



FRESH PAINT: EMMI WHITEHORSE

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PARRISH ART MUSEUM

The  FLAG Art Foundation

EMMI WHITEHORSE: RESEEDING CHACO

Interview by Susie Kalil

Emmi Whitehorse's ambitiously scaled painting *Reseeding Chaco* (2026) features marks, scrawls, and forms painted in swaths of incandescent yellow. The work evokes New Mexico as the land of the sun and the Ancestral Puebloan culture that thrived in Chaco Canyon. To gaze at *Reseeding Chaco* is to get the sense of an artist perpetually drawn to the edge of the unknown, to questions about our primordial origins, about the final destiny of this planet and humankind, about what erodes and what endures. In the diptych, tight-knit, layered gestures and forms of pure nervous energy fill the space with wiry lines or dissipate into an ethereal golden void. The infinitely small seems conflated with the unimaginably large—organisms under a microscope become like topographical maps. There is a feeling that the painting, with its shimmer of constant movement, will have changed if you look away and back again.

Whitehorse's works on paper mounted on canvas—which combine oil stick, chalk, graphite, pastel, watercolor, wax crayon, and acrylic—evoke Dinétah, the homeland. They are stimulated by the artist's mystical conjuring of place, her instinctive feel for an untamed land. The psychological intensity of her personal involvement sustains a generative impulse behind the translucent grounds. Whitehorse has not only pondered the environment, but has experienced it with all her physical and spiritual being. As a child, she played and tended sheep in New Mexico's landscape. She continues to walk it, while making connections between abstract properties of distance, speed, perception and memory. Drawing upon her life experiences and Navajo heritage, the images tell the story of an intimate knowledge of the Southwest.

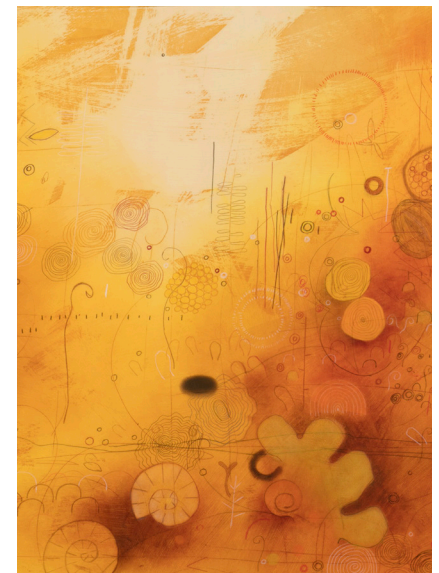
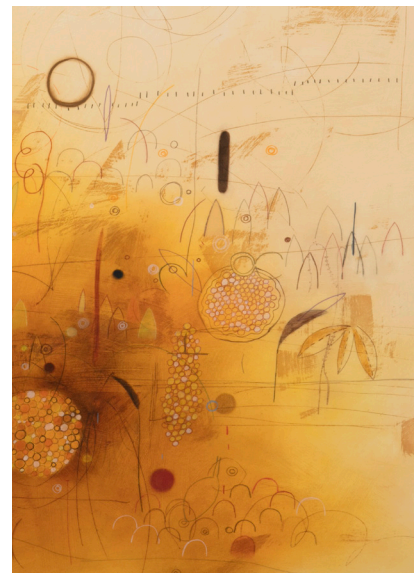
Susie Kalil: Your paintings convey deeply felt, personal responses to the landscape. You approach the New Mexico desert as a kind of transcendental medium—one that sustains a spiritual and emotional equilibrium. The paintings broaden and diffuse the senses—touch, balance, sight, sound—so we can take in whatever is around us. How did you develop that close bond with nature?

Emmi Whitehorse: I've always been fascinated with nature because I grew up in a remote place. We were secluded from the rest of the world. It was an expansive land, which we used for raising sheep and other animals, and it was difficult to access. We didn't have electricity or TV. One had to find a way to entertain oneself. For me, that was looking at comic and coloring books. Comic books were terrific—they were like watching

TV—and I loved the drawing style, especially the straightforward space where a superhero would be coming out at you, drawn larger than the background, to give this really interesting perspective. I looked at my grandmother's weavings too. They were very geometric and created that effect of movement. They made me think that you can give form or create the illusion of space on a flat surface. I also observed what was around me: nature. Rocks, plants, and the shapes of leaves. I was like a botanist. I think that's why the fascination with natural things comes easily for me.

SK: You were born in Crownpoint, not far from Chaco Canyon, an unforgiving land—parched earth, scarce water, and few building materials. But Chaco is also a mysterious place chosen some 1,000 years ago as the powerful center of the Pueblo world for two and a half centuries. Its immense buildings, laid out according to spiritual and cosmological requirements, connected the people to solar and lunar cycles. Can you tell us more about the mystery of Chaco culture? Why did you choose this sacred site?

