The history between artists and National Parks dates back to the 1870s. One of the tenets of the National Park’s Call to Action for the next century is connecting people to parks through art. In January 2015, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Park Service announced “Imagine Your Parks!” – a new $1 million grant initiative under the NEA’s Arts Works category, marking the intersection of the NEA’s 50th anniversary in 2015, and the NPS’s centennial in 2016. Both agencies are working together to support the creation of and greater public engagement with art related to the National Park System and its protection of cultural and natural resources. Concurrently, in February 2015, the California Arts Council confirmed the availability of the “Creative California Communities” program – a grant supporting collaborative projects that harness arts and culture as a key economic and/or community development strategy. The announcements of these grants and support from local Park administrators provided the encouragement to pursue a large-scale collaborative art project addressing the unique cultural history of our region and the relationship between Native American artists and Joshua Tree.

For many years, visual artists, musicians, filmmakers, and writers, have congregated along the 60-mile corridor bordering the northern boundary of Joshua Tree National Park. The Morongo Basin Cultural Arts Council annually hosts its Hwy 62 Art Tours, High Desert Test Sites has gained significant recognition for its experimental and immersive projects, and for more than 60 years, the 29 Palms Art Gallery has presented some of the most important artists of the Hi-Desert. Despite the high concentration of creatives in this area and the acceptance of a wide array of media, subject, and presentations, there has been little recognition of Native American artists – historical or contemporary. Sand to Stone seeks to create an awareness about previously overlooked, shift assumptions about Native American Art and culture, and advance the scholarship of Native American art.

THE PROJECT
Sand to Stone: Contemporary Native American Art in Joshua Tree is a multidisciplinary art project highlighting contemporary Native American artists from the four tribes (Cahuilla, Chemehuevi, Mojave and Serranos) who have significant cultural ties to Joshua Tree National Park. Over the course of one year, this community collaboration will feature an art exhibition, site-specific installations, performances, education programs, a dedicat- ed website, and a modest publication. Each component encourages Native American artists and local communities to respond to the land within and around park boundaries and to reconnect with the park in the production, exhibition, exploration, and performance of art, music and dance. These activities will have the added benefit of fostering cross-cultural interactions and reaching diverse populations historically underserved by the mainstream arts community.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES
Exhibition: 29 Palms Art Gallery, May 2016
Site-Specific Art Installation by Lewis deSoto: Joshua Tree, May 2016
Intertribal Performance of Bird Singers: Copper Mountain College, February/March 2016
Performance by Cahuilla Bird Singers: Joshua Tree National Park’s Indian Cove, April 2016
Education Programs, Ongoing
Catalogue & Website: www.sandtostone.org

NATIVE AMERICANS AND JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK
The Serranos, Cahuillas, Chemehuevis, and Mojaves are intimately connected to the land in and around Joshua Tree National Park. In spite of the visually barren, seemingly inhospitable desert, these tribal groups recognized an abundance of available resources and made this area their transitional or long-term home long before the arrival of Europeans in 1769. Indigenous people gravitated to land where food, water, and shelter, could be obtained. The desert landscape proved to be conducive for setting up small villages that offered necessary nourishment, protection, and trade. The rocks, ridges and canyons provided shelter; the oasis and other natural springs supplied important water sources; vegetation, such as mesquite beans and yucca root, offered dependable food sources for animals and people. These tribes were in tune with their land and made use of that which nature provided.

EARLY ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IN JOSHUA TREE
Native Americans who lived in this area left their creative marks on or within the land in many ways, the most obvious being petroglyphs (rock carvings) and pictographs (rock paintings). Their art was also prevalently visible in everyday objects, such as basketry and pottery; and perhaps the most common means of creative expression – their music and dance. Numerous sites scattered throughout the area, feature etched or painted images of bighorn sheep, people, and abstract designs. The Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in 29 Palms, is home to the Fossil Petroglyph Preserve, which contains nearly 2000 petroglyphs. Over the years, thousands of well-documented artifacts – ollas, arrowheads, tools, and weapons – have been identified by amateurs, professional archaeologists, and curators from the Marine Corps Base, the National Park and beyond. The Marine Corps Base’s Archaeology and Paleontology Curation Center is home to a large collection of projectile points and milling slabs, while Joshua Tree National Park’s museum holdings include a number of Native American artifacts, many of which were gathered and identified early on by Elizabeth and William H. Campbell, beginning in the 1920s. These objects tell important stories about the land and its inhabitants’ creative production.

CONTEMPORARY NATIVE AMERICAN ART
Fast forward to today. The general public often associates Native American art with paintings of Chiefs wearing feathered headdresses, statues of Indians on horseback, woven baskets, intricate beading, and pottery. While many contemporary Native American artists continue to utilize traditional processes, many others are working outside this context in a variety of media – photography, film, installation, sculpture, and painting. The three primary artists selected to participate in Sand to Stone – Gerald Clarke Jr., Cara Romero and Lewis deSoto – were selected for their artistic sensibility, ability to provide insight, and desire to contribute to the contemporary dialogue. Drawing from their indigenous roots and using contemporary practice to frame a present reality, they are challenging preconceived notions about what contemporary Native American art is and offering new models of cultural identification. Their artworks serve as cornerstones for discussions about current indigenous worldviews, cultural mythologies, relationships with land, and the complexities of the modern Native American experience. Although they are influenced by specific histories and traditions, they are also members of a larger creative community. They are innovative forces redefining the place of indigenous artists in the global world of art.
FEATURED CONTEMPORARY NATIVE AMERICAN ARTISTS

Gerald Clarke Jr.

