

THE TREATY OF 1868: AN EPIC
A Series of Paintings by Joan Waltemath



"The Treaty of 1868: An Epic" is a series of eight oil paintings by Joan Waltemath addressing her relationship to the American Indian culture of the Great Plains. Emulating the vast and uninhabited nature of the prairie landscape, these neutral-hued canvases are near fifteen feet on each side. Appearing sparse at first, they in fact abound with narrative, expressive, symbolic, conceptual, and formal considerations.

Waltemath is known as a geometric abstract artist, but in this series she alludes to real events. Her grids, always based on the golden section, are innately proportioned to the human body; in this series they are sewn units of natural and black canvas.



In each painting, pale floating rectangles and slim black slices hold the space, while the grid loosely corrals various markings. Tracts of cloud-like billowing whites, indicating the spiritual realm, abut areas of intricate pictographic writing, rust brown as in rock-art, alluding to episodes in earthly, material life. Floating throughout is the occasional neon patch, charcoal smudge, whisper of pencil, an incongruous mechanical diagram, and countless other enigmatic shapes still to be named, all indicating transitions between visible and invisible planes.

The artist makes her own paints, and incorporates an extensive range of light-reflecting materials. The result is that even a slight movement of the viewer in front of the canvas causes the surface to ripple and shift in an intriguing dance of appearances and disappearances.

Abstract art, originally devised to convey spiritual realities -- by Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, Delaunay, Kupka, and the recently acknowledged Hilma af Klimt -- is the ideal language to recount the story of the First Peoples. Waltemath, born in Nebraska on Treaty land, was compelled to attest to these sagas after her immersion in the ceremonies of Lakota spiritual life. She was also compelled to stay true to her own abstract trajectory. The result is a novel form of history painting, open to interpretation and fully resonant with the contemporary era.

In initial showings to the Native American community, all instinctively knew the ceremonial world her paintings expressed, and could immediately see and feel the drama.



VIMEO of Joan Waltemath discussing the Treaty of 1868 Series at the Bemis Center in 2018. [click on image to play - 5 minutes long]

The 8 Paintings:

PALLIUM

The land is coveted.

THE FALLEN

There is a fight.

TORQUE MIRA

Vanquished.

M'S CROSSING

Ancient ways.

SMOKE

Legally human.

GROUND PLAN FT. CROOK

Ceremonial power.

