



# NATIVE ART WORLD RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A Sampling of Efforts by Indigenous Artists and Art Professors to Confront the Crisis

## LEE FRANCIS NAVIGATES THE LOCKDOWN

**L**EE FRANCIS IV, PHD (Laguna Pueblo), doesn't ever seem to stop, not even on his birthday, April 17, when he was up for an energetic interview despite being in the middle of restructuring his many projects and, like parents all over the country, helping his child with online schooling.

A few days earlier, illustrator Dale Ray Deforest (Diné) had written on Facebook, "The fact that Lee Francis is having to sit still during the pandemic is a sure sign of how bad the situation is."

"That cracked me up when he posted that," said Francis. "It was all too real. It's funny 'cause it's true."

Francis is pretty much a one-man artistic empire. He is the founder of Native Realities, "an Indigenous Imagination Company, dedicated to unleashing the Indigenous imagination through popular culture, including comic books, graphic novels, games, toys, and collectibles," Indigenous Comic Con (IndigiPop X), and Red Planet Books and Comics in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He also serves as national director of Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers, which was founded by his father, the late Lee Francis III, in 1993. And he is a poet, writer, storyteller, and scholar himself.

The pandemic caused him to pause for a moment ... but only long enough to reimagine, reset, and rearrange his projects so he could continue to provide opportunities for Indigenous artists of all kinds as they faced cancellations of events and markets, not to mention the very real threat the virus posed to their lives and the lives of people in their communities.

For his first act, Francis had to make quick decisions about IndigiPop X, which was scheduled for March 25–29 in Albuquerque, right as cities and states around the United States began stay-at-home orders of various degrees.

"We had already started talking the week before that it was looking like we were going to have to postpone in one way or another," he said. "We started talking with the venue. We started talking with our sponsors. We started talking with



some other folks about what that would look like if we had to postpone.”

With only days to organize, Francis shifted the Indigenous Futurisms portion of the convention to a successful eight-hour livestream event featuring new videos from artists and musicians, and a few recordings of talks from last year’s convention. He offered refunds for tickets and vendors’ table fees, but those who didn’t want a refund can come to next year’s convention without paying extra charges.

“We’re going to take all that ticket money and just turn that back over to the artists,” he said. “I wanted to make sure that we honored all the creators who are just getting hammered right now, because a lot of them are trade-show oriented. They do four shows a month to make rent, and now they don’t have those opportunities.”

Francis said he felt a responsibility for everyone’s safety as well, which is why he canceled rather than postponing for later in the year. “It was a hard decision, but we know all these folks have families and grandmas, and we don’t want them to go back and cause strife in their own space,” Francis said. “As an organization, we should not be putting any of our communities in that position, to have to make a choice between making money or putting Grandma at risk.”

Red Planet Books and Comics generally opens for longer hours as the weather warms up, and the planned grand reopening was set for after IndigiPop X, but Francis has not reopened the physical store, though he continues to offer online sales.

Besides the Indigenous Futurisms livestream, perhaps one of the most visible projects Francis led was Native Realities’ publishing of COVID-19-related public health posters designed by various Indigenous artists. Francis said he wanted them to be as eye-catching as old-time propaganda.

“This is a call to action, right?” he said. “That’s propaganda. You need people to recognize them. They need an illustration that catches the eye.”

One of the first artists he recruited was Roy Boney Jr. (Cherokee Nation), whose illustration of Sequoyah holding a sign in Cherokee about handwashing, caught his eye.

“I hit him up immediately,” said Francis. “I was like, ‘Dude! Can I license it from you and use it as a poster?’ Roy’s one of my favorite people, and he was so generous in saying ‘Yeah, it’s all yours, man.’”

Other artists followed suit, including Arigon Starr (Kickapoo/Muscogee), Dale Ray Deforest, and Vanessa Bowen (Diné), and the posters quickly made their way around the internet via social media shares. With his shop closed, Francis offered the posters free for people to download and print.

“We didn’t make any money on them,” he said. “We just needed them out for the community.”

Francis is currently in the process of consolidating his various projects under the umbrella of Wordcraft Circle, a nonprofit organization, in order to streamline them. The reconstruction was in the works before the pandemic started—and it continues.

