NATIONAL MUSEUM of the AMERICAN INDIAN | Smithsonian

ANCESTORS KNOW WHO WE ARE
INTERVIEW WITH STORME WEBBER

Audio Description: The speaker sits in front of a bookcase filled with vinyl record albums.

Interviewer: Tell us about yourself.

Storme Webber: Cama'i. [greeting in Sugpiaq] Hello, my name is Storme Webber and I live on Duwamish territory in Seattle, Washington, where I was born, where my mother was born. My mother's people are Sugpiaq Alaska Natives from a small village, Seldovia, in southeast Alaska. My father's people are Black and Choctaw people from Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana area. I'm second-generation two spirit and lesbian. I'm an interdisciplinary artist who's been working on my art for, by this time, decades, and it's a great honor to be a part of this project.

Interviewer: How does your background influence your art?

Storme Webber: My background has everything to do with my art practice. I did not come up in a family that was particularly focused on career discussions or higher education discussions. My family was poor. My mother was a lesbian single mother, and she had to fight very hard to take care of a family and take care of herself. So my influences came, first of all from my grandmother, who was herself an artist who, because of being born in 1922 as an Alaskan Native woman, never had the opportunity to practice art.

Audio Description: Black and white photo of a woman with dark hair.

Storme Webber: In her study of, particularly Billie Holiday, and jazz music and her love of beauty and just a genius for living and a huge, compassionate heart, she was my first patron. She was my first teacher and she supported me all through my life. I give her all the credit, along with my other ancestors, who I feel that I try to listen to in my practice. As I went through life, I realized that part of the background influences for my art was, and I don't know if I said this already, but it was the exceptional experience of never fitting in anywhere and of really growing up outside of the so-called American dream. My mother was a two-spirit, Alaska Native, mixed-blood, lesbian woman who came out at age 16 in Seattle, and she lived in another social group that was invisible to the larger society. And my grandmother was really Indigenous in her ways in that growing up with my grandmother, the most important things were music, Billie Holiday, jazz music, beauty, you know, seeking treasures in unusual places, laughing, joking. There's a quote from Toni Morrison that I don't remember completely, but there were a couple of quotes that I came to in my teens that gave me strength and one of them was, and I'll paraphrase it, "And she had nothing to fall back on. Not whiteness, not ladyhood, and out of this very desolation, she may very well have invented herself." That was from Toni Morrison. The other one that struck me was by Ralph Ellison from his novel *Invisible Man* where he said, "Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time. Instead of being right on the beat, you're either slightly ahead or slightly behind." "Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time. Instead of being on the beat, you're either slightly before or slightly after. And you slip into the breaks

and you look around." Again, paraphrasing, but these were words that I found in my younger years and they gave me comfort. I would say that some of the greatest challenges became some of the greatest blessings.

Interviewer: Who inspires you?

Storme Webber: I would say, first of all, of course, my ancestors, my personal lineage of Black and Native people who, really, it must be said, are the survivors of the survivors. I am descended from people who survived the Middle Passage and who survived the Trail of Tears and survived the Indian War[s] and colonization. I think about them a lot. I try to listen for what loving and helpful messages that they share with me. One of those messages is the title of this show, *Ancestors Know Who We Are*, and that was something that I felt my ancestors said to me because I've had long experiences of being judged as not enough something. Not enough woman, not enough Black, not enough Native, and at some point, after years of experiencing this judgment and thinking about this judgment, my ancestors whispered into my ears and they told me, "Ancestors know who you are." I'd like to share a story with you about my Black Choctaw grandmother, and I will say that like a lot of Black people from the South, we don't have paperwork from the Choctaw Nation. I have photographs and I have my grandmother's oral history. The reasoning behind that was really the racism at the time and the specificity of the one-drop rule, which said if you have one drop of Black blood, you're Black. Don't worry about anything else. So that was that. But I want to tell you about my grandmother. My grandmother was born in 1905 in Marshall, Texas.

Audio Description: Color photo of a Black woman standing in a church. She wears a pink flowered pill box hat.

Storme Webber: Now Marshall, Texas, was at one point the Confederate capital of the United States. It might have been Confederate capital number two or three, because the other ones had been sacked, but the other thing that is notable to me about Marshall … and I've not been there yet. I'm going back there to visit, but I want to go with someone who knows the area. One thing about Marshall was that of all the counties in Texas, the poor white people tended to have slaves. I find that really interesting, and I think that speaks to the perniciousness of racism amongst white people in this country that certain things like this would go on. So the very poor people, not the big landowners that they always talk about and say the poor white people didn't have slaves. I guess in Marshall, they did, so my grandmother had to leave there. What I noticed about her and her other people from that area was they had the best sense of humor. They had the best sense of humor. I was going to the Michigan Women's Music Festival and a friend of mine was coming to pick me up, but I'll rewind back to the other part. So I came in one day and I said, "Grandma, how are you doing?" And she said, "Hmm, everybody comin' out." She had a Texas accent. It was so beautiful and very slow. I said, because this was the time of Ellen [DeGeneres] coming out on nationwide television, so I thought this is my chance because I hadn't come out to my grandmother, and I said, "Grandma, you always know when people are gay, don't you?" And she said, "Um-hum." And she answered real fast. She was just sad, kind of startled, you know? Then I said, "Well, did you know I was gay?" And she said, "Hmm, I knew since you knew." So that was that. There was no judgment. There was no shaming. She just was totally accepting. And then a funny thing happened is that a friend of mine came to drive me to the airport to go to the festival and grandma grabbed on to her hand and grabbed onto my hand—she was about 89 then—and she held both of our hands, she looked into our eyes, and she said, "Now listen, I don't usually get involved in young folks cotin' [courting], but I just want to tell you one thing. I don't judge you. I don't judge you because when I die, God ain't gonna ask me what you did." And just the grace of that, you see. This is what I mean about the

