

# FROM THESE HANDS

## FIBER ART AND POETRY BY GWEN WESTERMAN

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February 15 through April 18, 2021



Hillstrom Museum of Art



OPPOSITE

Gwen Westerman, *From These Hands*, 2009, 100% commercial cotton with floss, fringe, leather, bead, and needle embellishments, hand quilted, 20  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 16  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

ON THE COVER

Gwen Westerman, *Return to Crow Creek* (detail), 2015, 100% commercial cotton, 40 x 41  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

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## FROM THESE HANDS

### DIRECTOR'S NOTES

The Hillstrom Museum of Art is pleased to present this exhibition *From These Hands*, featuring the fabric art and poetry of Gwen Westerman, Dakota scholar, artist, and poet. Westerman, a faculty member at Minnesota State University, Mankato, has collaborated with the Museum in the past, when she served as a co-curator and artistic contributor to our 2012-2013 exhibition *Hena Uŋkiksuyapi: In Commemoration of the Dakota Mass Execution of 1862*. That exhibit was occasioned by the 150th anniversary of the largest mass execution in U.S. history, in which 38 Dakota were hanged in Mankato on December 26, 1862, following the end of the U.S.-Dakota War.

This current exhibit, *From These Hands*, includes important loans from The Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul and The Heritage Center at Red Cloud Indian School in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, and the Museum is grateful to these institutions for making Westerman's 2012 works *Caske's Pardon* and *Buffalo Ridge I* available.

And we are grateful to Gwen Westerman for generously sharing her award-winning fabric art and poetry, as well as sharing the Dakota life and history told in her works.

Donald Myers  
Director  
Hillstrom Museum of Art

### BIOGRAPHY

A fiber artist and poet, Gwen Westerman lives in southern Minnesota, as did her Dakota ancestors. Her roots are deep in the landscape of the tallgrass prairie and reveal themselves in her art and writing through the languages and traditions of her family. Since 2005, she has been creating quilts that have won awards at the juried shows of the Northern Plains Indian Art Market in Sioux Falls, the Eiteljorg Indian Art Market in Indianapolis, and the Heard Museum Guild Indian Art Fair & Market in Phoenix. Her work is now in the permanent collections of The Heritage Center of Red Cloud Indian School in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, the University Art Galleries at the University of South Dakota (Vermillion), and the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul. Currently a professor of English at Minnesota State University, Mankato, she is an enrolled member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota Oyate. She is co-author of *Mni Sota Makocce: The Land of the Dakota* (2012), which won a 2013 Minnesota Book Award and the 2014 Hognander Minnesota History Award. She also has a collection of poetry in Dakota and English, *Follow the Blackbirds* (2013), published by Michigan State University Press. Her poetry has been published widely, including most recently in *When the Light Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry* (2020), *Quiltfolk* (2020), *Rocked by the Waters: Poems of Motherhood* (2020), *Under Purple Skies: The Minnesota Anthology* (2019), *New Poets of Native Nations* (2018), and *POETRY* (2018). Her quilts have been featured in *American Patchwork & Quilting* (January, 2021), *Quiltfolk* (2020), and *Quilts and Human Rights* (2016).

## FIBER ART AND POETRY BY GWEN WESTERMAN

### ARTIST STATEMENT

As Dakota people, we have a long, rich history that explains not only where we came from, but also our responsibilities to each other and to the universe. My art is grounded in Dakota culture, history, oral tradition, and language recovery—and the continuation of our story. The women in my family have made functional quilts from fabric for at least six generations—my childhood was full of them. While many of the quilts I create are utilitarian as well, and I expect them to be used, they also function to tell a story. My uncle and my grandma always reminded me that we need to tell the truth about our people and our history. I strive to do that in my art.