EW: I was watching a program on Chaco and learned there was significant travel and visitation between there and Mexico. They had built boulevards so wide between the two territories that you had to wonder what they were carrying back and forth. Then I thought maybe the roads were made when they were building because they had to bring all the logs to make the roofs of the kivas (sacred, subterranean chambers) from Mount Taylor. That's quite a big distance! Then, I discovered the Chaco had such



a fascination with the lunar and solar equinoxes and built the village to align with the path of the moon and sun during these events. It is quite a magical moment when you see where the moon- and sunlight hit during different phases. In my painting at the Parrish, I started thinking about making these two wide lines and half and full circles to mirror some of this history I was discovering about Chaco.

There were over 3,000 people living there at Chaco at one time. To me, it was so mind-boggling that it was right next door to me and it was completely untouched! The Navajo people didn't approach it—they have always been very respectful. Chaco was a grave site, and you don't visit a grave site.

Now, when you approach Chaco, it's just bare. There had been a forest at one point, so you have to wonder if they depleted all those trees. Further south in New Mexico, there is a fossilized coral reef, meaning there was a huge amount of water that created it. Maybe the seashells found near Chaco were collected from that area. The weather was probably more favorable back then. They didn't have pollution like we do now.

SK: What about the title, *Reseeding Chaco*? Seeds involve life merging and spreading. There's an analogy between the movement of seeds and people. Seeds as marking the beginning of an endless journey and carrying with them the potential for survival and adaptation. What did you mean by "reseeding?"

EW: I was wondering if it was possible to have some sort of lushness around a dead area again. The area around Chaco is always dry. It might be green for a while but then dries up again. The vegetation is like yellow straw, very low to the ground, because people let their animals overgraze and roam free there. It was probably a pipe dream of "what if" it could be transformed. It's about reconstructing Chaco in my mind, looking down on the massive structures, the community, and seeing growth again. That thought was interesting and imprinted itself in my head.

SK: In general, your art is not overtly political, yet several recent works address illegal dumping of toxic waste, chemical pollution, fracking, and uranium mining of Navajo lands. Is this struggle to preserve the Navajo culture and way of life a focus of *Reseeding Chaco*?

EW: Chaco was thriving and then the people left—something happened. Like they say in Navajo: it fell out of harmony with nature. It was in line with the physical being and then it all fractured. The people abandoned it or they dwindled down and ended up taking refuge in some other

pueblos. I've always thought about that collapse and wondered if they depleted the resources. The last time I went back to Chaco, you can practically see the mining nearby, which is very disarming. I never thought that place would experience such an environmental change again.

SK: At the heart of the Navajo world view is the belief that their ancestors came out of the earth. The understanding of origin—that they came directly from the soil and are a part of it—is the touchstone of the Navajo experience. How has that worldview influenced your work?

EW: I think it's about a utopian sense of everything being in balance: no worries, no dementia, or any mental illnesses. Your mind is clear of everything and what you see, where you live, you appreciate. You make it a point to tend to it—to maintain that equal exchange. Your air isn't poisoned. You are fed, you are clothed. Everything is derived from where you live and with nature sustaining you. Your world, the space you live in, is tended. Beauty is a healthy body within a healthy landscape. That, to me, is beauty and that's the way the Navajo understands and sees it. Being a child of earth, it's important to feature landscape.

SK: Your grandmother was a blanket weaver, and the wool came from the backs of Navajo sheep. Was your grandmother a guiding force throughout your early years? How did her sense of "balance" and beauty in life influence you?

EW: Her sense of balance was definitely an influence. A lot of the earlier Navajo blankets that were made, which people wore, were about the patterns. When you wore them on your back, they would have a certain pattern and when you pulled the two front ends together, it would form the other part of the pattern. Very striking. It enhanced and elevated your body, your presence, and sense of style. That always made me think how traders didn't understand the patterns—they thought they were rugs, which is so demeaning. That's always been a bur under my saddle!

SK: Your great grandmother and grandmother were at Fort Defiance (a former military base the United States government occupied in Navajo territory beginning in 1851). When the Navajo people were dispersed, the relatives rejoined the family in New Mexico, but your grandmother was the only one with deeded land—200 acres in Whitehorse. Your mother taught you the responsibilities of tending goats and sheep. It seems you were surrounded by strong women. You've also talked about your grandfather, who always rode a favorite white horse—hence the source of your last name. How did they teach you to slow down, remember, and know who you are?



