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### **Tracing Celestial Tracing**

The Cascadian light breaks open on a crisp fall afternoon. Brenda Mallory is standing in the middle of Portland's Metro Central, a waste disposal center on the edge of the Willamette River. Scanning the area, surrounded by this detritus, she cuts a lonely figure. But she is not alone. Each one of these objects has a story, a purpose. Mallory is there vibrating with the charge of these scraps. Out of the corner of her eye, she catches the glint of a bullet casing nestled among vines and withered dandelions. She spies the broken shards of a vinyl record and hears melodies long since abandoned. In her hands, a strip of cable, a broken clock, a nail, become more than what they once were. They become story, memory. They become song.

*The North Star Changes* presents more than 20 years of Mallory's career. This breadth allows us to appreciate how, from early engagements with found materials to diverse iterations of abstraction and symbolism, her sculptural works tessellate and transform, insisting on the suturing of remnants made whole. She knows that history is not limited to manifest narratives. She has a sense for stories left in shadow, how an object is imbued with the memory of a loving caress, a violent discharge, a time before, a time yet to come.

Time and place. These are quintessential Indigenous themes, but Mallory does not strike an obvious chord, instead exploring the mobility of place as cosmic—the celestial tracing celestial. The title of the exhibition asks not where we are in relation to the cosmos, but how the constantly changing stars, in their arcing journey across the heavens, are at once coordinates for our stories—constellations come to life—and fleeting glimpses into the past. Despite our yearning for a lodestar, a guiding light, Polaris will not always be that star. Another one will take its place. But what will Polaris become then? A star and a story. A relative come and gone.

## Early Material

From the earliest works in the exhibition, Mallory establishes one of the driving forces of her practice: engaging materials in unconventional, politically charged ways. *Demeter Does the Math (and Cries)* (2000) combines ammunition casings and the cotton scraps left over from sewing reusable menstrual pads. She takes these materials, imbued with sensory information, and forms them into 13 columns, each with 28 voids (the shell casings), evoking the cycle of a lunar year. Demeter, while clearly a reference to Greek mythology, also brings to the fore cycles of violence against Indigenous women, an epidemic that has only worsened since the turn of the millennium, as well as the sacred place of women in traditionally matrilineal societies, such as the Cherokee. To do the math is not an idle exercise, but an accounting for what has been lost, and what we could still lose.



Brenda Mallory  
Cherokee Nation, b. 1955  
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**(ᏊᏗᏂ ᏂᏂᏂᏂᏂᏂ)**, 2000  
*Demeter Does the Math (and Cries)*, 2000  
Waxed cloth, shell casings,  
thread, wood

Collection of the artist

Photograph by Dan Kvitka

The biophilia series, here represented by *biophilia: Goods and Services*, *biophilia: Emergent Properties*, and *biophilia: Cradle* (all 2005), uses similar materials: waxed flannel, steel and wire. This trilogy forms contrasting elements into recognizable shapes—that of a cradleboard or a laboratory cart—asking the viewer to reconnect with the echo of a memory, like desire, hardened into



The expansive properties of cloth and steel also find expression in *Recurring Chapters in the Book of Inevitable Outcomes* (2015). Combining pattern and iteration, ashen pillars emerge from the floor as bursts of star-like shapes float above. What is inevitable here? On the one hand, and in keeping with Mallory's insistence on ecological themes, this could be read as an apocalyptic scene, the result of uncontrolled avarice, colonial extractivism and neglect. On the other, the colorful orbs insinuate a luminosity that is at odds with the destruction below. This contrast—the assemblage of densely worked materials into spare vignettes—asks us to question linear narratives. The installation also refuses a teleological approach, instead inviting reflection on the cyclical forms of nature and on the concept of inevitability.



