

The Art of Jack Malotte

Jack Malotte lives in the heart of the Great Basin in the small, remote community of Duckwater, Nevada. From his front door, it is only a short walk along a dirt road sparsely lined with sagebrush, salt grass, and rabbit brush to the Big Warm Spring, the largest and possibly the most pristine geothermal hot spring in the state. The landscape, rich in natural resources, has nourished and sustained Indigenous people for millennia. To reach more urban, heavily populated cities requires traveling at least five hours by car along unpaved roads and single-lane highways. To describe Duckwater as isolated is an understatement. “When I moved to Duckwater, people thought I had died,” Malotte likes to say with a smirk.

Born in 1953 in Schurz, Nevada, Malotte spent his early childhood in the eastern Nevada community of Lee, before moving to the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony as a youngster. Malotte’s parents are both descended from the Te-Moak Band of Western Shoshone from South Fork, Nevada. His mother is also part Washoe. After graduating from Earl Wooster High School in Reno in 1971, Malotte studied art at the California College of Arts and Crafts (known today as the California College of the Arts) in Oakland, and has been a practicing artist his entire life. During the 1980s, Malotte became well known for his artwork that focused on political issues faced by Native American people seeking to protect and preserve access to their ancestral lands.

While Malotte spent most of his early life in western Nevada, the twenty years he has lived in Duckwater might be his longest and most sustained period of artistic production to date. Living close to the land, without the distractions or restrictions of an urban environment, Malotte has freely embraced a variety of artistic processes and subjects. Making art has always been his number one priority. “I was in it to do the work, to do artwork,” Malotte says. “I’ve worked other jobs, but I’ve always had those just to keep doing artwork. I wasn’t in it for the money. I just want to do good work.” Malotte admits he has witnessed “the best and the worst” of life in the Great Basin. It is this broad and diverse spectrum of experience—both the beautiful and the devastating—that he has fully incorporated into his life’s work.

Early Years, 1970s-1980s

As a young boy, Malotte watched from across his family's kitchen table as his Uncle Bobby, (Robert Ridley), drew in his sketchbook. "That's why I wanted to be a draftsman," Malotte remembers. Watching his uncle draw fueled Malotte's curiosity and interest in art. Growing up, he frequently leafed through an old encyclopedia set that his mother, Barbara Ridley, kept at home. He was inspired by artists Aubrey Beardsley, Maxfield Parrish, and Walt Disney, but was equally drawn to the bright colors of vinyl record album covers and music posters from his teen years in the sixties.

While a student at Earl Wooster High School in Reno, Malotte frequented the library to research artists and styles he admired. Following graduation, he entered the California College of Arts and Crafts (known today as the California College of the Arts) in Oakland. At the time, there were only three other Native American students enrolled, and his instructors discouraged him from making artwork with cultural content. He did not heed their advice, however, instead choosing to engage with political subject matter. More than anything, however, Malotte used his time in college to immerse himself in a variety of different media, including screenprinting.

After working summer jobs as a U.S. Forest Service "Hot Shot" firefighter and wilderness patrolman in Arizona, California, and Nevada, Malotte eventually returned to live in western Nevada. To support himself, he worked in advertising and editorial illustration for the Nevada State Journal (now the *Reno Gazette-Journal*). In the early 1980s, he became deeply involved in Native American and environmental activist circles, lending his skills as an illustrator to various political causes and delving into increasingly complex social issues.

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Mid-career, 1990s-2000s

Malotte kept a busy exhibition schedule beginning in the mid-1980s, even as he spent these years shuffling between different studios and living situations in northern Nevada. During this time his work was included in exhibitions at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC and the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona.

Meanwhile back in Nevada, Malotte met the artist Jean LaMarr, a highly regarded, Paiute/Pit-River activist printmaker and muralist from Susanville. LaMarr became a supportive friend, opening doors to other exhibitions, mural projects, and residency opportunities. LaMarr also encouraged Malotte to experiment with monoprinting. Her influence on his style can be seen in his looser, expressive approach, softened color palette, and willingness to experiment with different paper textures in the 1990s.

