

Rochelle Kulei Nielsen

Short Bio

Bachelor of Fine Arts at Marylhurst University and Master of Fine Arts in Contemporary Studio Practice at Portland State University.

Rochelle is a member of the Northwestern Band of Shoshone Nation. She was very involved in the Native American community having spent the last ten years as Coordinator of the Native American Education Program in Vancouver, WA. She currently is an Adjunct Professor of Art and Native Studies at Portland Community College, Eastern Washington University, and an affiliated faculty with the Indigenous Nations Studies Program at Portland State University having taught a course on Indigenous Critique of Native American Art. Rochelle served as the coordinator of the Northwest Indian Story Teller Program with the Wisdom of the Elders, Inc. Rochelle maintains an active studio practice, with over 20 solo, competitive group and invitational exhibitions and portfolio exchanges dealing with Indigenous inappropriate appropriations and Indigenous history.

Artist Statement

In this exhibition, Nielsen explores the impact and legacy of schooling in the US including the many ways formal education participates in the violence of settler colonialism. Scholar Sandy Grande has argued that both Indian Boarding Schools and other forms of US public education, were integral to the goals of subjugating Indigenous peoples, contributing to the colonization of Indigenous minds and bodies. Nielsen highlights the role schooling played in colonization with work like “E is for Erase” which features two photographs of a young boy named Thomas Moore Keesick from the Muscowpetung Saulteaux First Nation. This photographic pair shows Keesick upon admission to the Regina Indian Industrial School in 1897, and after school leaders forced him to remove the clothing and long hair that connected him to his community. Images like this portrait pair serve as heartbreaking reminders of the history that Nielsen explains was not taught to most US citizens, by their family or by the education system. As Grande has argued, indoctrination through education was a vital component of the theft of Indigenous land, resources and labor.

Nielsen's installation considers the many cultural practices and languages, including Nielsen's own Shoshone language, that US colonizers tried unsuccessfully to erase. She further exposes the violence of public education by creating a space for viewers to reenact the experience of her mother, who after being caught speaking Shoshone in school, was forced to write, "I'm not an Indian" on the chalkboard multiple times. What does it feel like to be forced to deny an important part of one's identity, multiple times and in front of peers? What does it feel like to be told that who you are is wrong? Nielsen asks us to consider the relationship between schooling and settler violence. Why was it so important for the oppressors that Indigenous nations stop using their own languages? In what overt and covert ways does education today still uphold white heteronormative capitalist patriarchy? What happens when significant parts of US history are no longer hidden, but are openly and honestly discussed?