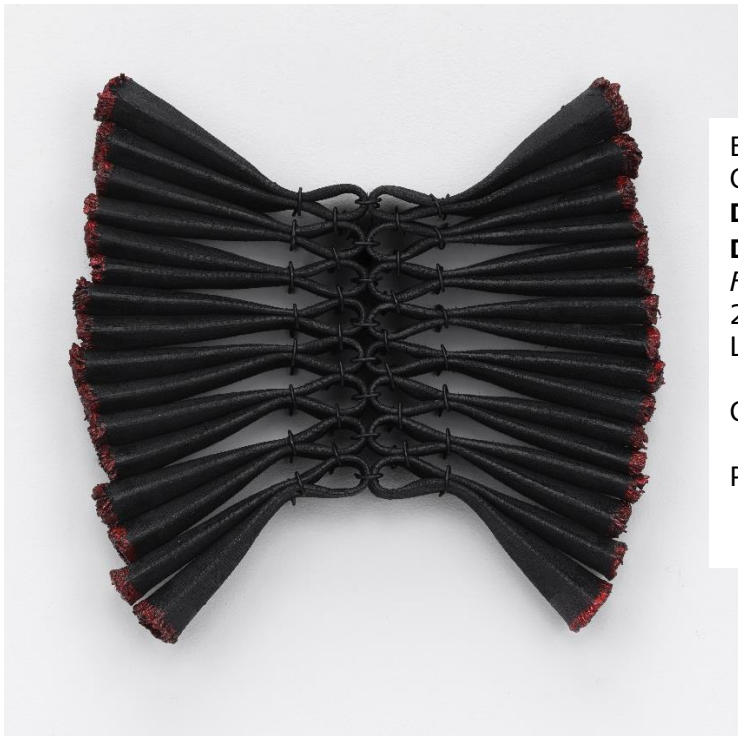
Brenda Mallory  
Cherokee Nation, b. 1955  
**JAWP h5P0Wh TG-P0VJ**  
**J0VAT 05P0W0Y**, 2015  
*Recurring Chapters in the  
Book of Inevitable  
Outcomes*, 2015  
Welded steel, waxed cloth,  
nuts, bolts, hog rings

Collection of the artist

Image courtesy of the  
Eiteljorg Museum of  
American Indians and  
Western Art, Indianapolis

Or take *Firehose Experiment* (#15 and #16) (both 2022), where the recuperation of a singular base material, a linen firehose, becomes the catalyst for an exploration of form but also the suturing of materials in a way that allows the viewer to witness the act of assemblage itself. "I want you to see the seams," Mallory insists. In *Firehose Experiment #15*, she uses hog rings as connecting devices, a reminder of the violence of commercial livestock

industries, but also, in its basic function, a seam, a liminal space, a joining. In *Drivebelt Experiment #2* (2016), we see the iterative patterns of reclaimed drivebelts—serpentine, multi-grooved, tensile—as a hypnotizing panel: a belt, a line, but also a meditation on line and reprise. Mallory dwells on the recuperation of materials discarded, and yet, in her hands, they are transformed. While her use of found objects offers a sustained critique of the habits of consumption and the disposability of matter, it is in the repurposing of these materials that she demonstrates an embodied memory that exceeds this environmentalist paradigm. In other words, used materials become a method of reckoning with the juncture of time, space and what lies between.



Brenda Mallory  
Cherokee Nation, b. 1955  
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**ᎠᎩᎩ ᎠᎩᎩᎩᎩ #15**, 2022  
*Firehose Experiment #15*,  
2022  
Linen firehose, paint, hog rings  
Collection of the artist  
Photograph by Mario Gallucci





Brenda Mallory  
Cherokee Nation, b. 1955  
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**ᎠᎩᎩᎩ #16 (Ꭰ ᎠᎩᎩᎩᎩᎩ), 2022**  
*Firehose Experiment #16 (Now We Reap), 2022*  
Linen firehose, paint, threaded rods,  
washers, nuts

Collection of the artist

Photograph by Mario Gallucci



Brenda Mallory  
Cherokee Nation, b. 1955  
**ᎠᎩᎩᎩ ᎠᎩᎩᎩ ᎠᎩᎩᎩ ᎠᎩᎩᎩ #2, 2016**  
*Drivebelt Experiment #2, 2016*  
Rubber drivebelts, paint on wood panel

Collection of the artist

Photograph by Dan Kvitka

## **Cross, Circle, Star**

The forms are insistent: cross, circle, star. They repeat and modulate. Fix and transform. These themes have a particular significance in the Cherokee cosmos. The world we inhabit is only one of many. Above is Galunlati, the sky vault, where the stars and sun dance. Below is Elati, a place of undercurrents and mystery, a world that is the reflection of the one we inhabit, Elohi, the middle, a place between. These worlds are connected through a central axis that transverses them all. In the sacred cosmology of Cherokees and other nations of the southeastern woodlands, this Axis Mundi is represented by what archaeologists call the cross-in-circle motif. Of course, it is more than simply a motif. It is a way of situating oneself in relation to the cosmos, to that ever-changing pattern of stars as they transit the celestial realm. We are grounded in place by this axis, a cross in a circle, which is one of the most prominent pre-contact artistic themes in the region. The motif is found on shell gorgets, pottery and earthen mounds.