Gwen Westerman

### Hena Uŋkiksuyapi

We are Star People. Wicanŋhi Oyate heunŋanŋanpi.  
Our legacy is as diverse, as present, as absent as  
stars in the sky. In the brilliant light of day,  
we see just one star, our Sun, but those  
other stars are not gone. At sunset,  
they appear again. Bright city  
lights may darken them  
but they are not gone.  
Our point of  
reference  
veils  
or  
clears  
our vision.  
To create beauty  
from tragedy, healing  
from trauma is not a battle  
for supremacy of a single story  
but a process of new understandings  
that evolve as we evolve. But where does  
“true memory” reside? Our past is recorded in  
our way of life, in our traditions, and in the living  
hearts of our people. Our stories shine there like stars.

And we remember those.

2015

## FROM THESE HANDS



Gwen Westerman

*Owe Mato/Bearpaw*, 2002

100% commercial cotton, 81 x 67 inches

This quilt honors my great-grandma Sallie Bearpaw, as well as the name my grandma gave my son when he was born, “Yo-na,” which means “bear.”



Gwen Westerman

*Ina/For My Mother*, 2004

100% commercial cotton, hand quilted, 63 ½ x 62 inches

In many indigenous traditions, the turtle represents our Mother Earth. In Dakota language, “Ina” means not only our Mother the Earth, but also our human mother. In my mother’s family, her father and his siblings all carried water animal names. My grandfather’s name was Yah-skv-nv-hi, or Hard-shelled turtle. My mother collected turtles and I made this quilt for her.



Gwen Westerman

*Green Star*, 2005

100% commercial cotton, 63 x 63 inches

I made this quilt for my daughter when she graduated from Minnesota State University, Mankato. My grandma gave her Sallie Bearpaw’s name, “Sa-li.”

## FIBER ART AND POETRY BY GWEN WESTERMAN



Gwen Westerman

*Wicayhpi Heciya Tayhany Uyhipi/  
We Come from the Stars, 2007*

100% commercial cotton with glass beads, metallic thread, brass bells, and mirror embellishments, 74 x 66 inches

*First Place, Quilt Division, Northern Plains Indian Art Market, 2007*

Our creation stories tell us that we are Wicayhpi Oyate, Star People, and we come from the stars along the Milky Way to this place, the earth. When we die, our spirits will travel back along that same road to the Creator. The center mirror reminds us to see ourselves in the stars.

Featured as cover art for *Beloved Child: A Dakota Way of Life* (Diane Wilson, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2011).



Gwen Westerman

*From These Hands, 2009*

100% commercial cotton with floss, fringe, leather, bead, and needle embellishments, hand quilted, 20 5/8 x 16 1/2 inches

In this self-portrait, I pay tribute to both sides of my family. My parents met at Haskell Indian Institute in the early 1950s, in the middle of the Great Plains, so the landscape captures the flow of prairies and beyond the horizon are the stars of our universe, where we come from and where we will return. The little woman is a pattern my grandma used in a quilt she made for me in 1978. My mother taught me to sew when I was 10 years old. In 2002, I asked them to send tracings of their hands. They died within four months of each other that year. My mother's hand on the left and my grandma's on the right shape the woman who connects the land and the stars.

## FROM THESE HANDS



Nellie Mae Bunch Johnson (1912-2002)

*Little Women*, 1978

Hand pieced and hand quilted, 78 x 63 inches

Made by my grandma Nellie Mae Bunch Johnson (1912-2002). Many of the fabrics my grandma used for this quilt were scraps from clothes I made for myself in junior high and high school.



Gwen Westerman

*Otokaheya/At the Beginning*, 2010

100% hand-dyed cotton with bead and paper embellishments, mounted on stretcher bars, 40 x 36 inches

In a series of three quilts commissioned for the exhibit *Original Green* at the Mill City Museum (Minneapolis), this piece represents how St. Anthony Falls may have looked 10,000 years ago when it was closer to the St. Paul area and the power of the Mississippi River was unrestricted. The fabric was dyed with a process called snow-resist, and recycled materials are included.