Less than a decade later, though, Malotte had returned to his distinctive, finely detailed illustrations, many of which he transferred into screenprint designs. Beginning around the year 2000, Malotte's work often incorporated geometric shapes, particularly those drawn from the mathematical patterns found in Washoe basketry design. The tall slender rectangles that appear in his landscape works allude to the white survey posts used by the mining industry to mark future resource extraction sites. The larger, precariously balanced triangles, which represent non-natural interventions on the landscape, are perhaps a direct reference to the cutting and excavation of the land he saw happening around him. Numerous animals—coyote, mountain lions, hummingbirds, pelicans, and eagles—also appear frequently in his screenprints from this time. “They’re spirits that I’ve developed,” Malotte explains. “My own vision of what (the spirits) look like.”

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Art and Activism

In the early 1980s, Malotte lent his artistic talents to various political and environmental causes, often contributing illustrations for call-to-action posters, pamphlets, broadsides, and publicity materials. He became deeply involved with the Western Shoshone Sacred Lands Association, a group established in 1976 to challenge the U.S. Government to reopen land claims and pursue land repatriation for Western Shoshone people. The group worked to defend Indigenous land rights agreed upon in the 1863 Treaty of Ruby Valley between the U.S. and Western Shoshone leaders. Malotte's posters and fliers galvanized support for this cause.

Malotte also worked and participated in protests with other activist organizations, including Citizen Alert and the Southwest Network for Environmental Justice. These progressive groups brought critical attention to issues such as water contamination, militarization, open-pit gold mining, and nuclear testing on traditional Western Shoshone lands. Malotte's active involvement in these groups led to his participation with the Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Peoples, an organization dedicated to promoting self-determination and the sovereignty of Native nations. Malotte became the primary illustrator for the group's magazine, *Native Self Sufficiency*. He even designed the group's logo—a feather—that is still used today.

As Malotte's longtime colleague and friend Dr. Debra Harry at the University of Nevada, Reno, has noted, "Jack's work brings powerful visual representations to the vision and voices of the Indigenous rights movement. His work transmits our call to protect our land and treaty rights, stop militarization, and promote self-determination."

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A Satirical Lens

Never afraid to confront difficult or controversial topics in his artwork, Malotte often protests by applying his own brand of cynical humor to otherwise serious and sobering issues. In 1982, Malotte was awarded a grant from the Nevada State Council on the Arts (now the Nevada Arts Council), to complete this series of mixed-media illustrations. He presented them in a solo exhibition at the Sierra Nevada Art Gallery (now the Nevada Museum of Art) in 1983.

Malotte's detailed drawings address issues such as toxic dumping and abuse of Native lands, alcoholism within Native communities, and racial stereotypes directed towards Native people. One provocative illustration shows an eagle positioned within the crosshairs of rifle. It refers to a specific incident from the early 1980s when a Native American individual from outside the Great Basin was arrested for killing eagles and selling the bird's feathers in Fallon, Nevada. Another image alludes to the wastewater from Reno's sewage treatment facility that used to be deposited in the Truckee River not far from the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony. Frequently, Malotte's landscapes incorporate a fighter jet overhead—an ominous symbol of the ever-present U.S. military that occupies not only hundreds of thousands of acres of ancestral Native land in Nevada, but hundreds of miles of airspace as well.

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Screenprints and Experimentation

Since 1999, from his home in Duckwater, Nevada, Malotte has had uninterrupted time to simply make art. His partner, Virginia “DeDee” Sanchez, works full-time in the Duckwater community development office, leaving Malotte eight hours a day to work alone in his studio. While this work has always involved sketching, drawing, and painting, Malotte has also expanded his screenprinting operation with a four-station manual press. He prints on shawls and t-shirts that he sells at craft fairs throughout the Great Basin, and has also created hundreds, if not thousands, of unique screened studio artworks.

It is the screenprinting process that truly allows Malotte the freedom to experiment. “I make mistakes,” he says of his process. “Sometimes I’ll just put it away and come back to it later on. And sometimes I’ll just end up covering a mistake I did before, and then I’ll discover something else from that.” Through screenprinting, Malotte has expanded his extensive vocabulary of visual symbols. One of them, the profile of a Native American figure, reappears regularly. “That figure represents all us Indians, the whole tribe, everybody.” Malotte explains. “I’ve done a lot of those figures.”

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