EW: Yes, my great grandmother was given sheep as part of the restitution for The Long Walk—the removal of Navajo people from their home by the U.S. government starting in 1864. They took that herd and moved it from Arizona to New Mexico which is why our family always kept sheep. I think my connection to nature came through the sheep herding. I spent so much time outside, tending to the herd, taking them here because it's greener, or there for the water, bringing them home in the evening and putting them up in the corrals. Checking for burs in their feet.

SK: As a child, you asked to go to school so that you could draw. You drew and drew to the point that pencil and construction paper were taken away. When did you realize that you wanted to be an artist?

EW: It's what made me happy: to be able to put marks on paper or any surface, even brown shopping bags. The mark was really freeing. I didn't have to verbally explain. I marked on paper whatever I was thinking or

feeling—I drew it out. In high school is when I realized I wanted to be an artist.

SK: I would like to discuss the struggles, years of perseverance, and searching, which you encountered as an art student at the University of New Mexico (UNM) in the late 1970s and early '80s. You cited the artist and teacher Harmony Hammond, in particular, who became a mentor and nurtured your development by granting "permission" to go against the grain. Hammond had moved from New York to Galisteo, becoming a professor of art at UNM. Her entire career had been staked on pushing boundaries—as a feminist, an activist, a painter, sculptor, and installation artist—all while resisting art world categories. During those same years, you also co-founded with Jaune Quick-to-See-Smith the Grey Canyon Group, a collective which sought to defy Native American stereotypes and traditional craft practices. Can you talk about that formative period?



EW: I just really wanted a degree and figured I would follow the academic guidelines, then get out. Endure, get your degree, and be free of it to do whatever. I was thinking along those lines until one day I was complaining to Harmony, who looked at me and said, “Well, just get out of that circle and spread out. If you’re confined in the smallness of the space you’re working, if the work is confining you, then work on the floor—work anywhere, just spread out.” Why hadn’t I thought about it—not facing an easel? It truly was like a whack on the head. Everything opened up and things started falling in place. The work just blossomed after that.

There were very few women in the Art Department at UNM. Everything was really stacked male heavy, and female ideals were not important. Especially if you were dark haired with brown skin—I was literally told that I shouldn’t be painting. It was a European thing, an intellectual process—my brain couldn’t possibly translate that—and I would never be able to paint. I instinctively avoided that ideology and moved around it in the painting department, finding my place with drawing teachers. Jaune encountered the push back and had to fight back, too. We found each other in the hallway and Jaune immediately took me under her wing. We became friends and would often complain to each other. Then we found other Native students in the art departments and we asked them to hang out with us, get together, and complain. It was a solidarity.

SK: Over the decades, which artists have you sought out or felt a kinship with?

EW: There’s one particular artist, Hans Bellmer, the German Surrealist, who drew a lot and was very good with the pencil. I noticed his line—the way he handled it, from dark to light to thin. The lines were really elegant. I didn’t care for Bellmer’s large erotic dolls, but looking at his lines was an eye opener for me.

My biggest influence is Mark Rothko—the layering of color and how that evokes space and movement. His paintings look like portals that you could walk into—another world, another space. I saw the large show of his work at Tate Modern in London and visited the Rothko Chapel in Houston, too. The Chapel is in the round and reminded me of a Navajo home, like a hogan or kiva. The way the paintings are hung seems evocative of Navajo blankets. Or, for example, in a Navajo healing ceremony, they clear everything off the walls and hang certain sheets rubbed with paint. To me, somehow, Rothko was very much aligned with what I grew up with, and the Chapel seemed very homey and recognizable.

SK: It’s important to note that you work on a flat surface—the paper is laid out on a large table, which you stand over in a “hovering” movement. With hands directly in the paint, you feel the flow and control the direction on the paper. In this way, you create chromatic harmonies of striking delicacy and invention, of poetic and magical calm. But underlying the soft lyricism there exists a rigorous pictorial structure so finely balanced that changing even one shape or form would destroy the equilibrium of the whole.

EW: When I face a large square of pristine white paper, it’s really terrifying. I try to mess it up as quickly as I can. So, yes, the bottom is usually more chaotic with color and lines. I then cover the paper, cover up that whiteness. I look at it, step back, and think about the form underneath. Maybe I apply a complementing color, which usually extends as far out as my arm will reach. The layering comes after that. To fill the space, I start adding lines, adding circles, adding scribbles—anything I can throw at it. Over that, I will add more color to give it a shadow—rounds, oval shapes, plants, twiggy looking shapes—all of it trying to get this whiteness out and covered up. In *Reseeding Chaco*, however, there are some white areas at the top. People can read it as sky, or a place to rest your eyes. The white zones give some space to each painting—the feeling of air.