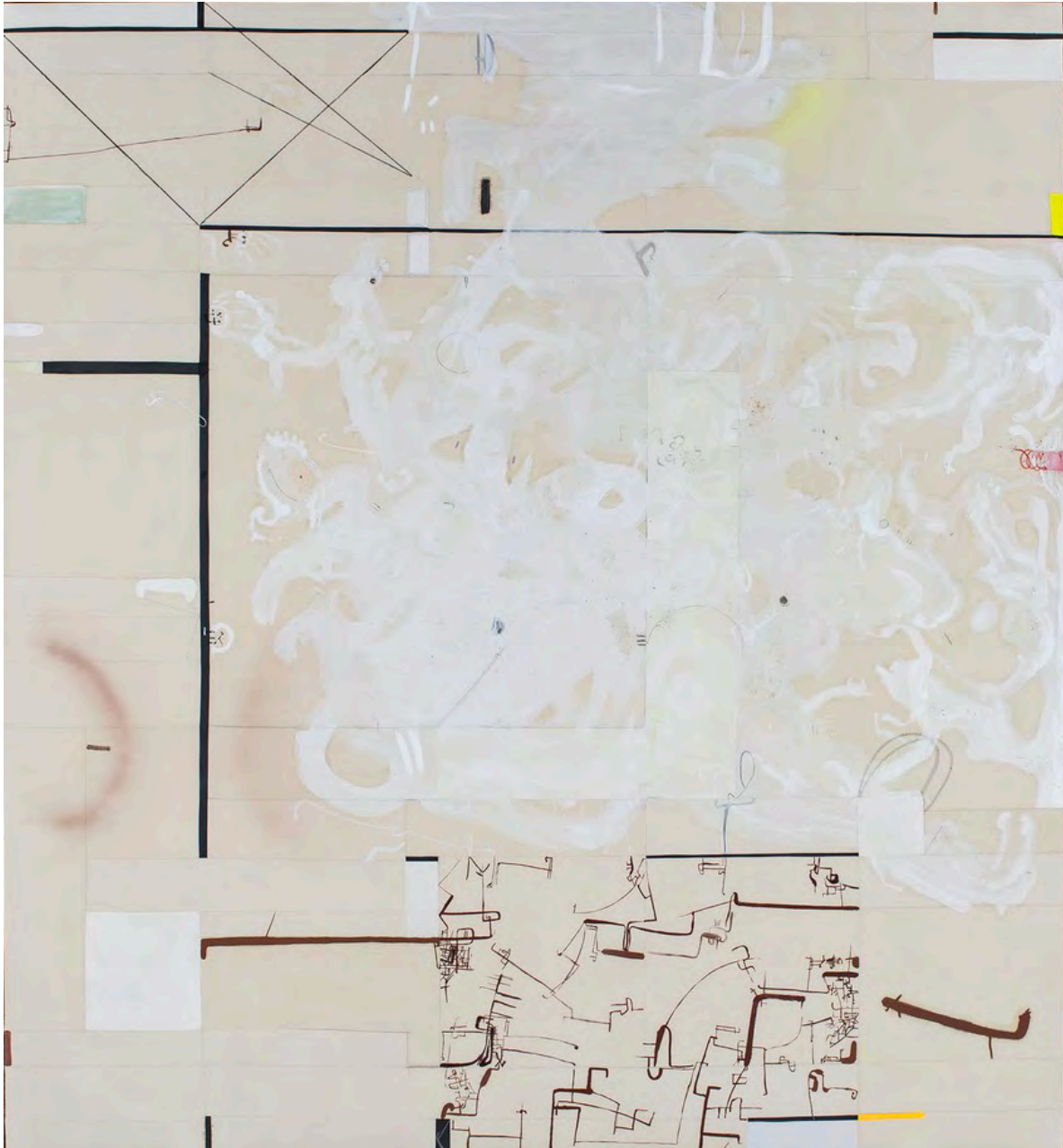
OYATE

The People.

COMING HOME

Celebration.

PALLIUM



Sewn 2009, painted 2017

174" x 160"

Oil, lead white, graphite, Spanish hematite, copper, iron oxide, florescent, interference, polar silver, diamond silver, phosphorescent, mica, lapis lazuli, and malachite pigment, oil stick, oil crayon and spray paint on prepared natural and black canvas sewn from individual pieces.

PALLIUM: A triangular apparatus in the upper left hovers over a large square area surging with white turmoil, an area indicating the First Peoples spiritual realm. In the lower section, reddish-brown pictographic writing has been channeled by the artist, and indicates events on the earth plane.

The Treaty of 1868 is confirmed between the United States government and three Plains tribes, the Lakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho. In exchange for an end to decades of fighting, the First Peoples are given a vast track of their own land stretching from Nebraska to Wyoming and Montana. The treaty brings to an end an ancient nomadic way of life, one which had always been harmonious with nature and the land.

The American government's *coup de gras* was hunting the buffalo to extinction, thereby depriving the tribes of their primary food source. In exchange for promises that they wouldn't starve, native tribes must conform to foreign standards of the incoming dominant culture. The First Peoples must, among other requirements, live in permanent settlements, learn to herd or farm, and convert to Christianity.

Over the next 40 years, in violation of this Treaty, the government incrementally confiscates most of what remains of Indian territory, while European settlers are granted their land in the Homestead Act.

Pallium refers to the vestment draping the shoulders of the Pope.

THE FALLEN



Sewn 2010, painted 2016-17

152 1/2" x 140 1/4"

Oil, lead white, graphite, hematite, copper, iron oxide, florescent, interference, phosphorescent, mica, and malachite pigment, oil stick, oil crayon and spray paint on prepared natural and black canvas sewn from individual pieces.

THE FALLEN: The large center, bounded by two black strips, is peppered with phosphorescent coral and transparent blue crosses, undulating in and out of view as one moves. The crosses memorialize the fallen soldiers on both sides of the infamous Battle of Little Big Horn, or Custer's Last Stand.

In the summer of 1876 thousands of Indians from all over the Treaty territory journey to the Little Bighorn River in southeastern Montana to celebrate Sundance, the most important sacred ceremony of the year.

Ceremony, the bedrock of the Plains Indian way of life, includes sweat lodge, song, drum, dance, costume, prayer, pipe-smoking, medicine wheels, and feasts. Through these modes, they consult with their ancestors, who come forward in spirit to offer insight, give advice, uncover problems, and in general, to inspire.