Gerald Clarke Jr. is an artist, educator, cattle rancher, small business owner, father and active member of the Cahuilla Band of Mission Indians. He currently lives on the reservation, working his family’s ranch and is culturally active, having served on the Tribal Council as Vice-Chairman. Clarke also seamlessly balances his teaching responsibilities and creative practice; he is the Visual Arts Chair at Idyllwild Arts Academy where he teaches Sculpture, Drawing and New Media, and previously served as Assistant Professor of Art at East Central University in Ada, OK. He is frequently called upon to function as an advisor to the art community at large, all while tirelessly developing his own artistic practice. This November he will participate in the Artist-in-Residence program at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, NM.

Schooled in the craft, art and traditions of his ancestors and trained academically as a painter and sculptor, Clarke is known for his innovative take on traditional techniques. He values craftsmanship as a conveyance of pride, respect and authority; but he pushes these ageless methods to the edge, using them as inspiration from which to experiment with – creating new forms and deconstructing old ideas. He strives to express his contemporary indigenous experience in his art, which is intimately connected to his life, family and community. “In my work, I look for the unconventional beauty one finds only in nature. It celebrates, it mourns, and outrights all else.” Working in installation, performance, painting, video, sculpture and glass – Clarke seeks to give voice to his Native American community by dispelling myths, bringing truths to the forefront, and finding a middle ground between perception and reality.

Lewis deSoto

Lewis deSoto, an artist of Cahuilla ancestry, is internationally recognized for his photographs, installations, sculptures, and public art that engage cosmological questions, notions of self, and cultural mythologies. Educated at UC Riverside and Claremont Graduate University, he taught at Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, served as the Director of Graduate Studies at California College of the Arts, and is currently a professor of Art at San Francisco State University. He has been exhibiting his art professionally for over 30 years and his artworks can be found in museum collections around the country, most notably the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In November 2015, his Empire series will open at Cal State University San Bernardino with an accompanying publication, and in February 2016, selections of this body of work will be shown at the Palm Springs Art Museum. In late spring, deSoto is scheduled for a solo show at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, and he was recently chosen to participate in the 2016 SITE Santa Fe Biennial.

Influenced by anthropology, sociology, history, religion, literature and music, deSoto is recognized for his conceptual artwork, as well as his culturally-specific and site-specific installations that transform spaces through light, audio and video. In talking about Tahquiz, a site-specific collaboration with Erin Neff at UCLA’s Culver Center for the Arts in 2012, he states, “I’m a big believer in the fact that culture is always hybridizing and building on existing forms, combining others. The idea that a western form of singing could harmonize with an ancient indigenous song is very interesting to me. We often think of these cultures being at odds, but in fact there are many ways in which these cultures have created new ones.” This statement encapsulates a personal philosophy that emerges within a number of deSoto’s artworks.

CARA ROMERO

Cara Romero is a dedicated photographer, cultural activist, wife and mother of Chemehuevi and German-Irish descent. She holds degrees in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Houston, Fina Art Photography from the Institute of American Indian Arts, and Photography Technology from Oklahoma State University. She is the former Executive Director of the Chemehuevi Cultural Center, served on the Chemehuevi Tribal Council, and is currently the Director of the Indigenous Knowledge Program at Santa Fe’s Bioneers – a nonprofit dedicated to social change. Romero is passionate about indigenous cultural studies, the conservation of cultural resources, the preservation of undeveloped landscapes and sacred sites, and is dedicated to her photographic practice.

Romero’s strength is as a contemporary visual storyteller; re-writing the ideas of Indian identity, battling cultural misappropriation, and confronting stereotypes, while preserving tradition and maintaining cultural sensitivity. Her whimsical and challenging photography reflects her training in film, digital, fine art, journalism, editorial portraiture, and commercial photography. Romero’s most recent bodies of work are large-scale photographs representative of her Chemehuevi identity, her passion for editorial photography, and a decade of photo documentary work in Indian Country. It represents a response to current events and issues in Indian Country ranging from environmental impact on indigenous communities to the portrayal of indigenous women in popular culture.

LEWIS deSOTO with ERIN NEFF, Tahquiz, Sound and Light Installation, Culver Center for the Arts, UC Riverside, 2012

CARA ROMERO

CARA ROMERO, Last Indian Market, Photograph, 24” x 72”

CARA ROMERO

Nilex, 2014, Photograph, 35” x 40”

BIRD SINGERS and DANCERS

For Native Americans, music and history are tightly interwoven – heritage is told and retold through oral traditions that link the generations and preserve culture and tradition. Bird singing and dancing have, in particular, been an important part of culture for tribes in Southern California for centuries and continue to be actively passed on. Bird songs tell stories about the lessons learned during the migration throughout the seasons – the origin, journey, and return home. This migration parallels the movement of people through territories and these stories intend to instruct, inspire, guide, preserve, and disseminate lifestyles and traditions.

Songs and stories were exchanged among groups and although the source of songs were acknowledged, practices were often shared, given to or adopted by others. The original bird songs are composed of an allegorical cycle of approximately 300 stories, sung in a precise order, begun at dusk and ending at dawn. These days, however, protocol is less strict in structure, and although high standards are maintained, the traditional way of performing bird songs and dance have been adapted to present day. Bird singing and dancing remains the centerpiece of most social and cultural events; men and women participate – singing and dancing respectively while accompanied by the metered beat of rattles. This tradition provides an important linkage between neighboring tribes and generations, and is the heart of a growing revitalization movement.

Gerald Clarke, Jr., Continuum Basket, 2002, Beer and Soda Cans, 36” x 9” x 26”

CARA ROMERO

Continuum Basket, 2002, Beer and Soda Cans, 36” x 9” x 26”

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Bird Singers, 2015, Photographs on aluminum and enamel, 11" x 14" each

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