



CHIP THOMAS AND THE PAINTED DESERT PROJECT



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SEPTEMBER 6, 2024–JANUARY 5, 2025

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

FOTOFOCUS
backstories
BIENNIAL

Chip Thomas and the Painted Desert Project at the Contemporary Arts Center (Cincinnati, OH) is a Featured Project curated by Kevin Moore for the 2024 FotoFocus Biennial: *backstories*. Now in its seventh iteration, the Biennial activates over 100 projects at museums, galleries, universities, and public spaces throughout Greater Cincinnati, Dayton, Columbus, and Northern Kentucky in October 2024—the largest of its kind in America. The *backstories* theme focuses on stories that are not evident at first glance. These stories offer context for what happened previously or out of view, providing narratives not yet told or presented from a new perspective.



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CHIP THOMAS AND THE PAINTED DESERT PROJECT

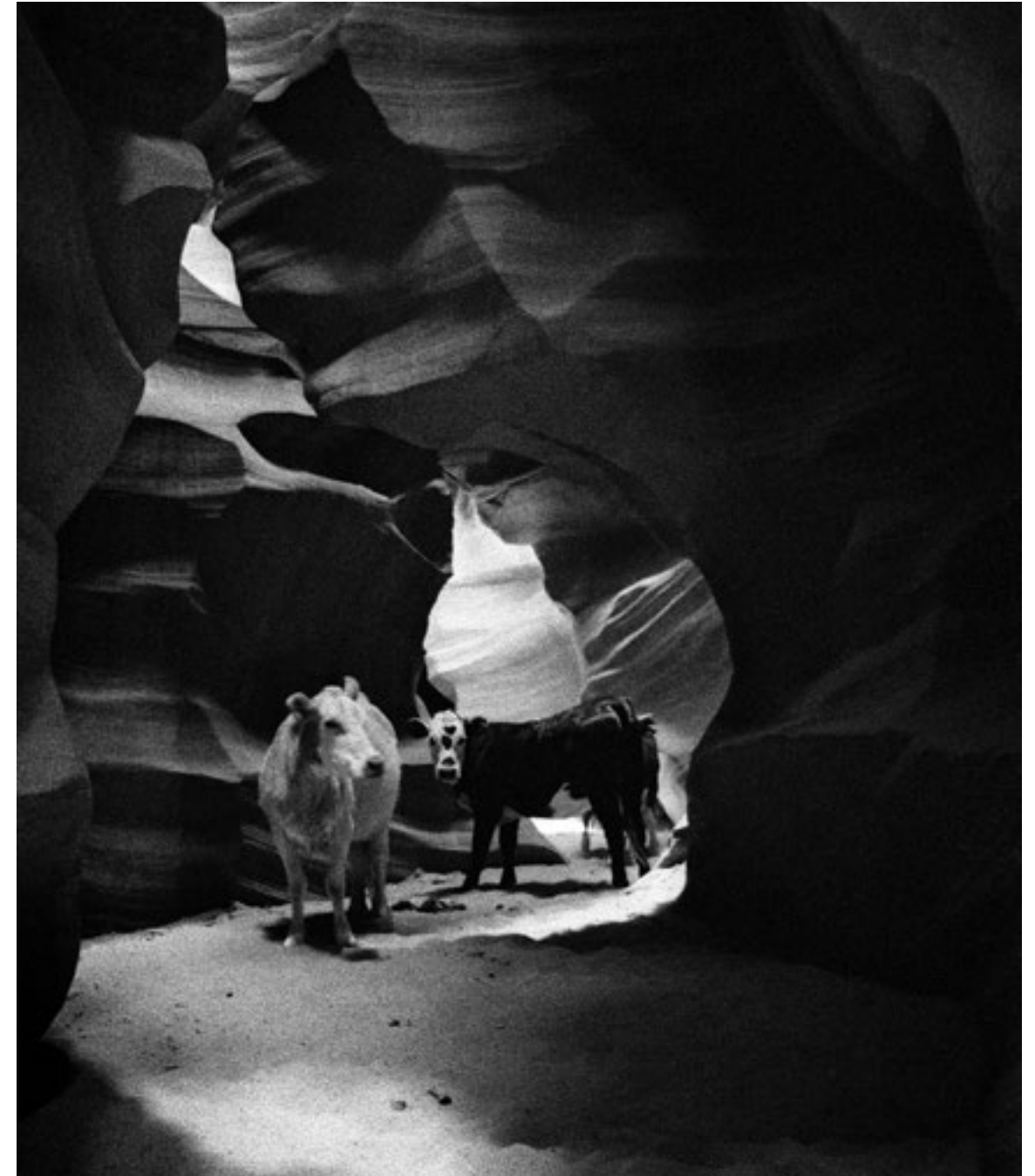
Chip Thomas moved to the Navajo Nation, between Monument Valley and the Grand Canyon, to work as a physician in 1987 as part of a student loan payback program for public service. There, he began photographing the Navajo people (Diné) in a traditional photojournalist style, using black-and-white film and developing the work in his home darkroom. In 2009, Thomas adopted the pseudonym “jetsonorama” and began combining photography and traditions of street art, placing work on billboards and abandoned structures in the region to celebrate the rich cultural history of his adopted community. At the heart of Thomas’ practice—both medical and artistic—is a notion of care: care for oneself, the environment, and the cultures that sustain us. “When I would see patients in the clinic, my objective was to help them find a state of wellness,” Thomas has said. “And then the effort [through my art] was to create a larger environment of wellness for the community.”