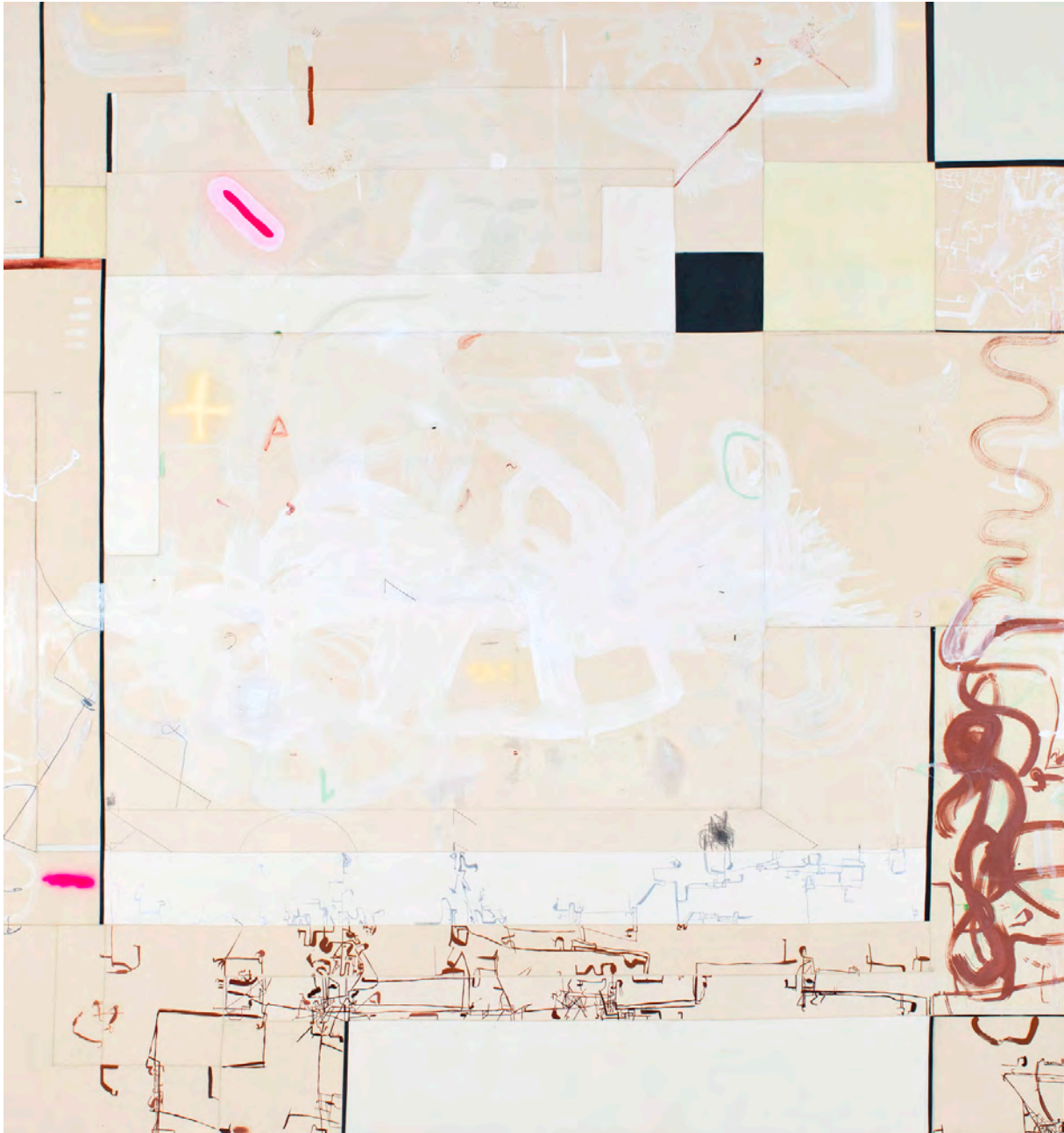
Rooted in communing with invisible forces, this original way of life was considered by the white man to be pagan, inscrutable, and unnerving. Particularly unsettling at this time was the rapid spread through all the Plains tribes of the ritual of the Ghost Dance. Often led by Chief Sitting Bull, this new ceremony was dedicated to expelling the conquerors from native lands and restoring the traditional way of life to the tribes.

