

Window Rock artist brings art back to the reservation

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Sun Correspondent
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Raphael Begay curates show featuring five Diné artists

Raphael Begay is of the Honágháahnii, Kin łichii'nii, Tábaahí, and Áshíí hí tribes. Honágháahnii is literally translated as “one who walks around,” and that’s exactly what Begay does with his camera. He calls what he does “cultural landscape photography.”

Begay grew up in Hunters Point, Ariz. He now lives in Window Rock, Ariz.

In an interview with the *Sun*, he shared the story of how he became interested in photography. He was involved in his middle school’s newspaper, and the photography instructor gave the students the opportunity to exhibit a piece. They were told to shoot something that they found compelling, personal, or sentimental. Begay took a picture of a rushing waterfall that was near his grandparents’ house.

“I reference this point in my journey because it was the first time I realized an image could have such power, memory, and a way to connect ideas for myself but also as an extension of that community and that family that was my childhood upbringing,” Begay explained.

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Nowadays, Begay said he uses his art to support the two-spirited LGBTQIA+ queer Indigenous community in the Southwest region of the United States. One of his goals is to bring art back to the Indigenous reservations. And he's using his time as a curator for a show at the ART123 Gallery to do just that.

"A goal of mine is to bring the creative and Indigenous imagination that we normally find in Santa Fe or Albuquerque or elsewhere back to the reservation. This is an opportunity to do that within the local Gallup region, especially given the high Native population, especially Navajo," Begay said. "With this opportunity I wanted to celebrate that."

Begay curated a show entitled *Reflect & Refract: Diné Photography & Visual Sovereignty* that features five Diné artists – Evan Benally Atwood, Lonnie Begaye, Ryan Dennison, Nate Lemuel, and Tyrell Tapaha – who he thought shared that goal and vision. The show celebrates the artists' relationships to and perspectives of Dinétah, the Navajo homeland.

"We each have a story to tell, and I believe the story of Diné to be one of never-ending beauty, kinship, and life. Inspired by the journey of the storyteller, *Reflect & Refract* is an opportunity to see and to steward our connection to land, light, and love," Begay said in a press release published by GallupARTS on Jan. 9.

He went into more detail about his goal for the show with the *Sun*.

"The message I'm trying to portray with the show 'Reflect and Refract' is that we as creatives, as artists, as Indigenous people, have the inherent right to determine and represent ourselves in the best light that we see," Begay said. "I've been inspired by self-determination as a right as an Indigenous person, as Diné, as Navajo, I believe photography or any art form has an opportunity to inform and inspire and allow an individual to create their own destiny, or at least activate space in a way that allows them to curate their future that is more informed, that is more discussed."

He said he's trying to show people the beauty of living on a reservation.

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“Despite the reality of living on the reservation, there is a beauty to it. There’s a perseverance and a reverence and a sense of resilience that is inherently found in living on the reservation,” Begay said. “I think most people on the reservation look at it as limiting, but I look at it as the most beautiful thing in the world. There’s this sense of imagination and tenacity of the human spirit that is found in that.”

Rose Eason, GallupARTS Executive Director, said that Begay’s ability to push the envelope is what made him a great final curator for the series of curated shows put on by GallupARTS.

“Raphael is an envelope-pushing curator. His work so meaningfully Indigenizes the practice of curation, which has long conformed to Euro-centric values and perspectives,” Eason said in the press release. “What he is doing is so essential, and also so exciting!”

When asked what his favorite part about taking photos is walking around in nature with his camera and finding what he calls “visual blessings,” – themes, images, symbols, or compositions that inspire him. For Begay, it’s all about seeing what the land has to offer.

Reflect & Refract: Diné Photography & Visual Sovereignty will open on Jan. 14. A Guest Curator Talk with Begay will be held on Jan. 19 at 6 pm at the ART123 Gallery (123 W. Coal Ave.) and on the GallupARTs Facebook page.

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