SK: I’m also thinking about your myopia (nearsightedness) as a young girl—how that encouraged you to look closely at all the plants, bugs, tiny footprints encountered in nature. You had to develop sharpened

antennae, then instill those memories as a deep part of yourself. How do you channel such psychic intensity into your paintings?

EW: Yes, in my paintings, there are forms up front, and forms in the back. This tension gives you a sense of space. Being myopic as a child definitely plays a role. I think you get to understand the discrepancy with the details in the foreground and blurriness in the background.

SK: A number of symbols—the circle, the wavy plant tendrils, rustling leaves, cellular seed pods, orbits, serpentine, ellipses—are all part of your lexicon, each with their own iconography. The circle, for example, is part of the Navajo clan of human relationships entered at birth; the social circles radiate from the family; the circular floor of the hogan serves as a metaphor for the Navajo concept of the universe. Ceremonies and rituals are performed in a circle. Can you comment on your love of the circle and “roundness” in nature?

EW: I think *Reseeding Chaco* is about the “roundness” at home. Everything was in the “round.” The homes and corrals. By shrinking the circle, I was also thinking of the lunar eclipse, the moon’s phases.

SK: The color yellow is pervasive in the New Mexico landscape, from the brilliant sun to the vibrant cottonwood trees, chamisa, and flowering bushes. For the Navajo, yellow is one of four Sacred Colors, rising in the West at dusk. It also represents a psychological neutral ground that suffuses the environment with both energy and calm. Why did you use the beaming color for the diptych?

EW: It’s one of the colors that my grandmother used in her weavings. That yellow comes from a wild mustard plant. In the late summer or early fall, you will see all this yellow covering the surface of the ground. They look like fans. So *Reseeding Chaco* pays homage to that yellow plant.

As we discussed, Chaco Canyon is also a very barren land. The color yellow also dictated that barrenness. I picked the two yellows because New York is so gray and dark green, which seems to suck the life out of the air in summer. This yellow piece has a different sensibility. I wanted a color that would warm up the spirits of people.

SK: To be alone and at peace with the land, you seem to suggest, is the most precious human experience. *Reseeding Chaco* is like a palimpsest, constantly overwritten and multilayered, and thus insistent on the passage of time, not only in the making of the two panels but also in our experience of them—their flickering back and forth between hidden paths, impasses, surprises and obscurities. Artists teach us how to see,

how to feel. What do you want viewers to know about this mysterious place?

EW: I thought about Chaco because it is truly a mysterious place, but the work comes across as very unlearned, with childlike drawings. It’s a lot more than that. It’s like you pointed out, the diptych is packed with the recent and ancient history of where I am from. They tell us about the different places that are important and what we should be mindful of—it’s not just about jumping in the car and taking a road trip. It’s not about longhorn steers or cowboy hats and boots. *Reseeding Chaco* is from a whole different viewpoint of this place in the West. There are other pockets for culture that people forget about or don’t know about. But it is a learning place. So here is a voice reminding us.



AUTHOR BIO

Susie Kalil is an independent curator, critic, and author of volumes such as *Kermit Oliver: Enduring Spirit*, *The Color of Being / El Color del Ser: Dorothy Hood, 1918–2000*, and *The Art of Roger Winter: Fire and Ice*. She resides in Houston.

ABOUT FRESH PAINT

An ongoing partnership between the Parrish Art Museum and The FLAG Art Foundation in New York, *FRESH PAINT* is a rotating series of single-artwork exhibitions at the Parrish that spotlight new or never-before-exhibited works by both emerging and established artists. By circumventing traditional exhibition planning timelines—which can extend years into the future—*FRESH PAINT* provides a platform for artists to promptly showcase freshly created artworks and ideas, allowing for a more direct response to current issues and cultural movements. Each *FRESH PAINT* installation is accompanied by an interpretative text written by an invited author, critic, poet, or scholar.

FRESH PAINT: Emmi Whitehorse is organized by Scout Hutchinson, The FLAG Art Foundation Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at the Parrish, in collaboration with Jon Rider, FLAG's Director; Caroline Cassidy, FLAG's Deputy Director; and Madeline DeFilippis, FLAG's Exhibitions and Programs Manager.

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Parrish Art Museum is located on 14 acres of ancestral Shinnecock land. We, at the Parrish, recognize Shinnecock people as the traditional stewards of this land.



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Cover and interior artwork images: Full and detail views of Emmi Whitehorse (Diné, b. 1957), *Reseeding Chaco*, 2026. Mixed media on paper mounted to canvas. Two panels, each 59 1/2 x 89 1/2 in. (152.4 x 228.6 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.
P. 8: Whitehorse at work. Courtesy of the artist.
All photos: Addison Doty