

Radical Indigenous Artist Natalie Ball Is Unapologetically Moving Forward— as Mother and Artist

~~~~~ *Jeanine Jablonski*

When I first came across images of Natalie Ball's work, I was floored. Who was this amazing indigenous artist living in Oregon, and why had I not seen her work before? I was mad at myself for not having been aware of it earlier. Ball's work immediately brought to mind the early sculptures of indigenous Canadian artist Brian Jungen, his assemblages of Nike footwear and human hair, ca. 1999. Ball's works are full of heart, they're unwavering and fierce. In Ball's sculptures, I also see a mixture of equal parts Louise Bourgeois and Ree Morton—I feel the mother in the work. I connected with Natalie to talk about artmaking, motherhood, and the seduction of the abject.

NATALIE BALL: I'm ready when you are.

**JEANNINE JABLONSKI:** Great, I'm here with a sleeping baby!

NB: Ha! one of mine is home sick but the movie is on...

**JJ:** Oh god, why are they always sick?!

NB: The flu is coming back around so the slightest sign I keep them home!



**JJ: While majoring in ethnic studies at the University of Oregon, you took a painting class and began moving in the direction of studio art. What was it, do you think, that shifted your trajectory toward making?**

NB: I eventually earned a double major in Art and Ethnic Studies from the University of Oregon. I was in ethnic studies for a couple years, then in a class we watched Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Couple in the Cage* and it shook me up. So I wanted to couple ethnic studies with art. Even when I was only painting, I wanted to push past the language of ethnic studies and all the writing, and figure out how to "make" things that were visceral.

**JJ: That was my next question. Was it the physicality of expression involved in making, versus all the theory in the ethnic studies program that catalyzed the shift? I mean, the *Couple in the Cage*, that is seminal, and visceral as hell.**

NB: Yesss! and I wasn't exposed to art then. I was a new mom—a solo mom. I worked fulltime for PGE, then stumbled on college because they gave me a full ride, and I wanted to be around my daughter more. Fusco's piece blew any language or written form away; I didn't need an art education (the grooming) to make art. It was full of gesture, materiality, and like you said, physicality of expression. Ethnic studies gave me a language for how I was feeling, my experiences as an indigenous woman and mother. Ethnic studies empowered me in that way.

*Figure 1.*  
Coco Fusco, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*, 1992–94. Performance, Edge Biennial, Madrid. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. ©Coco Fusco/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



**JJ: What is the place of performance in your own work? Like your performance piece *Pussy Hat* from grad school at Yale. When I see images of some works, and many of your installations, they read as being connected to performance, and I don't think it is simply their relationship to the body. Are you aware of performing the works while you're creating in the studio?**

NB: I am now. I was made aware of that part of my work at Yale. Performance is in the making of the work, in the studio. (I thought about recording that, but haven't yet.) The end result, the installation, is the residue of the performance or a happening. I was asked to perform my work in front of the viewer at Yale, and I wanted to refuse that. So this is how the residue happened.

**JJ: You were asked to perform? As in, an advisor or peer suggested this? And you negated that by placing yourself, as artwork, within an audience in *Pussy Hat*?**

NB: Yes, it was suggested in critique and studio visits. So I explored the spectacle of my assemblages, alongside historical settler-colonial spectacles like public hangings. During the Modoc War of 1872–73 my ancestor was hung. The head of my ancestor and three others were later spiked on poles and displayed in public. Thinking about ideas of power through the display of the “criminalized” body was critical. *Pussy Hat* made it current for me. I should say I have started my own research on “gibbeting,” and will use my Pollock Krasner funding to continue it. It's tracing the act of propping and displaying the criminalized body, from here back across the United States to Europe.



*Figure 2.*  
Natalie Ball, *Nate the Skate*, 2019.  
Leather, hair,  
wood, coyote  
teeth, beads,  
20 x 20 x 10 in.

*Figure 3.*  
Natalie Ball,  
*Pussy Hat*, 2018.  