Attempting to suppress the burgeoning movement, General Custer took a large flank of soldiers to disperse the Sundance gathering. But Custer had completely underestimated the great size of the assembly, and his troops were overwhelmed and defeated, with no survivors.

Markings up the left side of the painting indicate the marching American army. A grove of trees hovers at the upper left, witnessing the slaughter.

Walters visualizes THE FALLEN to be viewed in darkness, to encourage reflection on this tragedy.

TORQUE MIRA



Sewn 2012, painted 2017
169" x 158"

Oil, lead white, hematite, copper, iron oxide, aluminum, pipestone, interference, florescent, mica, phosphorescent pigment and oil stick, graphite and conté crayon on prepared natural and black canvas sewn from individual pieces.

TORQUE MIRA: Slight pencil markings struggle to penetrate and map out the central area of churning white light, which now accommodates a small glowing cross. Neon pink wands might be flashlights trying to peer into this dimension so mysterious to the foreigners. On the right, an enlarged ceremonial dancer spins in thick red earth swirls, spiraling up to different levels of consciousness in an attempt to clear the air, understand, and correct.

By the 1880s, the American government intentionally conspires to demolish the First Peoples culture. Congress formally bans all Indian traditions, ceremonies, dances, feasts, language, and manner of dress. The family unit is broken up, children are seized and forced to attend boarding school far from their parents. If a man has long hair, he receives no rations and is eventually imprisoned.

In secret, on the reservations, the tribes struggled to preserve whatever they could of native culture. Sundance continued to be performed annually through an intricate system of guards, passwords, and hidden trails. But much traditional ceremony was lost forever.

TORQUE MIRA is a play on the Grand Inquisitor Torquemada who, some 400 years before, executed thousands during the Spanish Inquisition. It also refers to the fact that ceremony can reorient a torqued vision.

M's CROSSING



Sewn 2011, painted 2015 -17

172" x 168 1/2"

Oil, lead white, marble dust, hematite, copper, iron oxide, aluminum, interference, florescent, mica and phosphorescent pigment on prepared natural and black canvas sewn from individual pieces.

M's CROSSING: The pictographs in the lower area are enmeshed in tangles but appear to lift up and cross a black strip into an area of blue grey wisps which continue to rise across more black lines and shift into white realms.

Waltemath here re-counts her experience at the Bemis Art Center in downtown Omaha where she had a residency in 2008. The Center was formed from abandoned buildings purchased in the 1970s by the enterprising artist Jun Kaneko. When living and working there, Waltemath was consciously aware of antithetical forces affecting the residents and challenging creative life. Making art became impossible, and everyone was fighting.

In a lucid dream she was led through the building, coming upon a group of cowboys drinking and playing cards, and exuding hostility. A coincidence the following morning revealed that this building was once the First National Bank, a meeting place for many who had participated in the extermination of the Indians and their culture, and the opening of their lands for white settlement. The building needed clearing. Friends in the native community recognized the situation when visiting her studio, and several traditional ceremonies were initiated. The atmosphere lifted and slowly light returned to the building.

Waltemath had already been developing the harmonic patterns to sew the grounds for her new series of large canvases, but now she knew the subject of the series: The Treaty of 1868. Although little known to the white population, the Treaty of 1868 was constantly referenced by the Indians who Waltemath knew as a turning point in their history.

"M" is a stand-in for the "Many" who were released during the creation of this work. A white square at the upper left turns blue in the dark, indicating how spirits come in as lights flying around the room at night.

M's CROSSING was shown in 2018 at the American Academy of the Arts and Letters, where the artist was given the Jacob Lawrence Award for outstanding achievement in the Visual Arts. Here is an excerpt from their press release:

"While all art seems to contain some aspect of deeply understood and personal ritual, through years of study and participation Joan Waltemath has, in some sense, become a part of the highly structured and visionary Lakota Indian Tradition. Through her knowledge of the Lakota ceremonies as well as art history and her extensive explorations into philosophy and harmonics, Waltemath's new paintings take this ancient tradition and magically transform its structure into a new and brilliant visual experience. This understanding presents itself in these paintings so clearly that we, the viewers, are able to become further informed about our own personal journeys."

SMOKE



Sewn 2015, painted 2018

150"x 146"

Lead white, lead white with marble dust, fluorescent white, phosphor red, phosphor blue, iron oxide, hematite, Spanish hematite, Robert's black pipe dust, Pearl Luster turquoise, Pearl Luster Silver, Pearl Luster copper, Polar silver interference, Diamond Silver, Magic White, Micro Silver, selenite, oil pastel, graphite, and charcoal on prepared natural and black canvas sewn from individual pieces.

