

Harry Fonseca: Stone Poems Collection CAE2101

Introduction/Abstract

Native artist Harry Fonseca created a major series of paintings called the *Stone Poems* based on basket imagery and Indigenous rock art and petroglyphs of the Coso Range in the Eastern Sierra, as well as rock art sites in Utah and the Southwest.

Biographical Note: Harry Fonseca

Harry Fonseca was born in Sacramento, California in 1946, and is of Nisenan Maidu, Hawaiian, and Portuguese ancestry. He studied at Sacramento City College, and with Frank LaPena (Wintu-Nomtipom/Tenai) at Cal State University, Sacramento. He also traveled in New Zealand studying Aboriginal cultures and art. As such, his inspiration and creative output closely mirrors the hybridity of the Nevada Museum of Art focus on the Greater West. Fonseca is well known for his *Coyote* series of paintings, which he started in 1979, where he portrayed the traditional Native American “trickster” figure to navigate his personal experiences of living as a gay Native American man.

Scope and Content

In the late 1980s, Native artist Harry Fonseca began a major series of paintings called the *Stone Poems* based on basket imagery and Indigenous rock art and petroglyphs of the Coso Range in the Eastern Sierra, as well as rock art sites in Utah and the Southwest. In these works, Fonseca merged abstract and figurative imagery, often composed of one or more large central figures surrounded by repeated motifs: spirals, for instance, or crosses. Using strong red oxide, black, and white paints on very large canvases to reflect the scale and impressiveness of real petroglyphs, Fonseca merges contemporary painting style with his Native heritage. In 1995, Fonseca traveled to New Zealand for a cultural exchange and symposium with Indigenous artists from the Pacific Rim and Pacific Islands. During this trip he befriended Aboriginal painter Judy Watson and collaborated on new works with her.

Fonseca is considered one of the most important Native American painters of his generation, along with artists like Frank LaPena, Frank Day, James Luna, Judith Lowry, and Jean LaMarr. After his untimely passing in 2006, the Harry Fonseca Trust was established and is governed by two trustees responsible for administering his work. One of Fonseca’s most impressive large-scale *Stone Poems* hangs permanently at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. The Fonseca Trust assembled archive materials related to the *Stone Poem*.

Materials include a *Stone Poem* journal/scrapbook that Fonseca made when deliberating whether he should begin the *Stone Poem* series. Also included are smaller working watercolors, posters, paintings, drawings, and archival photographs of the artist in the field at rock art sites.

This archive is currently in process.