Installation in  
the Pit, Yale  
University School  
of Art. Braiding  
hair, sinew, cowry  
shell, dentalium,  
balaclava, patent  
leather, mirror,  
tule cordage,  
resin, 72 x 9 x 7 in.



Figuring

**JJ: Can you talk me through a few works, and share your thinking behind their making? Let's start with *Nate the Skate* from 2019.**

NB: *Nate the Skate* is a name (one of two) I got when I was growing up in North Portland. It's a self-portrait: how do I create a body when it's no longer whole. That piece was in the *Bad Lucky Indian* exhibition at Half Gallery in New York.

**JJ: Where do your materials come from? I read that when you were at Yale, you went home to the reservation for a lot of your materials?**

NB: Yeah, but not so much now since materials from home take a while to gather. I trade a lot, I find it, I borrow it, eBay, etc. In *Nate the Skate* that's a lace front wig with real hair, my texture! A cowboy boot, the bottom of a rocking chair I found, and an old beaded belt I had from my powwow outfit when I was Powwow Princess of the Delta Park Powwow in Portland.

**JJ: The piece *When Harry met Sally*. I mean, when my Mom met my Dad. I mean, when my Ancestors met my Ancestors. I mean, when a Lace Front met Smoked Skin. This piece is so great and so is that title! Can you walk me through it?**

NB: I'm always trying to expand an understanding of what "Indian" is, and looks like, and the experiences of being an Indian/Native American. I believe that thinking about Native identity as governed by blood law is problematic and genocidal. In *When Harry met Sally*, I am thinking about how this makes our work, identity, and experiences static in a sense. Through words and materiality I want to talk about the intersections of Indian, how we have always been intersecting, and how I am Black and Indian which will never compromise my indigeneity. Also thinking about when people and materials join, and how they join. This is also a self-portrait!

**JJ: *Lace Front met Smoked Skin*?**

NB: Lace front wig, and smoked, elk hide moccasin.

**JJ: I've been thinking about your work so much—not only in the past year, since we connected, but very recently since having my second child. I've been thinking of you and your practice, about how the fuck you do it all. I sense that you are extremely present for your children, but also manage to handle the demands of your current schedule. Personally, I think a lot about how women with children are not well represented in the art world. So, could you share *how the fuck do you do it all*?**

NB: Girl yes! And right now I am gearing up to give my middle child my kidney—that's why I am behind on email. I knew I only had a couple of years before the transplant, and I was done breastfeeding my third kid, so I made the move to get my MFA from Yale. I knew that pedigree would help me navigate the art world as a mom who has a lot on her plate! Women and children aren't represented well in the art world even though it's a huge part of our practice.

**JJ: It's so intense. I try to represent where I can, and encourage artists to talk about it, to ask questions. But I feel like those who do have kids often hide it, rather than integrate their children into their lives outside of the home. Kids love art, and parties, and all of it.**

NB: We have to be unapologetic about it. And so does our work.

**JJ: I agree! I try to bring my youngest to work now, to openings, showing that I can do both. People doubt you can manage with more than one child. That's what I've felt. I've been super inspired by the Australian parliamentarian Larissa Waters breastfeeding while at work. Your kidney, wow mama, that's huge and incredible. When is that surgery? Between which shows?**

NB: Soon. I will only be out two weeks then back to regular life. I have what she needs, I would give her my brain if I had to! And we only need one kidney, so we're good!

**JJ: When first coming across your work, I was instantly reminded of the work of indigenous Canadian artist Brian Jungen. More recently your work has me thinking of the late Ree Morton. Morton's work embraced the complexities of her life as a woman through a material lexicon both austere and playful. Your work is so confident in its aesthetic cohesiveness, especially the myriad of mediums you use, from animal artifacts or totems (like coyote teeth and elk hide), to different clothing (handmade traditional, to contemporary rez style), to acrylic nails, to beaded purses...in your words, the "intersections of Indian" that circulate throughout your life. Many of your materials are embedded with their own histories, either personal or otherwise, even before you incorporate them into your work. Can you speak to this? Is it important that they have a history?**

NB: It means a lot to me to have materials that have lived a while; it also creates a canvas for me to work with—what I can respond to. I am trying to give you another narrative to add to what you might think is "Indian." Hopefully my materials disrupt that idea and expand it. Materials express my resourcefulness too—using what's around the house, the community, in grandma's closet. They come with a huge set of stories and experiences, rich with possibilities.