SMOKE: The pictographic area has a concentrated mass with looser elements around, the highest figure resembling a horseman placing his lance at the exact corner where the spirit realm begins, marked with a small coral square. Across the way a tiny circle of yellow hovers against a bright white reverse L shape. Above and to the side, iridescent cloud shapes float and coalesce, weaving in and out, crossing over the upper black strips.

Waltemath expresses here how, through ceremonial life, time moves in multiple directions, shifting worlds backwards and forwards.

In the early 2000s she was introduced to the yuwipi healing ceremonial culture through her brother, a social worker with the Northern Ponca tribe. He was working to stabilize this devastated, inebriated community through a return to the traditional ways at the heart of their way of life.

The yuwipi ceremony is one done in darkness. In one of her first ceremonies, lasting all night, Waltemath witnessed an historic peace agreement made between traditional enemies from the Ponca and Lakota tribes. It included the appearance of Smokemaker, a Ponca holy man who had been killed in 1868 by Lakota Warriors.

When the US gave the Ponca homeland to the Lakota in the Treaty of 1868, the Lakota moved in swiftly for the kill. The remaining Poncas were forced to walk to their new home in Arkansas. Although the government promised to send their possessions down to them when they arrived in their new home, everything instead was burned behind them.

On their walk south, the son of Chief Standing Bear died. A proper burial could only take place on their ancestral homeland, so Standing Bear carried the body of his son back to Nebraska where he was promptly arrested and incarcerated for trespassing.

East Coast advocates took up his cause, eventually leading to Standing Bear speaking persuasively before Congress. In America's first civil rights case, in 1879, Standing Bear was declared to be human. Until then Indians and Blacks were considered to be animals with no human rights.

A statue of Standing Bear was recently sent by the State of Nebraska to the US Capitol Building in Washington DC, replacing one of the two statues it is allowed.

In the Smithsonian American Art Museum is George Catlin's 1832 portrait of Smokemaker, as well as portraits of Smokemaker's wife, son, and daughter-in-law. These paintings name him "The Smoke", a variation on the translation of the Indian language.

Parts of SMOKE were done with pigments given to Waltemath by Smokemaker's seventh generation grandson.

GROUND PLAN FORT CROOK



Sewn 2014, painted 2018
151" x 151"

Lead white, lead white with marble dust, fluorescent white, phosphor red, phosphor blue, iron oxide, hematite, Spanish hematite, Rick's pipe dust, malachite, Pearl Luster turquoise, Pearl Luster copper, Pearl Luster silver, aluminum, Pearl silver interference, Diamond Silver, Magic White, oil pastel, graphite, charcoal on prepared natural and black canvas sewn from individual pieces.

GROUND PLAN FORT CROOK: A multitude of whites creates a surface which quivers, shimmers and flashes images as one moves: a bear strides majestically across the fields and disappears into eagles soaring through the white and blue heavens folding into coyotes roaming over the prairies, horses streaking through the winds, and innumerable unidentifiable beings changing shape.



At the painting's mid-left is the floor plan of the original Fort Crook in Omaha, where Chief Standing Bear was imprisoned for trespassing on his dispossessed homeland when he returned to bury his son.

Waltemath painted the pictographic sections of this painting with stone pipe dust presented to her by a descendent of Standing Bear.

