

ANCESTORS KNOW WHO WE ARE
INTERVIEW WITH PAIGE PETTIBON

Audio Description: The speaker sits in a sunny room with yellow striped curtains and green vining plants.

Interviewer: Tell us about yourself.

Paige Pettibon: (in Salish language) Paige Pettibon tsi dsdaʔ. səliš čəd, tułáí čəd caləłali. Good day. My name is Paige Pettibon. I'm Salish and I'm from Tacoma, Washington.

Interviewer: How does your background influence your art?

Paige Pettibon: It's really difficult to separate the two for me. I know some folks can but, for me, I take my background, I take my time in the community, my knowledge, my experiences, and I put that into my work. So I would say my background shapes my work, and I really like using my experiences in the community and with folks, my learning experiences of traditional narratives, and merging and blending the dichotomy of Indigeneity and Western culture and having that be shown through my work. I don't think that I can separate the two. It is heavily shaped. Another piece in the exhibition is of my grandparents and my uncle.

Audio Description: A black and white photorealistic painting of a Black man sitting on a stool with his arms around a White woman sitting on a chair holding a baby. They are in the corner of a white walled room. Three paintings on the wall behind them.

Paige Pettibon: I think that really shows the impression that I have from my family is heavily influenced in my work, and I think that comes through for the viewer. I also hope that the viewer is able to garner their own takeaway and see how their background influences how they proceed and move throughout the world. I also hope that it's like a reflective expression by using my background to shape my work.

Interviewer: Who inspires you?

Paige Pettibon: My whole family inspires me. I don't want to leave anyone out, like giving out the thank yous, right? So, first and foremost, my parents really strongly facilitated art growing up, and their parents. My paternal and maternal grandmothers were both artists. My paternal grandmother, she would make handmade cards and gift them to all of us kids and grandkids, and she would make her own stamps and embossing, and she had a craft room. She really dedicated to making her cards, and she had a group of people that she would work with. She had a little, you know, stamp club. I was always impressed by that and now I think it's really special to make cards. I maybe took it for granted when I was younger and now it is something that I think people really value and will save. And then my maternal grandmother was just in everything, like I am. She had multiple mediums that she worked with. She was an avid crocheter, and she also beaded and she used her culture. She was from the

Flathead Reservation and then she moved over here. She used her cultural upbringing to also have connections in the community, and she would teach people, and people knew her as the person that worked with yarn and beads and would gift it to her. So there was a lot of reciprocity going on, and I looked at that as something that can be my connection and relationship to community too—how art can be the vessel for those connections. I also inherited a lot of her beads, so I am always in remembrance of her work and her legacy and how my legacy can be passed on too. So, yeah, I would say I have to give it up to the grandmas. They are a lot of the reason I am who I am, and I am reminded by my aunts and uncles and cousins that I really live in my maternal grandmother's footsteps and she's passed it on to me, and I think it brings them joy to see that.

Interviewer: Describe one of the artworks in the exhibition.

Paige Pettibon: One of the artworks in the exhibition is of Soren Lake.

Audio Description: A painted portrait of a young boy with golden brown skin, golden brown eyes, long dark hair in braids, and wearing a button down blue shirt on a deep red background.

Paige Pettibon: I've known Soren Lake for about five years now and I've been able to watch him grow from a little boy to a boy who can read and loves to learn and who is really taking up with this culture and a great storyteller. I think he's only seven and the incredible growth that he makes day to day and not only that, but my best friend is his mom. I'm just so thankful that I'm around people who are patient with their children and have a strong relationship where they can develop their culture together and explore and express today's racial issues too. I did an interview with him last summer and I asked him how he felt about what's going on with racial tensions and he said, "You know, this is something we've always been doing. I am sick of it. I'm sick of people dying and that our people had to go underground and go in hiding and there was wars." These are things that are complex, but he's thinking about, and I just think it's so interesting how such a young person already has these thoughts. But he is hopeful and he wants to be someone who makes change. He said he wants to be a leader. I think one of the most difficult things to do in hard times is to see a good outcome, right? Is to see the light at the end of the tunnel through these hard times and how to process that. I think sometimes we are fearful of just, like, our being, and I think that's okay. But I think our strong leaders are the ones that can pull us out. And it takes community too, and it takes a really strong person to become a leader, and not for the fame or for the power but just for the people. I feel like Soren's one of those children that has that vision at such a young age, and I think we need to uplift our youth that have these thoughts and visions and to let them know that they are important and that they can build these ideas and to have action. That's why I painted Soren, because I know he's going to be a strong leader in the future.

Interviewer: What is your favorite medium and why?

Paige Pettibon: My favorite artistic medium, I would have to say, is acrylics, just because I have such a strong relationship with acrylics. But it's really hard to pick a favorite. For me, it's what kind of medicine do I need today? Is it to make jewelry? Is it to use fabric and cut and sew? So, for me, it's more of what do I need today to fulfill my expression and feelings so I can get work done? I am a working artist and I can get work done, but when I think about work that is just for myself, I think of what kind of emotion am I trying to let off today and express or meditate on. I like having all those different mediums in my toolbox so I can express each day differently.

