernest Whiteman**, influenced her work, with the gift of artistic vision and practice of art as ceremony.

While based in part Indigenous traditional practices and perspectives, her work also addresses themes of historical genocide, loss of culture, and land in relation to colonization. Whiteman questions the connection of life, death spirit world and the rebirth process of revitalizing DNA memory, spirit healing and redefinition of cultural identity. Many of Missy's films have screened on international national and local venues.

For the launch, the cohort assists their mentor on several digital billboard designs and learns about the field of public art. Artists will learn skills to translate artwork from analog to digital media and the various platforms and venues that the Trust offers (outdoor events, mobile stage, digital billboards, storefront installations, murals, gallery exhibits and more). While the details of activities will evolve with the interests of the artists and in line with public health regulations, the timelines will include milestone touchpoints building to a final project that will be featured as part of the Hennepin Theatre District's centennial celebration in the fall of 2022.

Throughout this process, Thunder will provide the project artists continued mentorship on creating public art for digital media, determining joint projects for public spaces along Hennepin Avenue and providing feedback and evaluations. Ultimately, the cohort will design and implement solo art designs, a gallery

installation and the creation of a crown jewel project built on their successes. That project will be unveiled in the District when Hennepin Avenue reopens in 2022 after four years of reconstruction. Aside from the technical aspects of developing public art, *We Are Still Here* is meant to equip the artists to create opportunities for community engagement beyond the artists themselves.



This activity is made possible by the voters of Minnesota through a Minnesota State Arts Board Operating Support grant, thanks to a legislative Appropriation from the arts and cultural heritage fund.

Native American Community Development Institute (NACDI) Our work is founded on the belief that all American Indian people have a place, purpose and a future *strengthened* by sustainable community development. NACDI initiates projects that benefit the Native community, often in partnership with other Indigenous-led organizations. Our future is bright due to the resilience and vision of our ancestors. Founded in 2007, NACDI is approaching its second decade with a renewed commitment to the Indigenous values that helped our people persevere despite centuries of hardship.

Hennepin Theatre Trust drives cultural and economic vitality in Minnesota through leadership of the dynamic Hennepin Theatre District in downtown Minneapolis and educational programming that reaches every area of the state. Its historic theatres — Orpheum, State and Pantages — and event center at 900 Hennepin Avenue light up Hennepin Avenue with top-tier entertainment, including the best of Broadway and a wide variety of arts programming. Hennepin Theatre Trust is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization. Learn more at HennepinTheatreTrust.org.

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