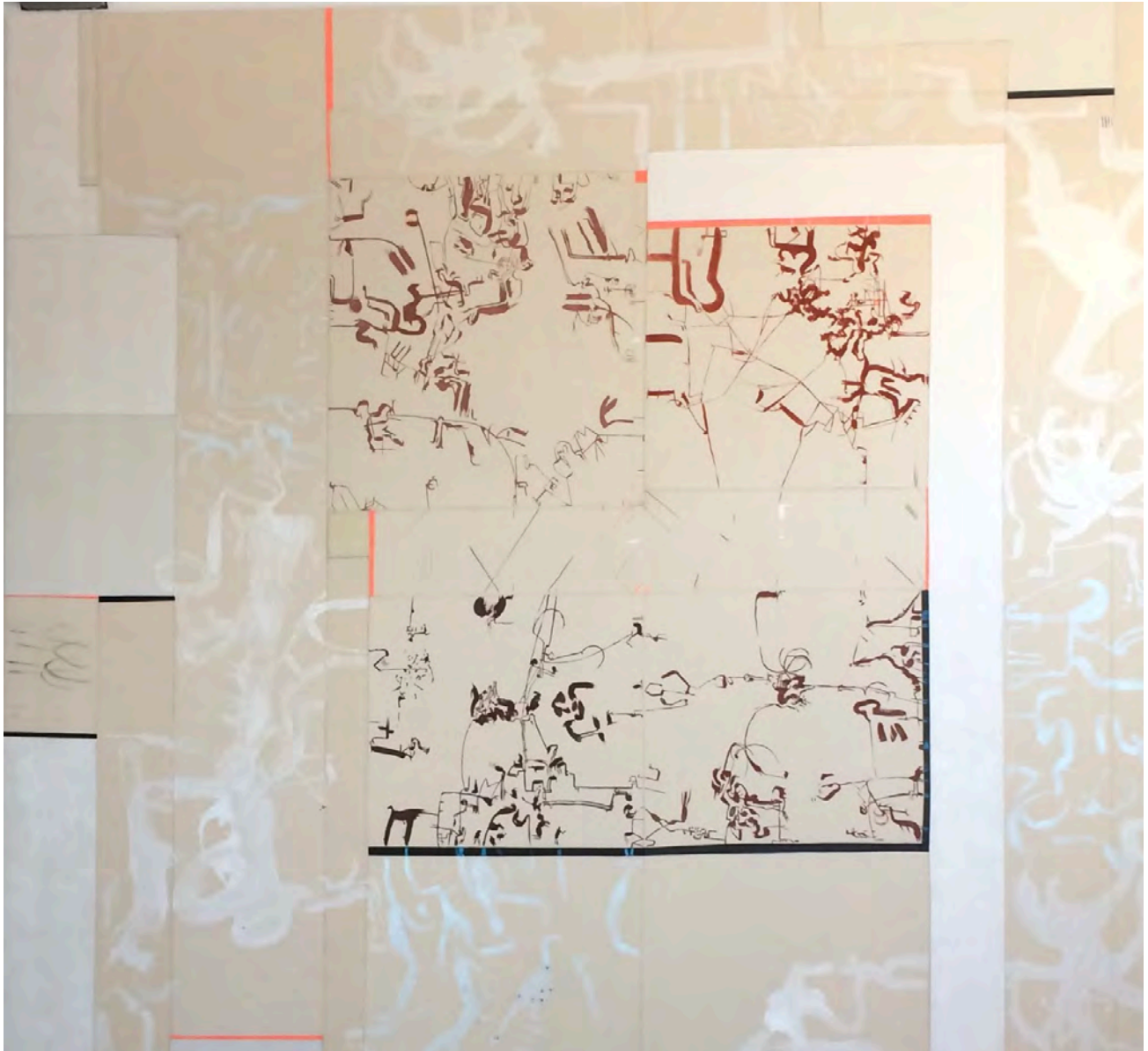
The sacred pipe is a kind of telephone line to the spirit world, an important way to communicate with ancestors. And in the spirit world, nature repeats in cycles and time itself collapses.

As she painted, a drama of spirits

ensued and it was discovered that in the family line of Standing Bear, a century later, there was another incorrect burial. Through efforts with ceremony, prayer, and inipi (sweat lodge), this incomplete burial gained closure.

The pictographs are a narrative of the story. Below are pictographs of severed heads on poles, the ancient Ponca way to handle conquered enemies; the narrative moves upwards through the bands of canvas to depict how events are connected through time.

OYATE



Sewn 2014, painted 2018
152" x 146"

Oil, lead white, lead white with marble dust, fluorescent white, phosphor red, phosphor blue, iron oxide, hematite, Spanish hematite, Robert's red pipe dust from many pipes, Pearl Luster turquoise, Pearl Luster silver, pearl silver interference, Diamond Silver, Magic White, Micro Silver, oil pastel, graphite, colored pencil, conté crayon and charcoal on prepared natural and black canvas sewn from individual pieces.

OYATE means The People, one's soul group, here refined by Waltemath to mean a group of people connected through spiritual practice.

Native American spiritual practice is called the Red Road. There is no deity per se on this road; instead, prayer is offered to the four directions. In the central area of the painting are four squares: the lower left is West, the direction of the Rocky Mountains and the origin of water; thunder and lightning are spirits belonging to water; its color is black, here painted in iron oxide pictographs.