As part of Wordcraft Circle’s response to the pandemic, Francis created the Wordcraft Circle Creative Relief Fund, which offered small (\$200 to \$500 USD) grants to 13 individuals to support “any and all creative endeavors.” Initial grants were



distributed in May 2020, but he hopes to offer more as funding becomes available.

As a Native creative himself as well as a supporter of Indigenous arts, Francis said he has witnessed an incredible interconnectedness.

“We’re creating this sort of creative microeconomy where we’re trading our capital for each other, which we were doing anyway, but especially now, we’re seeing folks helping out who do have a little extra resources,” he said. “They are able to slide some over to me, and then I can slide some over to somebody else, and that other person can slide something back. And then, you know, they can put some stuff back out, and then they come back over to me. It’s this wonderful ecosystem. I don’t like the circumstances, but I see the beauty of what we’re trying to do to ensure that creativity continues and that Native folks, specifically, can continue working at the trades that we love and that we want, that fill our souls.”

—Stacy Pratt, PhD (Mvskoke)

ABOVE Arigon Starr (Kickapoo/Muscogee), *Clean Hands Save Lives*, 2020, digital poster. Image courtesy of Red Planet Books and Comics, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

OPPOSITE Craig George (Navajo), *Stay Home*, 2020, oil on facial mask, private collection. Image courtesy of the artist.



# JOHNNIE DIACON PAINTS COVID-19

**L**IKE MANY ARTISTS, Johnnie Diacon (Thlopthlocco Mvskoke) faced suddenly canceled shows and festivals as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. At first he wasn't in the mood to do any art at all, much less work in response to the virus. But then something changed.

"I started thinking about the people older than me," he said. "Our older people are really susceptible to this, and if we lose them, we're losing some of our last speakers of our language and our people who know our cultures. And a lot of them, unfortunately, are the caretakers of our younger children also. They're so valuable to us."

That realization at the end of March led to the first of four pandemic-themed paintings, *Kvlonv Ennokvn (Coronavirus)*, an acrylic of two elders surrounded by ubiquitous, coronavirus microbes, what have become graphic symbols of the pandemic. It was soon followed by other paintings including "I Don't Take Responsibility at All" or *The Trump Virus: COVID-45*. For a while he thought he was finished, but then he painted *Going for Groceries During the Time of the Pandemic*, an acrylic portrait of a man wearing glasses, a black hat, and a white surgical mask.

The second painting of the series was the one that people responded to most dramatically. *Tribute to the Healthcare Warriors in Indian Country During COVID-19* is a Flatstyle depiction of healthcare workers in turquoise-colored scrubs and masks on horseback, battling coronavirus viruses with bows and arrows.

"I started hearing about the frontline workers of Indian Country and looking at all the Native nurses posting on the Social Distance Powwow [Facebook page]," Diacon said. "I worked in the hospital years ago when the AIDS epidemic started, when we got our first AIDS patient, and we had no idea what that was, and so we were gowning up, gloving up, going to these patients' rooms just to empty a urinal or take their temperature or something, because we didn't know. I'm still thinking how valuable that PPE is."



Those images and memories led to the painting, which was shared widely across social media.

"When you're facing something like this, you don't know what it is or how brave you are as a healthcare worker," said Diacon. "You could become infected and die. You could bring it home to your family. Yet you still go in there and do these duties. They are like warriors, and I wanted to do a tribute to them. You do it for your people and make your sacrifices for your people."

Diacon feels his responsibility as an artist deeply, and he said these paintings are part of it.

"In my art, I always feel like I'm making a record, because it's going to be around a lot longer than I am," he said. "This is something that's happening to our people today. I'm living this experience now. This isn't something I'm drawing from old people's stories and trying to redo it. I want to tell my story of where I'm coming from during this time ... so a hundred years from now, someone can look at this art and think, 'This is what was going on in these people's minds at this time.' It's a historical record, you could say."

—Stacy Pratt, PhD (Mvskoke)



**ABOVE, TOP** Johnnie Diacon (Thlopthlocco Mvskoke), *Tribute to the Healthcare Warriors in Indian Country During COVID-19*, 2020 acrylic on Crescent board, 20 × 15 in.

**ABOVE, BOTTOM** Johnnie Diacon (Thlopthlocco Mvskoke), *Kvlonv Ennokvn (Coronavirus)*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 24 × 20 in. Both images courtesy of the artist.