

Kishwacokee Kinship: Reimagining Relatives

March 16-April 13, 2024

Opening March 16, 2-7pm

Watershed Art & Ecology

1821 S. Racine Avenue in Chicago

watershed-art.org

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Dreaming The Prairie Interactive Game and VR

Kishwacokee is the name that Black Hawk used to refer to the place in Northwestern Illinois where the Rock and Kishwaukee Rivers meet. That meeting of waterways was also a natural meeting place for people.

When waters meet, there is a bringing together of their energies, an opportunity to combine and mix and interact. Those synergistic energies can also be the inspiration and occasion for a variety of species—sessile and mobile, non-human and human alike—to engage each other in a multitude of exchanges. All of those species—animals, plants, fungi—are quite literally our relatives, as all of us can trace our ancestry to the first living cell on Earth. The wondrous diversity of life on this planet can create for some the illusion of separateness, but there are also ways of regarding other lifeforms and the earth itself as our kin, as our relatives. It might take celebrating our differences simultaneously while comprehending and appreciating what joins us together under the surface. Under the skin, as it were.

Although this locus appears on present-day maps as part of the city of Rockford, its history goes back to times before European settlement, when Indigenous peoples were drawn here to meet and socially interact, to combine energies, to exchange stories/ideas/knowledge.

The title of this show is intended to remind us of the importance of this location as a site for many ways of celebrating this kinship, and if necessary, to rekindle our imaginations to embrace *all* of our relatives. They all have potential stories to share with us.

In that spirit of openness, localStyle began to conceptualize a praxis of StoryAsking as an expansion of Storytelling. StoryAsking enlarges the Storytelling circle and puts forth a way to enrich the range of experiences to be shared and the perspectives that inform them and thereby inform the audience.

When we (Marlena Novak and Jay Alan Yim) were in the initial stages of developing an interactive project about an Illinois Prairie, we were inspired by a talk that poet Michael Swierz presented regarding the struggle to save Bell Bowl Prairie and the endangered species that thrive there. We invited him to join us, along with a talented group of team members, to realize our project, *Dreaming The Prairie*.

Research revealed that there were stories that were not ours to tell so we wanted to extend an invitation to several other artists who had a tribal connection to the land to share their voices. We are honored that Monica Rickert-Bolter, Lydia Cheshewalla, and Kelly Church will be joining us in the exhibition with their art. Adam Kessel has contributed his work as the author of *Zombie Gardening* and *Tales of the Plant Guardians: Backyard Adventures*, copies of which are available for sale during the exhibition. Both books leverage his deep botanical knowledge of the plants that live in the Great Lakes Region.

We welcome you to experience Kishwacokee Kinship! —**localStyle**

Lydia Cheshewalla (Osage, Cherokee, Dakota, Modoc, Xicanx)

Kelly Church (Potawatomi, Ottawa)

Adam Kessel (Lakota, Italian, German)

Monica Rickert-Bolter (Potawatomi, Black)

Michael Swierz (Bohemy, Polish)

Marlena Novak (Polish, Slovak)

Jay Alan Yim (Cantonese)

Lydia Cheshewalla is an Osage ephemeral artist from Oklahoma, living and working in motion throughout the Great Plains ecoregion. Through the creation of site-specific land art and ephemeral installations grounded in Indigenous land stewardship practices and kinship pedagogies, Lydia engages in multivocal conversations about place and relationship. Her work has been shown at Generator Space, the Union for Contemporary Art (Omaha, NE), Comfort Station, Harold Washington Library, and the Center for Native Futures (Chicago, IL) among others. She is currently filling the bucket with water to see if it leaks and is often found standing in fields.

Kelly Church is Ottawa and Potawatomi and a member of the Matchi-be-nash-she-wish tribe in Hopkins, MI, where she resides today. She comes from an unbroken line of black ash basket makers and works with fibers of the woods and forests in Michigan to create weavings that share issues that affect us all, most especially those who come after us if we do not act today. Her weavings share stories of her life and experiences in today's world as a culture bearer, a teacher, Native woman, artist, activist, and part of her community and family, where all of her teachings started.

Adam Kessel is of Lakota, Italian, and German ancestry. Currently, he works as a Nature Center Director at Forest Preserves of Cook County. He gained his passion and knowledge of the fauna and flora of the region through his many years of teaching and learning in the Native American Community of Chicago. As a community member, he has helped to develop culturally based science curricula that revolved around storytelling and traditional uses of plants by Tribes of the Great Lakes Region. Adam is also the author of *Tales of the Plant Guardians* and *Zombie Gardening*. These books offer readers an opportunity to find that magic of nature in places that one might overlook.

Monica Rickert-Bolter is a Chicago-based visual artist of Potawatomi and Black heritage. Her artwork uses traditional mediums, such as charcoal and pastels, graphic design, and digital coloring to create expressive characters and tell diverse stories. After her undergrad, Monica became involved with Native nonprofits, combining her love of art and education to develop youth programs and resources, including illustrating children's books. She advocates for cultural representation and serves as a consultant for various institutions and organizations. Monica is a co-founder and the Director of Operations at the Center for Native Futures, a Native fine arts gallery that opened in 2023.

Michael Swierz is a poet and interdisciplinary artist, currently based in Chicago. Recent projects include *Refugium for a Post-Anthropocenic World* (2021-present), *Axioms and Tumbleweeds* (2021), and *When House on the Prairie Became Possibility Island. A case study on how to build a perceptual framework for wiggling through and out of the anthropocene* (2020).

Marlena Novak is a multidisciplinary artist and a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Novak has extensively exhibited her work internationally, received several grants, a teaching award, and artist residencies. Working—as one of seven crew-members on a 120 foot sail ketch—while sailing for 30 nights and days from Puntarenas, Costa Rica to Hawaii (prior to personal computers and smartphones) taught lessons of patience, observation and awe. She is an avid gardener growing organic food and plants for pollinators. Novak is co-founder of localStyle with Jay Alan Yim and a member of Deep Time Chicago.

Jay Alan Yim is a classically-trained composer, electronic sound designer, and a professor at Northwestern University. His work has been featured at international festivals and has been performed by musicians such as the New York Philharmonic, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic, Orchestre National de Lyon, and the JACK and Arditti Quartets. As a collaborative artist he has exhibited at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing, STRP Festival in Eindhoven, and the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin. He is co-founder of localStyle with Marlena Novak, and a member of Deep Time Chicago.

Dreaming The Prairie_Artist Team Members:

Charlotte Guan: Lead Character Artist (creature design & rigging), Phase One Project Manager

Mak Hepler-Gonzalez: Lead UI/UX Director, Level Designer, VFX/3D/Foliage Artist, Concept Development, Asset Optimization & Workflow Instructor

Kayla Kim: UX Designer, Quest Technician, 3D Artist

Zoë Morgan: 3D Artist, 3D Rigger, Lead Game Rigger & Animator, Interaction Programmer, UX Designer, Lead Quest Technician, Concept Development

Brigid O'Neil: 3D Artist, 3D Rigging, Asset Optimization, Concept Development

Kayla Taylor: Assistant Producer, Lead 3D Artist, Asset Optimization, Concept Development

Joslyn Willauer: Lead Environment Artist, Foliage Artist, Level Designer, 3D Artist

Marlena Novak: Producer, Creative Director, Conceptual Director, 3D Artist, Voiceover

Jay Alan Yim: Co-Producer, Sound Design, Original Score Composition, Concept Development, Entomology Advisor

Michael Swierz: Poetry, Ecological Informant

Contributing Artists: Diana Jiang: Project Intern, 3D Artist; **Jane Tao:** 3D Artist