Chip Thomas and the Painted Desert Project is a story in three parts. Part One presents Thomas as a documentary photographer, capturing singular moments from his surroundings and, increasingly, telling stories through multi-image photo essays. In Part Two we see the emergence of jetsonorama, covertly (at first) activating various sites on or near the reservation through startling, sometimes provocative imagery. In 2012, Thomas founded the Painted Desert Project, a residency program in which artist-collaborators are invited to paint in the desert. Part Three offers a selection of works by more than 25 street artists from around the world who have brought their distinct styles to the region, adding an urban art element to this vast rural landscape.











SHEEP IS LIFE

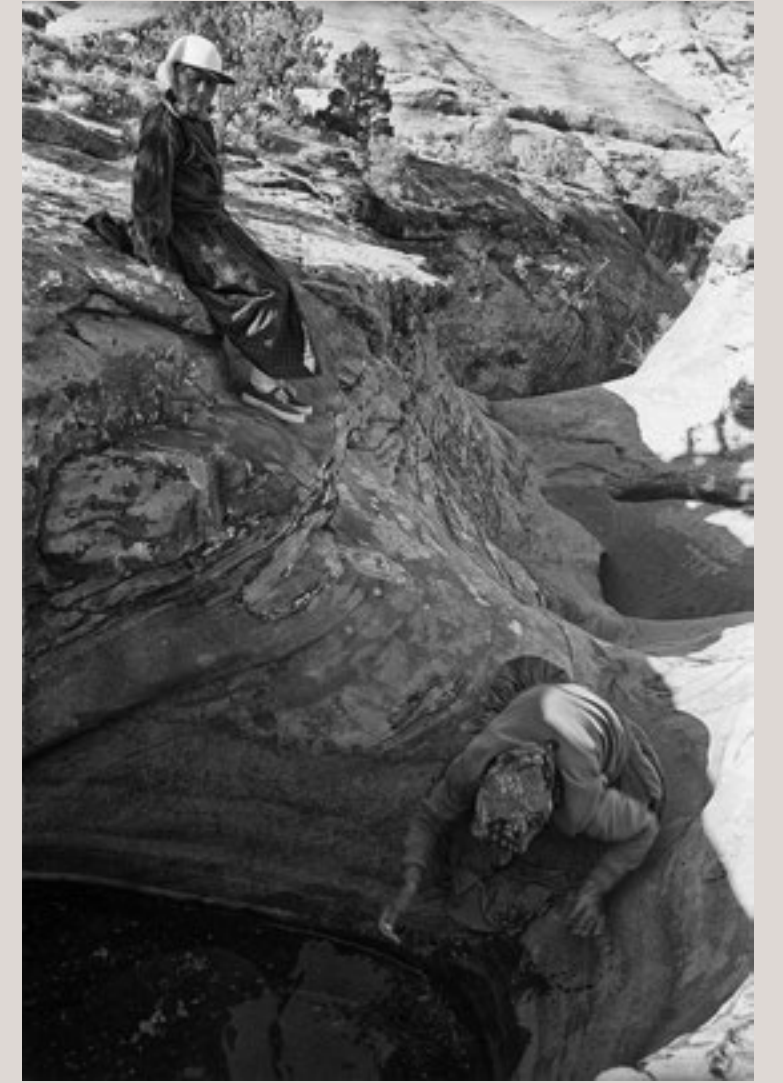
trans•hu•mance

noun

the action or practice of moving livestock from one grazing ground to another in a seasonal cycle, typically to lowlands in winter and highlands in summer.

