

NEWS

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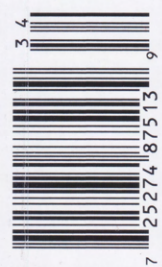
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Embracing The Beauty

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS
WITH FINE ART GALLERIST
RUTH-ANN THORN



“Art is the only thing that can heal trauma. It cuts through to our spirit, where healing takes place.”

—Ruth-Ann, owner of Exclusive Collections Fine Art Gallery



“For twenty years, I’ve made a living painting; it’s the only job I’ve ever had—and with Ruth-Ann. My work has been in over eighty-nine galleries with her.”

—Michael Flohr, contemporary impressionist painter

“When something isn’t working, Ruth-Ann is not afraid to say, ‘Let’s try something else.’ She has so much courage.”

—Melissa Flohr



by
Jeanne Ferris

Editor’s note: This article contains potentially triggering content.

DESPITE SEVERAL ECONOMIC RECESSIONS, A GLOBAL QUARANTINE, AND THE DISSOLUTION OF A PARTNERSHIP IN RECENT YEARS, the Exclusive Collections Fine Art Gallery (EC) has maintained a strong presence in affluent neighborhoods like Fashion Valley, the Gaslamp Quarter, La Jolla, Seaport Village, and Solana Beach. Further north, it has expanded to Laguna Beach and Beverly Hills, then east to Breckenridge, Colorado.

Words like “fine art” paired with a posh address sound unattainable for everyday folk. Most fine art galleries or museum receptions denote limited edition fine art or (re)discoveries: valuable ancient artifacts for sale. In the hushed background, a string quartet may play Vivaldi. Art galleries may also assert that only the eccentric with intercontinental legacies or the newly minted elite with disposable income can collect without a second thought.

Auntie Ruth-Ann’s art receptions are different.

EXCLUSIVE COLLECTIONS FINE ART GALLERY

Gallerist Ruth-Ann Thorn, a Payómkawichum/Luiseño creative, owns EC and has successfully curated fine art for about thirty-five years. Her receptions exude diversity and laughter, even perhaps bawdy rez humor. While rhythm-and-blues music plays overhead, spirited libations in fourteen-karat-gold vessels are offered, and gifts of white sage dispel lofty notions about art’s exclusivity.

But she brings more than just art and music and fun to her work.

“Ruth-Ann Thorn reminds me of my sister so much,” said Mr. Ruben Chato (enrolled member of the Lipan Apache Nation Tribe of Texas). “The beautiful thing about them is that they have both endured life’s adversities just as I have. The strength of Ruth-Ann is that she believes in humanity and me, as an Apache warrior artist.” Indeed, Ms. Ruth-Ann conveys an unexpected familial understanding.

Fellow Native artists Del Curfman (Apsáalooke/Crow Tribe of Montana), George Rivera (Pueblo of Pojoaque), Cara Romero (Chemehuevi Indian

Ruth-Ann Thorn (Rincon Band of Luiseño Indians) is the owner of Exclusive Collections Fine Art Gallery as well as the host of *This Is Indian Country* on FNX | First Nations Experience television network. All photos courtesy of Ruth-Ann Thorn.



Tribe), and Jeremy Salazar (Diné) share similar opinions: all entrust their work to EC under her protection.

Contemporary impressionist painter Michael Flohr said, “For twenty years, I’ve made a living painting; it’s the only job I’ve ever had—and with Ruth-Ann. My work has been in over eighty-nine galleries with her.” Melissa Flohr added, “When something isn’t working, Ruth-Ann is not afraid to say, ‘Let’s try something else.’ She has so much courage.”

This space of light and rich aesthetics displays an informed perspective one does not equate to a person who once lived with demons.

Ms. Ruth-Ann’s early formative years were spent in the San Francisco Bay Area with her divorced mother and maternal grandmother, who immigrated from Holland. She hails from strong-minded women who defied societal norms and family expectations for romance. Grandmother married a Chinese man at a time when European white women didn’t marry outside their lineage. Ms. Ruth-Ann’s mother, Gloria Lee, a fine art painter, married a California Native, which didn’t work out; “they were too young.”

Feeling neglected as an adolescent, Ms. Ruth-Ann chose to live with her father on the Rincon Band of Luiseño Indians reservation. “I was not particularly close to my [paternal] grandmother (La Jolla Band of Luiseño Indians).”

With both parents “checked out” in the parenting department, she dropped out of high school and left the reservation as a child-woman at fourteen. “I started dealing kilos of cocaine for money in Oceanside and then began using”; this reckless occupation ended when she was robbed and raped at gunpoint.

Escaping the drug-infested dens of depravity and violence, “I worked three jobs to pay rent so that I didn’t have to be a drug mule. When my dad got sick, I went back home to care for him.” During that time, she also pursued her GED high school equivalency, which “was harder than I thought it would be.”

EMBRACING THE BEAUTY

In 1988, Ms. Ruth-Ann found herself on the island of Oahu when she married her husband, who served in the Marine Corps. She began working at an art gallery called Images International of Hawaii. “I knew I wanted to become an art dealer within the first week. I sold my first art piece for eighteen hundred dollars. It was [by] Hisashi Otsuka. Since then, I’ve devoted my life to eating, breathing, thinking, and doing everything that has ended up bringing artists to market.”