## FIBER ART AND POETRY BY GWEN WESTERMAN



Gwen Westerman

*Owamniyomni/Whirpool*, 2010

100% hand-dyed and commercial cottons with bead and shell embellishments, mounted on stretcher bars, 40 x 36 inches

The Dakota name for St. Anthony Falls is Owamniyomni. Spirit Island is in the foreground and a Dakota village is on the opposite bank. The shells along the lower right side are from Pike Island where the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers converge. Cover art for *Mni Sota Makocce: The Land of the Dakota* (Gwen Westerman and Bruce White, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012).



Gwen Westerman

*Anpetu Sapa Wiŋ/Dark Day Woman*, 2010

100% hand-dyed and commercial cottons with bead and shell embellishments, mounted on stretcher bars, 40 x 36 inches

Various legends recount the story of Dark Day Woman who went over the St. Anthony Falls with her son in a canoe because she was distraught that her husband had taken another wife. Through the variations in the dying process, a figure of a woman appears in the sky. The effects of industrialization have diminished the falls and the Mississippi River, while the mills are deteriorating.

**Covalent Bonds**

we are  
    dream carriers  
child bearers  
those burdens borne  
with hope  
and intensity  
under the gravity  
of responsibility  
history and  
love  
not guilt  
love  
and hope  
for those who  
will dream  
and share  
these burdens born  
we do not give up  
willingly  
    but attract and repel  
balance and share  
stronger  
in that bond of  
love

2019

## FIBER ART AND POETRY BY GWEN WESTERMAN



Gwen Westerman

***Buffalo Ridge I*, 2012**

100% hand-dyed and commercial cottons with glass bead and ink embellishments, 36 x 40 inches, lent by The Heritage Center at Red Cloud Indian School

The bison were once an integral part of our Dakota way of life and have survived near extinction in small herds across the country. Their original habitat is now integral to wind energy, especially along the Buffalo Ridge from north-central Iowa through southwestern Minnesota and into eastern South Dakota. The Dakota language on this work is from an old song which says, “My friends, many things are chasing me but I am not afraid because I still live.”



Gwen Westerman

***Buffalo Ridge II*, 2014**

100% hand-dyed cotton with glass beads, buffalo hair, and ink embellishments, 38 x 40 inches

*First Place, Quilt Division, Northern Plains Indian Art Market, 2016*

See *Buffalo Ridge I* for description.

## FROM THESE HANDS



Gwen Westerman

*Caske's Pardon*, 2012

100% commercial cotton with glass beads, hemp, wool, and paper, mounted on stretcher bars, 48 x 34 inches, from the Collection of the Minnesota Historical Society

On December 26, 1862, 38 Dakota men were hanged in Mankato, including Wicanjipi Wastedanpi or Caske (first-born son). In 2012, calls for a federal pardon circulated for him though he had not committed a crime. Inspired by Mexican retablos, this work portrays his plea for a pardon for those who wrongly executed him. Featured in *Quilts and Human Rights* (Marsha MacDowell, Mary Worrall, Lynne Swanson, and Beth Donaldson, University of Nebraska Press, 2016).



Gwen Westerman

*Ded Uŋk'uŋpi/We Are Here*, 2012

Hand-painted rayon panels, each c. 60 x 82 ½ inches

The figures here represent the spirits of the 38 Dakota men who were hanged on December 26, 1862, after the U.S.-Dakota War. They were fathers, sons, brothers, uncles, and grandfathers who fought to protect their homeland and their people.