North is painted with hematite pigment.

East, associated with new beginnings is painted with a pipe dust mixture given to Waltemath by several different pipe carriers.

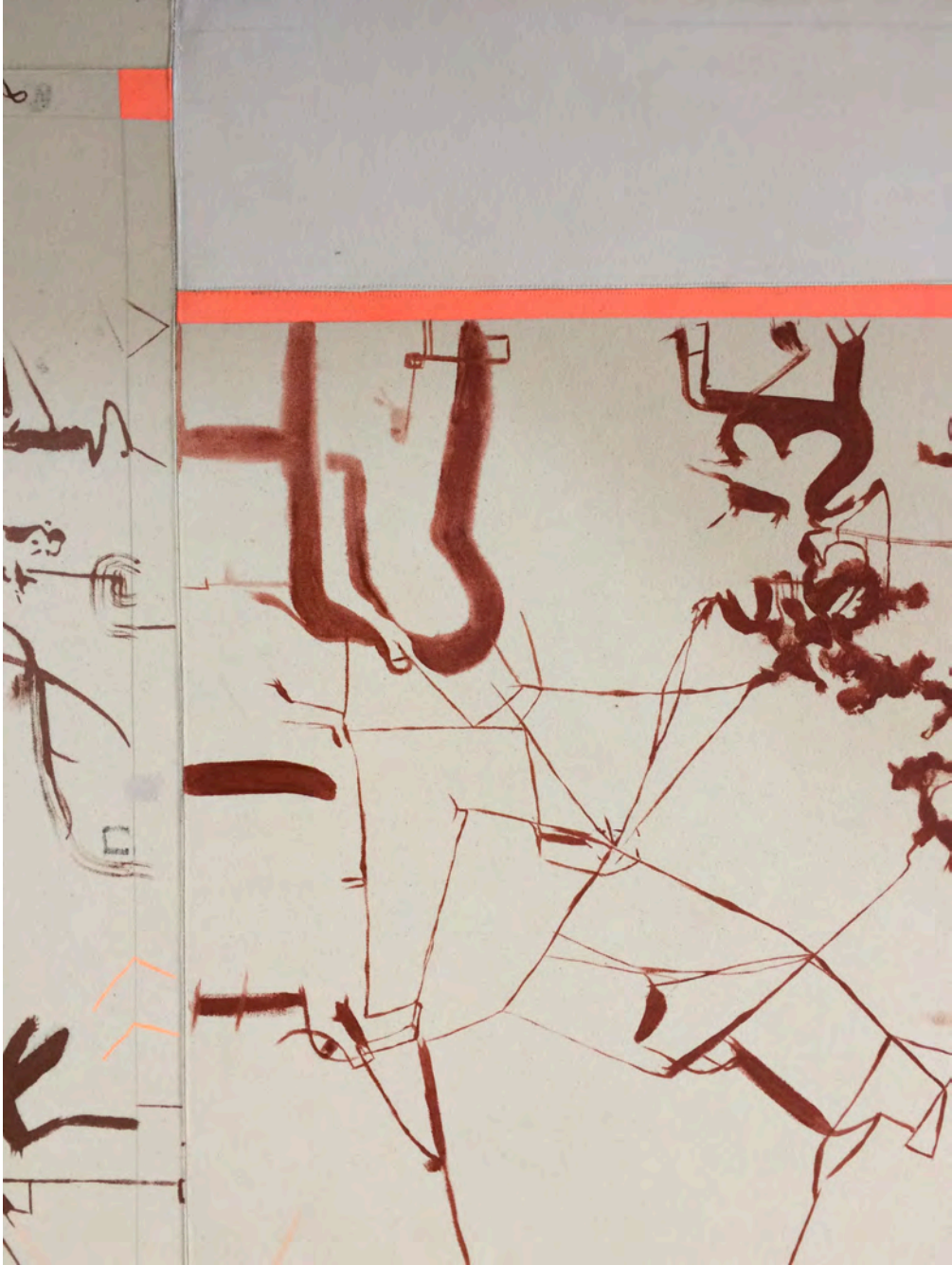
South is the realm of transformation and is painted in copper.

Copper was also used by Joseph Beuys who Waltemath acknowledges as an important predecessor in creating works of art intended to transform and heal trauma.