A cross, a circle, a star. The axis is also the place of fire, a mimetic representation of the sun above. The sun exists on earth in the form of the sacred fire that was given to Cherokees by the brave Water Spider, who constructed a basket out of her filament to bring back an ember from a dangerous island. Gliding across the waves, she wrapped the ember in a bowl made of her own body. Fire is a gift of the sun, brought to Cherokees by Water Spider, cared for in basketry, and represented as the point where worlds connect. This story is referenced by *To Carry an Ember* (2022), representing a cropped section of a Cherokee basket pattern, alluding to Water Spider's gift—fire, but also craft.



Brenda Mallory  
Cherokee Nation, b. 1955  
**O'OOJJ DHAAT**, 2023  
*To Carry an Ember*, 2023  
Deconstructed thread spools, spool  
cores, paint on wood panel

Collection of the artist

Photograph by Mario Gallucci

What is more, I cannot help but see cosmic pattern invoked in *Precession* (2022) and *North Star (Guiding Light)* (2022), works that together tell the whole story of creation and remind us of the balance essential to Cherokee life.

*Precession* names the gyration of a body spinning on its axis. The Earth spins, and as it tilts, the precession alters our perspective of what we often think of as immutable. *The North Star Changes*. Though our North Star is today Polaris, in 12,000 years that orientation will point to Vega. In 26,000 years, the precession will be complete, and Polaris will again be our North Star. *North Star (Guiding Light)* asks us to consider that what presents as fixed is, in fact, in motion—and that to comprehend our place in the universe, we must have a long memory, we must recall that our imaginaries of cosmic relation are in constant flux, a celestial becoming.

In the case of these two works, the use of red and white aids in connecting to Cherokee symbolism. In pre-colonial times, Cherokees had a red government that operated in times of war and a white government that administered in times of peace. There were towns and regions with affiliations to red or white, as well as an understanding that an individual's life could pass through phases of red intensity or white contemplation. The white ceramic latticework of *Precession*, juxtaposed with the red cast paper of *North Star (Guiding Light)*, joins the principles of war and peace, action and contemplation, in a singular,



resonant constellation. The properties of the red and the white do not distinguish them as oppositional forces, but complementary aspects of a singular cosmic whole. The cross-in-circle motif returns, but with the added layer of cultural, political and individual balance. Perhaps, in the juncture of these two works, we bear witness to a fundamental truth of human existence: balance comes from the braiding of strength and tenderness, effervescence and repose.



Brenda Mallory  
Cherokee Nation, b. 1955  
**DJIASASET**, 2022  
*Precession*, 2022  
Ceramic, wool felt, linen thread on  
wood panel

Courtesy of Russo Lee Gallery

Photograph by Eric Mellencamp



Brenda Mallory  
Cherokee Nation, b. 1955  
**ᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠ ᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠ (ᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠ)**, 2022  
*North Star (Guiding Light)*, 2022  
Handmade cast paper, paint, wax,  
wood frame

Collection of the artist

Photograph by Mario Gallucci

## **Body Memory**

While Mallory takes celestial bodies as a thematic, her work also reminds that our own matter—our body memory—is a guide of another sort. The physicality of her work is important. It is time consuming, even tedious. Her hands chafe and squeeze; her arms are covered in grease. She makes and remakes. She remembers her family finding a use for scraps of wire, a plank of wood, an old piece of clothing. Repurposing was a way of life.

When I think about Mallory's process, I see in her use and reuse of common materials an echo of earlier labors. This is not to romanticize the rural context in which she grew up, but to acknowledge the artist's work as part of a context in which utilitarianism was the overriding ethos. She learned by helping her father mend a fence, straighten a nail, haul brush, tamp a post into the hard red earth in a land far from home. This work is layered with political engagement—with the history of colonialism, patriarchy and apocalyptic capitalism. Her hands bend and coax form out of materials that were not meant to become art—and yet, art they become. She induces movement from these materials. In a way, she conjures something more, something dramatic, out of remnants that others have overlooked. This is muscle memory, the embodied, tactile presence that is required to make the work that she does, in the way she does. It is the work of an artist dreaming to life those objects the world has discarded. It is the work of weaving a basket, mending a web, like Water Spider, stoking a fire, awestruck and intimate. This body memory is at once the work of recuperating what we, as Cherokees, have lost—and we have lost so much—and a reminder that with our actions and our intentions, we endure.