grace that comes to you. Yes, ancestors know who we are. God ain't gonna judge me. God ain't going to judge me. What did she say? "When I die, God ain't gonna ask me what you did."

Interviewer: Describe one of the artworks in the exhibition.

Storme Webber: The piece *I Cover the Waterfront*, it's so very close to my heart because my strongest memory of my grandmother, one of the strongest memories, is her skill as a singer, her sensitivity as a musician. She sang around me a lot and she sang a lot of Billie Holiday, who was her favorite singer, and one of her favorite songs was "I Cover the Waterfront." Now, we live here in Seattle. We do have a waterfront. The poetry in that song and the poetry in her voice was so profound to me. When I begin to tell these stories, and some of the stories are not easy stories, there's a conscious feeling in my heart to tell them gently, and there's something so gentle about that song to me. It's so full of yearning and heartache and yet the strength that allows the music to come, that allows the poetry of the lyrics to come. That story is my attempt to share what it was like for a little girl to find herself in a palimpsest, in a palimpsest of a certain place in Duwamish territory called Seattle, Washington. A certain corner, which was, until the Pilgrims came, literally beneath the water. That corner itself was created by landfill, because settlers wanted to create more real estate because there's so much money in the land. It always circles back to the land, yes? So that's my attempt to think about those layers that exist at Second and Washington in Seattle. The water, the Duwamish, the settlers, the hucksters who came in and created this space, which was first the Fargo Theater, then was a brothel, then by 1930 became a gay bar. Then by the 1960s, I'm a little girl and I'm walking in there and I'm feeling the spirits of the land and I'm feeling the spirits of the Duwamish people, and I'm seeing these grown people all around me and I'm seeing them through the child's eyes. So I wanted to try to recover those memories and try to share what that was like and all the layers of experience and existence that are at that particular place. Also some of my stories, they're also calling forth all the intersections. Particularly Seattle has always been a place of many intersections, particularly among poor people and working-class people. This bar had older Asian men who had come to work and had never been able to bring their partners or their wives. They found community with lesbians in this bar and people that in the historical record were not known to make community together. They made community together and I saw it, and that's part of the story that my work is about, is restoring the absent narratives, restoring these lives. I'm really fortunate right now to be working and in conversation with an amazing artist named Free Egunfemi Bangura, and I'm working with her through the Monument Lab project, which is part of Goethe-Institut. What they're talking about is shaping the past, right, and place-keeping as opposed to placemaking she spoke of. So it's reminding the society now and the society to come that we were here. We were always here, and we live lives and they need to be part of the story.

Interviewer: What is your favorite medium and why?

Storme Webber: Music was my first medium, because my grandmother was a singer and I grew up with so much music around me and because I adored her so because she sang. That was my first ambition, so that was my first medium. I would say that is probably the foundation. Even in my writing and in my creative work, I'm always conscious of asking questions about the rhythm, asking questions about the representation and the balance of the work. I would say my favorite medium right now, at the moment, really, is land. [laughs] I would say my favorite medium right now is land back, because I really have for some time wanted to create intentional community and wanted to find some sort of way to do that. So if there are any allies out there looking for people to help with a project like that, you can get in touch with me. I would be most happy. So that would be my final say, would be that I feel that everything is grounded in music, in jazz music, particularly, and blues.

Interviewer: Why do you create art?

Storme Webber: I create art as a way to connect with my ancestors, as a way to restore a language between us that was driven out of my family. When the village was colonized, first by the Russians and then by the US government when the US bought the state of Alaska from people from another country, [laughs] which is still a funny thought, if you think of it. I read a definition once that I liked a great deal, and it said the artist is one who consents to dream of the actual world, and I think that is the practice in some way. I am often thinking about things that I cannot actually know, but there's something positive in contemplating that. I think about the spiritual depth and practices that were destroyed when the Christians came to the village and said, "These are savages. You must leave them. Look, they can't cure the disease that we brought you, but never mind that." So I create art because it helps me to dream of the actual world. I create art to connect me with other people who have visions of a more loving future, a more caring future, a more collective future. Alternatives to this winner-take-all capitalism that has so many people on the streets and is causing so much suffering in our country right now. People who use art to express a joy in life, to express an anti-fascist belief in the rights of people to live, to express ways to live in a society without racism, without patriarchy, without the oppression of the weaker. I create art as a way to dream out loud and to find my people.