Interviewer: Why do you create art?

Paige Pettibon: I create art because I, and I don't want to be dramatic about it, but I kind of have to. Like, you know, it's inherent in me. If I wasn't creating art, I don't think I would be such an optimistic person. I don't think that I would be so patient with others. I think that art for me is healing. It's my medicine, and it's a way for me to learn and express my emotions and feelings and relationships in a way that is safe and a way that I can articulate myself better through art. I think I make it because it brings me joy and it is my medicine and so, for me, it makes me a better person.

Interviewer: What memorable responses have you had to your work?

Paige Pettibon: The self-portrait that I did, it was very intricate and there was very small details. The piece was really stretching my technical skills and it really showed me that I can do it. I just really need to take feedback and have patience with myself. It really was difficult, and I had a point where I was very frustrated and I made it through and I finished it. It's one of my favorite pieces and it really showed me that I can get it done and to have more patience with myself. And I found I have to reach out for help and I have to have many eyes looking at, mainly skilled eyes, looking at it to guide me along the way. It really showed me the power of studio work and having a group of people that you trust to critique and give feedback and to take it. I think one of the biggest things that I've learned since that piece is to have feedback and learn how to use it to better my work. So that's one of the most memorable pieces for me.

Interviewer: What does it mean to be Black and Native or Afro-Indigenous?

Paige Pettibon: I can't speak for others so this answer is specifically for me, but I've noticed that it means I am political. I am racialized. I am somewhat perceived to be one or the other depending on what I'm doing. And so, for me, it also means that I have to do a lot of education. I have to be careful with the work that I do because people may make assumptions. I think that's okay too, because I think we should be careful with the things that we make because it can last forever. If it's misconceived or not the right message, that could be very harmful. So I proceed in the world in a way that is very through the lens of how others see me. I think as an artist I am in the public eye, right? So I'm always thinking about how others see me. I think as an Afro-Indigenous person, that is something that you think about a lot. You think, how can this be conceived in a positive way? How can others see me for who I am? How can others not stereotype me? So it is a heavy question because people get race and heritage and culture and politics mixed up. They are also overlapping, but you're always fighting for your rights and you're always fighting to be perceived in the way that you want to be seen rather than what others have placed on you. I've learned a lot about myself and I have learned a lot about my culture, but that was something that was developed later on in my life. To be Afro-Indigenous is to reclaim your culture and heritage, and your history as well. For me, it's my relations with others too. I have a big family. I have a big Afro-Indigenous family too, and when you see others that are Afro-Indigenous, you feel like you are part of the, you know ... You are an other other, right? You're the other other. You're not just someone who is indigenous to America, but you're someone who is displaced and taken from your land. It's a heavy thought, but I'm also very proud of my heritage. I'm also very proud of what I've been able to do with my artwork through this lens as well.

Interviewer: What role can art play in society?

Paige Pettibon: I believe art is ... We made art. It's one of the oldest forms of communication. I think it is inherent to humanity, and I think that it is one of the most impactful ways to make change, especially social change. I think that being in the presence of art is to also have a dialog with yourself, with the

artist, with what's going on, maybe what's going on with the time that that piece was made. It transcends time and place and political lines. I think that those that can tell a story through artistic expression, for me, has the most impact. When I watch a movie or read a novel, I'm so impacted by the story. That author could have a completely different view, but there's a common ground that we share. I think being able to be seen through art can be very validating. I think that it is the best form to communicate with folks. It can be judgmental, but it can also be non-judgmental, could be something that resonates with folks in a way that words may not be able to convey. I do believe that art will be our salvation, and I believe that we need to also encourage artists to create it because that's a part of it too. So supporting artists and also having facilities where people are accessing this art, making art accessible to folks too, because limiting art is also limiting change. I think it's really important to have these connections and to have it be accessible for all people.

Interviewer: What brings you joy?

Paige Pettibon: There are so many things that bring me joy. Throughout my life, the things that bring me joy have been more like smaller things that people do. Acts of kindness bring me joy. When I see someone being patient with our youth, someone being patient with our elders, that brings me joy. I see those people and I'm like, you are an example of what we need to be like. Best friends bring me joy. I love people that just vibe off each other, that break into hysterical laughter and can't stop. That is over the moon joy for me, is people having such a strong connection that they just look at each other and laugh. My family brings me joy. My nieces and nephews bring me joy. Our youth, when they overcome an obstacle, when they make a breakthrough with their education or whatever they're going through. Graduations, ceremonies, celebrations. I love other people's birthdays just as much as I love my birthday. I think any time to gather is like a joy. I'm a very extroverted person, so gatherings really bring me joy. And, you know, I like to play games. I like to play. I like to have fun with people, really. But when I'm alone in my own home, like the way the light comes into my house and the way I see my plants grow, these little things bring me joy too. If I get a good night's sleep I'm just, like, yes! Just having gratitude in the little things, I think, makes me a more joyous person.

Audio Description: Logo: National Museum of the American Indian. Smithsonian.