“I remember hearing when I first started working on the Diné (Navajo) nation in 1987 that many years ago the wealth of the people was determined by the number of cattle they had. It was traditional for the Diné to have two homes—a winter camp and a summer camp—and people would move their animals between the two camps based on the availability of food and water for their animals. In 1995, I found a family of three—Ben, his wife Minnie, and their daughter Lula—who still moved their animals seasonally. I was fortunate to spend three days with them during such a migration.” —Chip Thomas









WELCOME TO DIABETES COUNTRY

“Indigenous communities have the highest rate of Type II Diabetes mellitus of any group in the country. It’s one-fourth of adults over the age of 45. Wanting the Pepsi Corporation to consider the impact of their products on high-risk communities, especially those living in ‘food deserts,’ and hoping to prompt people most impacted by sugary drinks to consider the consequences of their food choices, a public health nurse and I ‘corrected’ this billboard late one night. It used to read ‘Welcome to Pepsi Country.’” –Chip Thomas





SPORTSMEN! SHOOT BISON FROM A TRAIN!

Tomas' video collage combines historic film footage of a moving train from 1898 with chronophotographs by pioneering photographer Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904) of a running bison from 1887. The soundtrack is by Bill Frissel. The video is inspired by a c. 1867 letter by General William Tecumseh Sherman, then a manager of the Union Pacific Railroad in Nebraska, to Major William Sheridan. In the letter, Sherman floats an idea to eliminate the bison and the Indigenous peoples who rely on them for sustenance in one grand plan. Thomas' screen print includes lines from Sherman: "Native Americans will never give up their lifestyle until the buffalo are gone. I think it would be wise to invite all the sportsmen of England and America there this fall for a Grand Buffalo Hunt, and make one grand sweep of them all."

It was a widely held belief by Plains tribes that the bison would not cross the train tracks, a behavior that resulted in diminished herd sizes and decreased biodiversity. This restriction had a human toll as well. Tribes that relied heavily on bison for clothing, shelter, and food experienced, and continue to experience, a decrease in average height as well as higher rates of poverty and suicide compared to other tribes. While killing bison to force Native Americans off the Plains was never explicit U.S. government policy, the government tacitly endorsed it.

The Bison Didn't Cross the Tracks; The Tracks Crossed the Bison, 2024. Video, 5:38 mins.



JAMAAL FLYING

Thomas photographed his son, Jamaal, jumping on a trampoline and has used the source images for various site interventions. *Jamaal Flying* is a video compilation of those various public projects.



BELIEVE

“I met Jordan one day when he wheeled his dad into my examination room. Over the course of the visit, I was taken by his kindness and respect towards his dad, who used to be a Navajo Nation police officer. At the conclusion of the visit, I asked about his tattoos and whether I could come to his place to photograph him and learn more about them. He was happy to oblige.”

—Chip Thomas



WHAT WE DO TO THE MOUNTAIN WE DO TO OURSELVES

From the beginning of his time on the reservation, Thomas has maintained that he does not speak on behalf of the Navajo (Diné) or others. But over time, trust has been established and he has been asked to apply his artistic sensibility to various causes, such as water rights, uranium

mining, poverty, immigration, social justice, and environmental efforts. Thomas writes, “As a documentary photographer, I believe everyone has a unique story. Though not everyone wants their story told. For those who do, a trusting relationship established over time with the storyteller is critical to an objective telling of this story.”

In 2011, Thomas joined the late Navajo activist and artist Klee Benally (1971–2023) to protest the expansion of the Arizona Snowbowl Resort, a ski resort north of Flagstaff. The resort had been contentious since it was built in the 1930s, seen by numerous Indigenous nations as a desecration

of a sacred site. The more recent practice of creating artificial snow using treated sewage wastewater only added to the controversy. One protest sign read: “where the affluent meets the effluent.”

For one action, protestors’ faces were painted with their own words, such as, “I am the change, industrialization, pollution, drought, water-air-earth, fake snow.” Thomas photographed the painted faces, and these have become the source images for various site interventions and screen prints of, most prominently, Benally and his wife Princess. The words over their locked gaze read, “What we do to the mountain we do to ourselves.”





water is life



"Native Americans would never give up their lifestyle until the buffalo are gone. I think it would be wise to invite all the sportsmen of England and America there this fall for a Grand Buffalo hunt, and make one grand sweep of them all."

General William Tecumseh Sherman to Major Philip Sheridan, c. 1867

LA ISLA MEMORY PROJECT

In 2019, Thomas was invited by the University of Colorado's Art and Rural Environments Field School to La Isla, a small, high-altitude farming community on the border of Southern Colorado. There, Thomas immersed himself in oral histories of the local inhabitants, many of whom traced their ancestry back to the Spanish Colonial period. An abandoned one-room schoolhouse, built of adobe as part of the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, became a focal point for Thomas' research. Former students described their experiences there as students throughout the 1950s, and shared family photographs, which became the basis of Thomas' collaged fabric installation. Observing the mesmerizing movements of the fabric in changing light, Thomas later noted, "I felt like narratives emerged from the fabric."