When she returned to California, she started by driving everywhere to deliver her clients’ artwork—often up and down the California coast by herself, renting sixteen-foot Ryder rental trucks for transportation. “I learned to back the truck right up to my motel door so that I wouldn’t get robbed.”

With Gloria Lee’s influence prevailing, Ms. Ruth-Ann finally embraced the beauty in art as an adult that she ignored in childhood. “My mother inspired me to have a career in the art business. When I first ventured out to open my gallery, she jumped in and helped me full-time. She helped me grow this business through her artwork and sweat equity.”

With a solid work ethic, Ms. Ruth-Ann reinvented herself as a small business owner and a respected entrepreneur. “Art is the only thing that can heal

trauma. It cuts through to our spirit, where healing takes place.”

This past September, she celebrated a new and single EC location with a ribbon cutting in the Gaslamp Quarter. It’s the first time since the 1800s, when Native Californians were hunted for bounty, that a Native-owned-and-operated business has anchored on Fifth Avenue. Rincon Tribal Council Member Laurie Gonzalez and Jamul Indian Village Chairwoman Erica Pinto attended, along with other Native supporters, friends, family, and media.

Chairwoman Pinto made a point to say, “Welcome back—even though we never left.” On California Native American Day, September 22, Ms. Ruth-Ann was honored for promoting Native culture and presented with an official proclamation from the San Diego City Council.

Making payroll is every small business owner’s daily concern. Still, these challenges only impel more innovative ideas for Ms. Ruth-Ann. Her maverick “Art of the City” shorts feature Native American creatives, with Ms. Ruth-Ann herself producing and hosting à la Anthony Bourdain, albeit with a French manicure, heritage silver, and one of her many signature hats. Four episodes were filmed in San Diego, four others in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and five in New Orleans; they’re now viewable on the FNX | First Nations Experience television network and on Ms. Ruth-Ann’s YouTube channel. A new episode filmed in Minnesota with notable Native creatives like Chef Sean Sherman (Oglala Lakota Sioux Tribe) of the James Beard–awarded Owamni restaurant is in the pipeline.

Also available on FNX is a series titled *This Is Indian Country*, also hosted



by Ms. Ruth-Ann. The thirty-minute entertainment show includes food, dance, music, water and land keepers, tattoo artists, and comedians.

“I just received a film grant [from SXSW, an indie film festival in Austin, Texas] to make a documentary about diabetes in Indian Country,” she said. “My dad is [a] diabetic with Type 2, and I am trying to re-educate him about diet and exercise. When we were stripped of our connection to our cultural foods and started eating from the government box of processed foods, it shifted our health. It became a colonial mindset for Native culture to become enslaved to this capitalistic idea [of] racist stereotypes. Type 2 diabetes is NOT genetic!”

Ms. Ruth-Ann continues to edit additional episodes dedicated to the First Peoples of this continent. “I’ve learned that generational trauma runs deep with the elders no matter what

tribe they are from,” Ms. Ruth-Ann said. “They still need healing from all the boarding schools and how every treaty made is broken.”

THE GREATER GOOD

About six years ago, a “good marriage of twenty-three years” with her partner/husband ended with a million-dollar cash settlement disbursed from her side. She said, “I married him to feel safe. I didn’t see that coming.”

Taking strength from meditation and prayer, Ms. Ruth-Ann chooses not to let adverse life events pollute her belief in the greater good. “I live on seven acres of open space on the reservation, which my dad gave me now instead of after his passing. Both my parents have been so helpful. It’s really come full circle....Once, while receiving a Reiki treatment, my grandpa [her father’s father] came through with a message: ‘You need to return to the land. It’s about the land. Walk softly.’”



Above and right: Grand opening of Exclusive Collections Fine Art Gallery on Fifth Avenue in the Gaslamp Quarter.

She now shares the land with her father, who “lives nearby so I can help care for him, with Jens, my significant other, and my award-winning artist daughter (naturally). And yes, I am transparent about my journey with her.”

In addition to her business and filmmaking, Ms. Ruth-Ann’s skincare line, N8iv Beauty, will debut in Nordstrom’s department stores in 2024. “As a start-up, there are three products: Daybreak Moisturizing Cream, Starlight Regenerative Cream, and Starlight Regenerative Acorn Oil (sourced from East Coast tribes) Serum, all packed with organic ingredients, plant stem cells, and copper peptides to promote radiant and healthy skin,” Ms. Ruth-Ann said. Fulfillment is local: “I work with boutique labs in Los Angeles and San Diego willing to work with small operators and batches.”

She credits a natural form of “Native artistic expression that parallels modern beauty practices” as her muse. “Native Americans possess an extensive history of plant medicine and utilize resources from the earth, like ocean nutrients and clays, to create cosmetics for enhancing beauty. The Native American holistic approach and traditional practices for wellness and beauty need recognition by beauty brands like Sephora, Ulta, and other beauty retailers. Native Americans need inclusion and representation [even] in the beauty industry.”

And what would she consider a Native creative superpower? “I am resilient, and that is the only thing I can rely on. Every day, I ask my ancestors—which way? I take courage from them and move forward.”