

## The Art of Jean LaMarr (main)

Jean LaMarr is an internationally recognized artist, activist, and educator. For five decades, her work has inspired important dialogue about cultural stereotypes, Indigenous feminisms, and legacies of colonialism. She has dedicated her life and her art to rejecting the myth of the “vanished American Indian.” As she explains, “I try to show that we are still here, that we’ve survived, and that we have something to communicate.”

LaMarr was born in 1945 in Susanville, California, in the northern Sierra about ninety minutes north of Reno. Her mother was descended of *Wada Tukadu Numu* (Northern Paiute) ancestry, with family ties to Wadsworth, Nevada, near *Kooyooe Panadu* (Pyramid Lake). Her father was from Dixie Valley, near Fall River Mills, California, and was descended of *Illmawi, Aporige, and Atsugewi* (Pit River) ancestry.

Growing up in Susanville, LaMarr and her five sisters lived in a forested area near a prominent overlook known as Inspiration Point. The beautiful setting, however, did not make up for the racism and discrimination they endured in their small rural community. These experiences later informed LaMarr’s artistic development at the University of California, Berkeley, inspired her involvement in activist politics, and eventually influenced her teaching at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. After living and practicing in California and New Mexico for many years, LaMarr eventually returned to her homelands to establish the Native American Graphic Workshop in Susanville.

Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1919#**

## Jean LaMarr: Purple Flower Girl

The color purple was beloved by Jean LaMarr's maternal grandmother Libby Joaquin. Today, it is LaMarr's favorite color, conjuring memories of the lilacs, lupine, and long mountain shadows of her homelands in Susanville, California. Her grandmother was with her in 1948, when LaMarr was given the Northern Paiute name *pahime gutne*, or purple flower. To this day, the color purple has become an integral part of LaMarr's personal identity. As her dear friend Dr. Susan Lobo has said, "Jean gathers creativity, adventure, and laughter, and mixes it all together with her unique genius until it becomes a glorious, swirling purple cloud."



Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1920#**

## U.C. Berkeley: Finding Her Voice

*“I didn’t learn I had a voice until I went to Berkeley and watched another student question a professor.” —Jean LaMarr*

In 1974, LaMarr was the only Native American art student enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley. Although she’d already received degrees from San Jose City College and Philco-Ford Technical Institute in Santa Clara, LaMarr was drawn to Berkeley’s emphasis on fine art and research.

Even though the university was undergoing a period of progressive change and reorganization in the early 1970s, LaMarr found herself in an art department clinging to a Euro-centric art historical tradition with an emphasis on modern abstract styles. Her professors highly discouraged her from incorporating cultural, social or political content into her artwork. “They said if you include anything representing your cultural background, it’s not art anymore. They called it folk art,” LaMarr explains.

The uncomfortable politics of the art department were constant during LaMarr’s time at U.C. Berkeley, but they did not deter her from challenging the biases of professors and honoring her culture. In so doing, her art became part of a larger activist strategy to deliberately resist and challenge the educational system.

Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1921#**

## Reclaiming Her Cultural Ancestry

When LaMarr was a student at U.C. Berkeley, the art department was located in Kroeber Hall—the same building that housed the anthropology department’s vast ethnographic and photographic research collections. The building was named after Alfred Kroeber (1876-1960), an anthropologist who collected Native American human remains and other artifacts to study, and who argued that some Native American tribes had become extinct.

While taking art classes upstairs in Kroeber Hall, LaMarr became interested in the Native American collections housed in the basement. At first, archivists were reluctant to grant LaMarr access to the materials, but after a friend with a Ph.D. vouched for her, LaMarr spent hours researching among the shelves, drawers, and display cases. She found hundreds of woven baskets and textiles, many of which had been unearthed and looted from sacred sites in the Sierra Nevada and Great Basin homelands of LaMarr’s ancestors. The items became the basis for LaMarr’s early printmaking experiments with texture, patterning, and geometric design.

Alfred Kroeber’s name was removed from the U.C. Berkeley anthropology building in 2020.

Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1922#**

## Urban Relocation: Art of Resistance

LaMarr was relocated away from her rural ancestral homelands in Northern California to the San Francisco Bay Area as part of the 1964 Indian Relocation Act. The federal program was designed to move young Native American people into urban areas and to assimilate them into the dominant American culture. Many found companionship and community at places like the American Indian Center in San Francisco or the Intertribal Friendship House in Oakland, California, where relocated Native Americans gathered to socialize and network.

Many of LaMarr's artworks and murals from this time tackle challenging and complicated issues related to assimilation and acculturation. In time, she became respected for her vision of empowering non-white artists and communities of color. While at U.C. Berkeley, LaMarr forged alliances within the Chicana community. "They took me under their wing. That's where I started learning about how art should be for everyone," LaMarr recalls. She admired how Chicana artists adopted silk-screening, and the practice of creating outdoor murals to engage, educate, and empower their community. She liked "that the art was for the community...not just for one person."

Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1923#**

## New Warriors

LaMarr has long focused on issues related to stereotypes and representations of Native American women, however, she also works to acknowledge and honor Native American men. “I hate to see how they have been treated and stereotyped themselves,” LaMarr says.

She often describes Native American men as “new warriors,” who combat cultural stereotypes—especially the “cowboy and Indian” myth of the American West that perpetuated the idea that Native American men were inferior to Euro-American men or “cowboys.”

Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1924#**

## Returning to her Homelands

In 1985, after twenty years in the San Francisco Bay Area, LaMarr and her husband Leroy “Spence” Spencer decided to secure a home on the Susanville Indian Rancheria. With many of her relatives aging, especially her mother, Esther Webster, LaMarr felt the time was right to return to Susanville to make it her home base.

These years allowed LaMarr to embrace the history of her family’s ancestry and homelands, and her original research led to discoveries and oral histories that had not been recorded in regional history books. This type of work, for LaMarr, represents what she considers the “endurance of cultural traditions in the face of great challenges.”

Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1925#**

## Native People, Sacred Lands

These four large paintings feature sacred sites and ceremonies in LaMarr's homelands that she considered in jeopardy due to ongoing resource extraction, corporate influence, mismanaged tourism, and lack of government protection. If one were standing in LaMarr's home in Susanville, each canvas in her series represents a view in a different direction. To the north is Mt. Shasta, to the South is the Round House in Janesville, to the West are the Sierra, and to the east are the Cortez Mountains.

"Throughout the world sacred lands are being destroyed for the sake of economic development. The Supreme Court continues to allow the destruction of sacred lands in the United States," LaMarr argues. "If a religious site does not have stained glass windows, it cannot be a "real" religion. This policy continues to deny freedom of religion for Native people."

When LaMarr's canvases are displayed on the wall, their size and color overwhelm the viewer producing an effect that is not unlike standing before stained glass. However, LaMarr does not intend to evoke the feeling of a church. Rather she reminds us that it is the land that is most sacred to Native People. "We belong here," she says. "The land belongs to us, and we belong to the land."

Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1926#**

## Indian Boarding Schools: An Enduring Legacy

Beginning in 1890, thousands of Native American children were sent to Stewart Indian Boarding School in Carson City, Nevada as part of the U.S. government's policy of forced assimilation. This practice was not unique to Nevada. Across the United States and Canada, over 500 boarding schools were in operation beginning in the late nineteenth century. Intergenerational trauma continues to haunt families whose ancestors and relatives were forced to attend these schools.

LaMarr's mother and four aunts were taken from their family in 1924 and sent to Stewart Indian Boarding School. LaMarr created this new sculpture—a traditional willow sweat—as a place to begin the process of cleansing and healing from this trauma. The sweat is covered with photos of children at boarding schools throughout North America and tied with orange fabric. In Canada, the color orange is worn annually on September 30—otherwise known as National Day for Truth and Reconciliation—acknowledging the lingering impacts of residential boarding schools.

Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1927#**

## Janesville Bear Dance

One way that LaMarr stayed connected to her family and cultural traditions while living in the San Francisco Bay Area during the early 1980s, was to regularly make the 400-mile round-trip drive for different gatherings and ceremonies. This included the annual Bear Dance that took place the second weekend of June in the mountain community of Janesville, just south of Susanville.

The spring ceremony recognizes the new year, signifies new beginnings, and is a time for all people to come together to make peace—not only with animals like the bear and the rattlesnake—but also with people from different tribal communities. For eight consecutive years, LaMarr designed posters for the gathering that were sold to support the Bear Dance. “LaMarr respects the Bear Ceremony and created the posters to raise money for the cost of feeding people who attend the ceremony, and for other expenses associated with the celebration,” artist Frank LaPena said.

Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1928#**

## Rewriting the Colonial Narrative

While living and working in Santa Fe, New Mexico from 1990 to 1992, LaMarr produced a number of works in response to current events, historical milestones, and the untold history of racist oppression and colonialism in America. One of the milestones to which LaMarr responded was the 1992 quincentenary, or 500th anniversary, of the arrival of Christopher Columbus on land that would become known as the Americas.

LaMarr's works from this time directly confront America's founding story and colonial history, calling into question the state-sponsored violence and Native American lives that were lost to establish the United States. "We have it easy compared to what they went through," LaMarr says when comparing her own life experiences to those of her ancestors.

Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1929#**

## Ms. Coyote: Humor and Survival

LaMarr frequently uses satire in her work to criticize or reveal contradictory narratives, noting that humor is often employed by Native American artists as a strategy for coping with trauma. She credits the artist Warrington Colescott, whose work she first encountered as a student at U.C. Berkeley, for introducing her to the idea that satire could bring levity to the serious cultural and political issues she wanted to address.