The structure of this painting differs from others of the series, which are organized as bottom, middle, and top bands. In OYATE, the earthly realm of pictographs is in the center, and it is surrounded by the divine dimension.

The pictographic elements here are meant to come close enough to recognizable imagery so as to trigger memories and associations by the audience that reflect each individual's own concerns.

detail OYATE



COMING HOME



Sewn 2011, painted 2018 - present (unfinished)
146" x 141"

Oil, lead white, fluorescent white, phosphor red, Robert Sweaney pipe dust, iron oxide, micro silver, fluorescent, Pearl Luster turquoise, Rick's pipe dust, diamond silver, Pearl Luster copper, phosphorescent blue, my own medicine pipe dust

At the mid-right center of the painting is a floating yellow square, while at the mid-left are two equal interlocking forms. The pictographs of the lower squares delineate visions of the artist's movements though different dimensions of time.

Analogous to Mondrian's early abstraction where the figure-ground relationship dissolves into a unified field, we are now culturally moving into a new awareness of our interrelatedness. These middle forms indicate the shift accommodating western thought processes into the way of nature where all is interwoven, interdependent, and each part honored as a part of the whole.

On the Red Road, we are all relatives. Our relatives include the insects, the blades of grass, the winds, rains, and the clouds in the sky. When you return to the ancient ways it is called COMING HOME. Waltemath describes: "Experiencing Sundance with music, theatre, costume, dance, medicine, feast, ritual, marking the calendar, when everything is synchronous, you experience your group, your soul group, and feel that everything is in its place."

She has now completed twelve years of Sundance, the third cycle of four years, which is considered a mastery of self. The next four years of participation in Sundance are for passing it on to future generations. It is notable that the future is always a factor in tribal decisions, where a council of elders generally considers what the effects of any decision might be on the next seven generations.

TREATY OF 1868: A LAMENT

Works on Paper

In the Treaty of 1868 series, whether canvas or paper, the same grid wrap is used. The titles of the works on paper include indications such as "1 2 3 5 8 west" which refer to the area of the grid wrap from which the drawing was created. The notation helps the artist locate the area within the grid wrap, in case she wants to use it again.

The image below is an installation from 2019 at Mana Contemporary in Jersey City NJ, as part of the exhibition "Flat Out: Works on Paper from 2000-2019", curated by Ysabel Pinyol and Karline Moeller.



Mixed materials on cotton and linen paper, 22" x 22", 2016-17

1. 1 2 3 5 8 west FOUR-LEGGED WISDOM
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, crayon, conté crayon, casein, gouache, egg tempera, bronze and metallic paint
2. 1 2 3 5 8 above INSIDE THE CIRCLE WE STILL HEAR YOU CRYING
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, crayon, casein, gouache, egg tempera, bronze and metallic paint
3. 1 2 3 5 8 above THE FROTH OF EXUBERANCE
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, crayon, casein, gouache, egg tempera, bronze and metallic paint
4. 1 2 3 5 8 east BEGINNING OF ENDLESS ENDS
pencil, colored pencil, conté crayon, oil pastel, iridescent crayon, casein, gouache, egg tempera and metallic paint

5. 1 2 3 5 8 east LEIBNIZ'S GOD OR WALKS WITH LIGHTNING
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, crayon, casein, gouache, egg tempera
6. 1 2 3 5 8 below MIND/HAND MINE/HAND MY HAND
pencil, colored pencil, casein, gouache, egg tempera and metallic paint
7. 1 2 3 5 8 below DARKNESS AT THE CORE
pencil, colored pencil, conté crayon, casein, gouache, egg tempera, and metallic paint
8. 1 3 4 7 above RED JOURNEY
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, conté crayon, iridescent crayon, casein, gouache,
egg tempera and metallic paint
9. 1 3 4 7 east FAINTLY: YOU STILL HEAR THEM IN THE BACKGROUND
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, casein, gouache,
egg tempera and metallic paint
10. 1 3 4 7 below VOICES OF THE DEAD ASKING TO BE SEEN
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, casein, gouache,
egg tempera and metallic paint
11. 1 3 4 7 below FERRO PHARAOH
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, crayon, iridescent crayon, casein, gouache, egg
tempera, and metallic paint
12. 1 3 4 7 below INNER EYE
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, crayon, conté crayon, casein, gouache,
egg tempera and metallic paint

Text by Barbara Braathen

For further reference:
www.joanwaltemath.net