**JJ: That makes sense. Does it make things difficult when you have a number of projects happening at once? Or do you have a load of things around, like a secret hoarder?**

NB: I am def a hoarder, I have my family keep objects for me too! My dad is bringing me my grocery cart from Portland! I discovered assemblage at Yale, and I was so excited. It validated what I was doing, and it gave me a history to pull from.

**JJ: Oh that's amazing, you have your own histories, and the histories of those around you—your community is imbedded. You won't run out of materials. And I bet your kids find things for you, and will continue to forever.**



*Figure 5. Natalie Ball, When Harry met Sally. I mean, when my Mom met my Dad. I mean, when my Ancestors met my Ancestors. I mean, when a Lace Front met Smoked Skin, 2018. Beads, elk hide, synthetic hair, shells, sinew waxed thread, cotton, metal, vintage Skookum dolls, 35½ × 10½ × ¾ in. Courtesy of PDX Contemporary Art (Photo: Mario Gallucci)*



Figure 6. Natalie Ball, *Bunny*, 2019. Deer rawhide, feathers, pine, chair, elk hide, 59 × 22 × 16 in.

NB: And I'm so familiar with all these materials, but I'm going to challenge my practice by working with glass this summer at the Pilchuck Glass School. I haven't worked with glass before.

**JJ: Oh, you'll love it there. I'm excited for you! Let's talk about growing up in Portland. What was that like for you? What high school did you go to? Do you have favorite places you visit every time you come home?**

NB: My Portland neighborhood is no longer there. I wouldn't even know where to look! I grew up in North Portland in a historically Black neighborhood. My dad's mom and dad moved from the rez after our tribe was terminated by the U.S. government. My mom's family moved to Portland from Arkansas. I loved my childhood in Portland, there was an active urban Indian community there too.

I went to Applegate Elementary School, and for high school I went from Benson, to Roosevelt, where I was eventually expelled. I graduated from Open Meadow (an alternative school). One of the best things we used to do when I was a kid, was go to American Wrestling matches, live, in St. Johns. My dad's friend was big and bulky like a wrestler and my dad would say he was wrestling that night, and we would get in for free! I have to say that the communities I was raised in were very violent and riddled with the residue of settler violence and continued violence. That is also in my work.

**JJ: Where did you feel the violence the most—was it in your everyday life?**

NB: I think so, we fought a lot, and there was gang violence, and on the rez it's violent like that. Police violence for sure. Institutional violence. But I also felt love and community in these spaces, so as violent as they were, they were beautiful and loving as well. All of the above.

**JJ: Maybe this is part of the struggle we feel in your work.**

NB: Resiliency is what I learned. Contradiction. The seduction of the object.

*This interview was conducted in 2019.*

Jeanine Jablonski is an internationally recognized gallery owner, artist advocate, and cultural producer. In 2008, Jablonski founded Fourteen30 Contemporary, an experimental gallery that produces a diverse array of exhibitions, events, artist editions, and publications, often in collaboration with institutions including: the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA); the Cooley Gallery, Reed College; and Ditch Projects. Jablonski has been an arts professional for over eighteen years, in both the for-profit and non-profit sectors. From 2011 to 2018, she was the Managing Director of the lumber room: a private home, artist residency site, and exhibition space founded by collector Sarah Miller Meigs. Jablonski has served on the boards of: the Portland Art Center; the Oregon College of Art and Craft; and Ditch Projects. She is the co-founder of PICA's Visual Art Circle, as well as the founder of the publication Portland Conversation in Culture. She has taught and mentored students from colleges and universities including: Memphis State University; Portland State University; Pacific Northwest College of Art; the Oregon College of Art and Craft; Reed College; and Memphis College of Art. Jablonski lives in Portland, Oregon with her two children, Roe and August, and husband, artist Evan La Londe.