“Humor helps ease the pain from racism,” she says. “Opening the door to this part of our lives brings a different light to the dialogue, which may bring a better understanding between different worlds.”

Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1930#**

## America's Dark Side

In 1987, LaMarr was invited to travel to New York to participate in an exhibition called *We the People*, organized on the occasion of the bicentennial of the signing of the first draft of the U.S. Constitution. The trip renewed her interest in America's political history.

After her return to Santa Fe, LaMarr began a series of large-scale monoprints on black paper critiquing American capitalism and questioning the nation's founding values. Traditional symbols of American freedom and hope, such as the Statue of Liberty, an eagle, and the American flag, appear alongside potential threats to those values. Her choice of black paper, enlivened only by subtle fields of blue and purple ink, signifies the dark message and mood she intended to convey.

Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1931#**

## Sacred Places Where We Pray

Many of LaMarr's mixed-media canvases combine traditional ancestral marks made with colorful hand-made paper and fabrics, alongside dark silhouettes of military fighter jets and helicopters. The stark juxtaposition of the two different subjects brings into focus the reality of Native American life in the Great Basin and Sierra Nevada, where sacred sites, and the airspace above them, often co-exist with various military, government and corporate activities.

LaMarr's series titles, such as "From the Boudoir Window" and "War in my Backyard," underscore the complexity of everyday life for Native American people, who are regularly forced to confront the encroachment of non-Native threats to their homelands.

Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1932#**

## Double Visions

*Double Visions* is a 20-minute, two-channel video installation, aimed at deconstructing popular misconceptions about Christopher Columbus' legacy. LaMarr invited students, artists, historians, elders, and everyday people to answer two questions: "Who discovered America?" and "Who is Christopher Columbus?"

Originally conceived in 1991, the installation has recently been refreshed for presentation in this exhibition. Visitors are invited to view the videos while sitting or reclining on the lounging couch. Traditionally, such couches were popular among European male painters who positioned their nude female models upon them. By inviting visitors to engage with the installation, visitors become active participants in the process of revising historical narratives about Christopher Columbus.

Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1933#**

## Cover Girl: Reversing the Gaze

LaMarr's *Cover Girl* series began with her discovery of an 1867 photograph by William Soule, the official photographer for the United States Army post at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. During his lifetime, Soule photographed hundreds of images of Chiricahua Apache people (today known as the Fort Sill Apache Tribe), who were uprooted and imprisoned by the U.S. military in the late 1800s.

Soule's four-year ethnographic study resulted in photographs such as the one LaMarr saw of a partially nude woman reclining on a buffalo hide. LaMarr was appalled when she first laid eyes on the photograph. "He photographed [her] naked and he would make them pose like that, in a boudoir sexual way," she said. Soule printed and sold images like this to American soldiers fulfilling their demand for exotic representations of "the other."

Seeking to reclaim the unnamed woman's dignity, LaMarr re-appropriated Soule's photograph for her *Cover Girl* series, carefully adding clothing and jewelry to cover her nude body. In doing so, LaMarr refused to let the woman's nude figure become the object of the viewer's gaze. The series title, *Cover Girl*, is a humorous play on words, referring at once to the act of "covering up" the woman, as well as to the term commonly used to describe a woman featured on a magazine cover.



Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1934#**

## Princess Pale Moon

LaMarr has dedicated much of her research to the fictional female character Minnehaha, who appears in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic 1855 narrative poem *Song of Hiawatha*. Over many generations, Longfellow's character Minnehaha helped to firmly establish sexist stereotypes of Native American women in popular culture.

One widely circulated calendar print by F.R. Harper from the late 1920s depicts an anonymous longhaired Native woman dressed in fringed buckskin alongside a placid, moonlit river. Disgusted by images like Harper's, that objectify Native women as objects, LaMarr decided to make the image the basis of her interactive installation titled *Princess Pale Moon*.

Set to the music of Slim Wilson's *Indian Love Call*, LaMarr invites visitors to "dress up as Indian princesses." The invitation, however, is a ploy that tricks participants into an act of reverse cultural appropriation. No longer does the viewer gaze upon the "Indian maiden," but rather it is LaMarr that gets to gaze upon the participant. While serious in intent, the installation also reveals LaMarr's penchant for employing trickster humor. After all, watching hundreds of people dress up like Indian princesses can be quite entertaining. "Humor is our savior," LaMarr says sarcastically of watching them "play Indian."



Español: Para escuchar el texto en español, por favor marque **775.546.1464** y presione **1935#**

## Land Acknowledgement

The Nevada Museum of Art acknowledges the traditional homelands of the *Wa She Shu* (Washoe), *Numu* (Northern Paiute), *Newe* (Western Shoshone), and *Nuwu* (Southern Paiute) people of the Great Basin. This includes the 27 tribal nations that exist as sovereign nations and continue as stewards of this land. We appreciate the opportunity to live and learn on these Indigenous homelands.