Interviewer: What memorable responses have you had to your work?

Storme Webber: *The Casino: A Palimpsest* solo exhibition at the Frye Museum was a tremendous turning point for me. It came about because I was fortunate enough to win the James W. Ray Award. I forget the descriptive word for it, but part of it was a solo exhibition at the Frye. The whole process was incredible. I had the most wonderful curator, Miranda Belarde-Lewis, another Indigenous woman who completely understood everything from the very start and was a tremendous co-creator throughout the process. One of the most memorable reactions to that work was over the three-month period over 20,000 people came to see the exhibition. That was my first solo exhibition in a museum. The other amazing thing was that the exhibition was reviewed in *Art in America*, which is very unusual for Seattle artists and very unusual for someone who is doing their very first show. Of course, I've worked decades on this project, so it was just the most wonderful, fortuitous coincidence that it all came together in the way that it did. There were many, many amazing responses, but the fact that over 20,000 people came to see this story of a little girl who had grown up in a cocktail lounge with her mom on the shadowy side of Seattle society was just incredible for me. It gave me a lot of encouragement as far as doing this work and thinking as you get older, think of the next generation to come and in the ways that things were made easier for my way by these giants who are leaving us now. Love to BlackBerri, my brother BlackBerri. We've just learned that bell hooks has walked on. Greg Tate. These tremendous people whose shoulders we stand on. I'm grateful for those positive responses that helped me to continue to do the work. Not that I feel I could ever reach where those giants were, but I will do my best as long as I can, for sure.

Interviewer: What does it mean to be Black and Native or Afro-Indigenous?

Storme Webber: You know, I think that the strongest feeling that I have of it is what a blessing, because we are the survivors of the survivors. We are the survivors of people who endured colonialism, who endured the Indian Wars, who endured the Middle Passage and chattel slavery. I'm astonished at the strength of my ancestors, and I'm endlessly inspired by them. I feel that there were times when I thought, "Well, this is kind of a ridiculous burden because we have the Trail of Tears over here and the

Middle Passage on the other shoulder," and it's a lot. It's a lot, but I feel really inspired at this moment. I feel that we are people who have been here for a very long time all the time, and I'm so encouraged by the younger generations and by the fact that we have at last come to a point where we can talk about anti-Blackness in the Indigenous community. We have to talk about it. We have to talk about blood quantum and the one-drop rule and how they were both constructed to, again, control the land and the money and the power and the labor. So I think we have endless conversations to have with one another, and I think we have a very wonderful place within the entire collective. Again, it's an honor to be here. It wasn't always even an identity that was understood or known about, so very, very thankful.

Interviewer: What role can art play in society?

Storme Webber: Art can play the most, and should play, the most powerful and intrinsic role in society. Look at the work of artists like Nina Simone and Langston Hughes and Linton Kwesi Johnson and Jean "Binta" Breeze and Joy Harjo and Ernestine Hayes. Art helps us be more human, art helps us to understand one another, and art helps us to really dream the better world, to really dream the world that we desire of. There are so many voices right now. It's very important, the artist as the one who is meant to take care of the society. There is a definition of two spirit from Ma-Nee Chacaby, and she said the two-spirit person is the one who keeps the fire going in the village. So there's something about this human spark and this human light that I feel that art is meant to provide. Yes, there is a tremendous art market and it's unbelievable the unbelievable amounts of money which are flowing in and out of this market, but that is not my focus with art. My focus with art is to try to understand how it can help us to be better humans and how we can be in better relation with one another and how we can reconnect with those precious parts of us and of our culture that were negatively impacted by colonialism and capitalism and racism and all the -isms. That we can build a better world.

Interviewer: What brings you joy?

Storme Webber: Of course, music and art and nature. When I returned to the village that my grandmother was from, the welcome that I felt there, the things that happened there. The first time I was there, I wrote a poem with the name of my great-great-grandmother as the title, and I didn't know her name. That brings me joy, that I feel a very real connection beyond death and life. I just feel so connected to my ancestors, and that brings me a great deal of joy. I know that they have protected me and they continue to protect me and lead me through. I know that they give me strength to help others. All of my years of practicing my work, I have often always curated other artists, particularly marginalized artists—BIPOC artists, survivors of the mental health institutions, immigrant artists. I began my practice here in Seattle, but then I moved to the Bay Area, then I moved to New York. I spent time in London. I spent time in Berlin and Amsterdam and Hamburg. Traveled to Brazil. I've been so fortunate to find that joy of creating something and going to a place where maybe the language is even different, but there is something in our hearts that managed to meet the hearts of another, because, actually, Indigenous and Black people and people of color are the majority of the world. We're not minorities, so these moments of very real connection with Black Europeans or Black-Brazilian people or Indigenous-Brazilian people and the peoples here on this land where I am—this brings me joy.

Audio Description: Logo: National Museum of the American Indian. Smithsonian.