**Root Words**

Prairie  
grasses  
have  
roots  
twice  
as long  
as their  
height,  
deep  
footings  
that steady  
them against  
unremitting winds  
that sweep across  
the plains. Their roots  
reach beneath the parched  
earth stricken by heat and cold  
and nourish them on  
the remnants of a vast  
inland sea that  
teemed with copious sounds  
of life long ago.  
Our language  
is like those prairie grasses  
surviving the fires  
of missionaries and their gods,  
floods of English words,  
drought, growing  
in unexpected places  
as if it had never  
been gone.  
Makoce kin etanhan  
unhipi. Ikce  
wicašta tehikapi.  
Daḡota iapi  
teunhinḡdapi.

from *Follow the Blackbirds*  
2013

## FROM THESE HANDS



Gwen Westerman

*Wiyohpeyata/To the West*, 2015

100% commercial cotton, 80 x 80 inches

*Second Place, Quilt Division, Northern Plains Indian Art Market, 2016*

A variation on the eight-pointed star pattern, this quilt includes four similar yet different color combinations that suggest the changing color of the western sky at sunset. In our way, red represents the west.



Gwen Westerman

*Return to Crow Creek*, 2015

100% commercial cotton, 40 x 41 ½ inches

*Third Place, Quilt Division, Northern Plains Indian Art Market, 2015*

A variation of the original paper-pieced horse designs, this quilt portrays the story of the horses who made their way back through ice and snow to bring their riders back to Crow Creek.

**38**

we rise  
together  
singing  
our prayer  
as one  
hear us

we are  
here  
standing  
at the  
center  
see us

we do  
this  
today so  
our people  
will live  
tomorrow

we offer  
our  
hands  
as human  
beings  
remember us

2012

## FROM THESE HANDS



Gwen Westerman

*Tree of Life*, 2015

100% commercial cotton, 33 5/8 x 18 1/4 inches

Using the tracings of my grandmother's and mother's hands made in 2002, this tree of life represents four generations. The veins run from the earth through the roots of my grandmother's hand, up through the trunk of my mother's and my hands, to the crown made with my daughter's hands.



Gwen Westerman

*De Dakota Makoce/This is Dakota Land*, 2016

100% hand-dyed cotton with printed embellishments,  
34 x 28 1/4 inches

To "reframe Minnesota," this work has no frame to limit the borders of our Dakota homeland. Before the gridlines of American surveyors, our homeland was defined by rivers and lakes. The Indian on the Minnesota State Seal has been re-appropriated to represent the travel of Dakota across the land, from the southern shore of Lake Superior throughout the Mississippi, St. Croix, and Minnesota River valleys, along rivers and trade routes in what is now the State of Minnesota.

**Wicaŋłipi Heciya Tanhanj Uŋhipi**  
*(We Come from the Stars)*

Stellar nucleosynthesis.  
That explains  
where everything

in our universe

came from according to astrophysicists who  
only recently discovered the cosmological constant causing  
the expansion

of our universe.

Our creation story tells us we came from the stars to this place Bdote  
where the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers converge,  
our journey along the Wanagi Canju,

in our universe,

that stargazers later called the Milky Way now disappearing  
in the excessive glow of a million million urban uplights.  
The original inhabitants of this place,

of our universe,

we are Wicaŋłipi Oyate, *Star* People  
and will remain here as long as  
we can see ourselves

in the stars.

from *Follow the Blackbirds*  
2013

## FROM THESE HANDS



Gwen Westerman  
*Medicine Lines*, 2018

100% hand-dyed cotton with hand-processed deer rawhide, ink, and glass bead embellishments,  
34 x 28 inches

The border between Canada and the U.S. along the 49th parallel is called the “Medicine Line” by Indigenous peoples, an artificial boundary that separated Dakota bands after its creation in 1818. Water, or “mni”, is our first medicine and connects us to the land. Without it, there is no life. This piece represents our traditional Dakota homelands. The major rivers, in blue, are the real medicine lines connecting our Dakota communities, their names in our language. The hand and red-winged blackbird show our connections to our first medicine.



Gwen Westerman  
*Prairie Storm*, 2021

100% hand-dyed and commercial cotton,  
36 x 44 ½ inches

Summer on the Minnesota-South Dakota prairie as a thunderstorm rolls in from the southwest.





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