SLICK ROCK MINE

“As a physician at a small clinic on the Navajo nation since 1987, many of my patients have suffered and continue to suffer the effects of uranium mining. I asked a coworker whose father worked as a uranium miner in the mid 1960s and who died of a uranium-related cancer if she’d share with me any memorabilia she had of her father from that period. She shared with me stories of her dad and provided photographs from that period. Her mother died of a uranium-related cancer and she has an older brother presently suffering from a uranium-related cancer.” –Chip Thomas

Uranium mining was an important source of income on the reservation. Navajo (Diné) miners worked over 500 mines on the reservation from the 1940s until uranium prices dropped in the mid 1980s. During those years, more than five-million pounds of “yellowcake” was mined, which, in the process, released heavy metals, radon gas, and low-level radiation from the rock. By 1950, the Public Health Service knew radiation levels at the mines exceeded levels considered safe but did nothing for years. Even after an important study was published in 1952, which showed that radiation levels in the mines were unsafe, safety recommendations were ignored—by public safety officials and the Navajo themselves, who needed the income.



By 1960, the Public Health Service definitively declared that uranium miners faced an elevated risk of pulmonary cancer. However, it wasn’t until 1967 that the Secretary of Labor issued a regulation declaring that “no uranium miner could be exposed to radon levels that would induce a higher risk of cancer than that faced by the general population.” By this time, it was too late. In the fifteen years after the uranium boom, the cancer death rate among the Navajo (Diné) doubled. This was a period in which the overall U.S. cancer rate declined.

Ken Ogawa and jetsonorama, *How Did We Get Here?*, 2024. Video with audio, vinyl installation, and lantern made from polyacrylic acid, wood, LED, electronics, 18 mins.

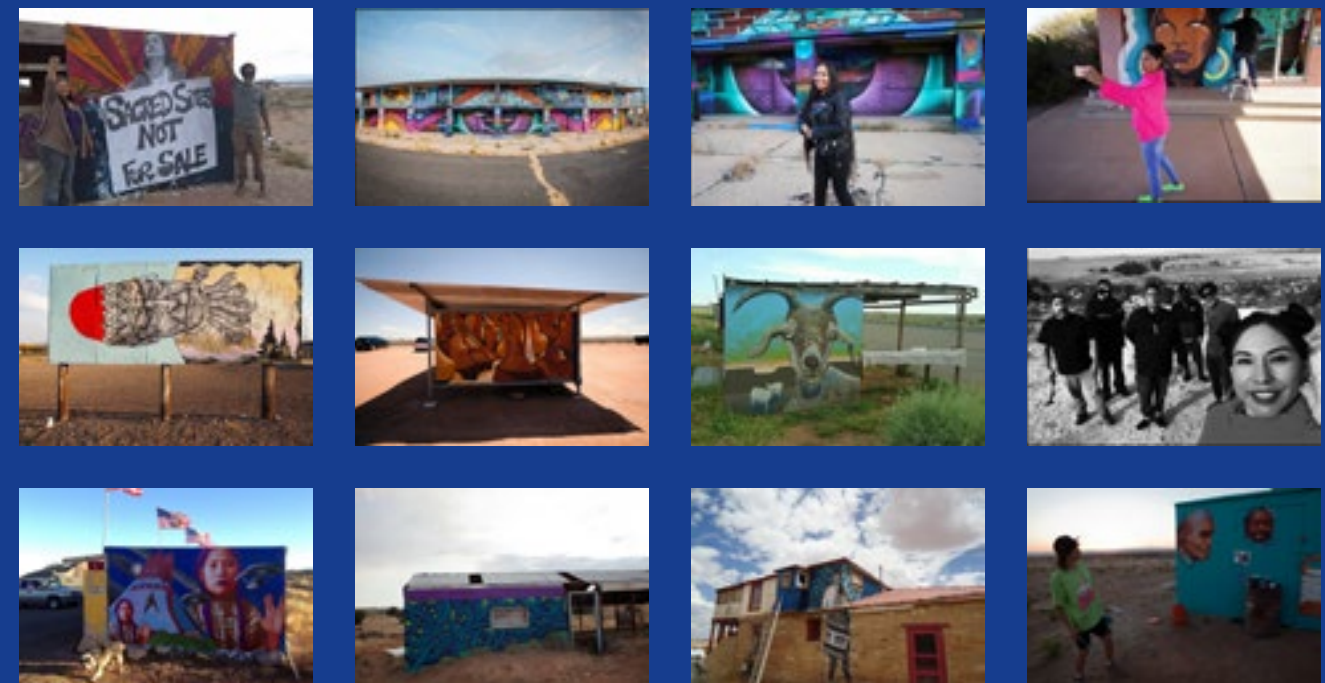


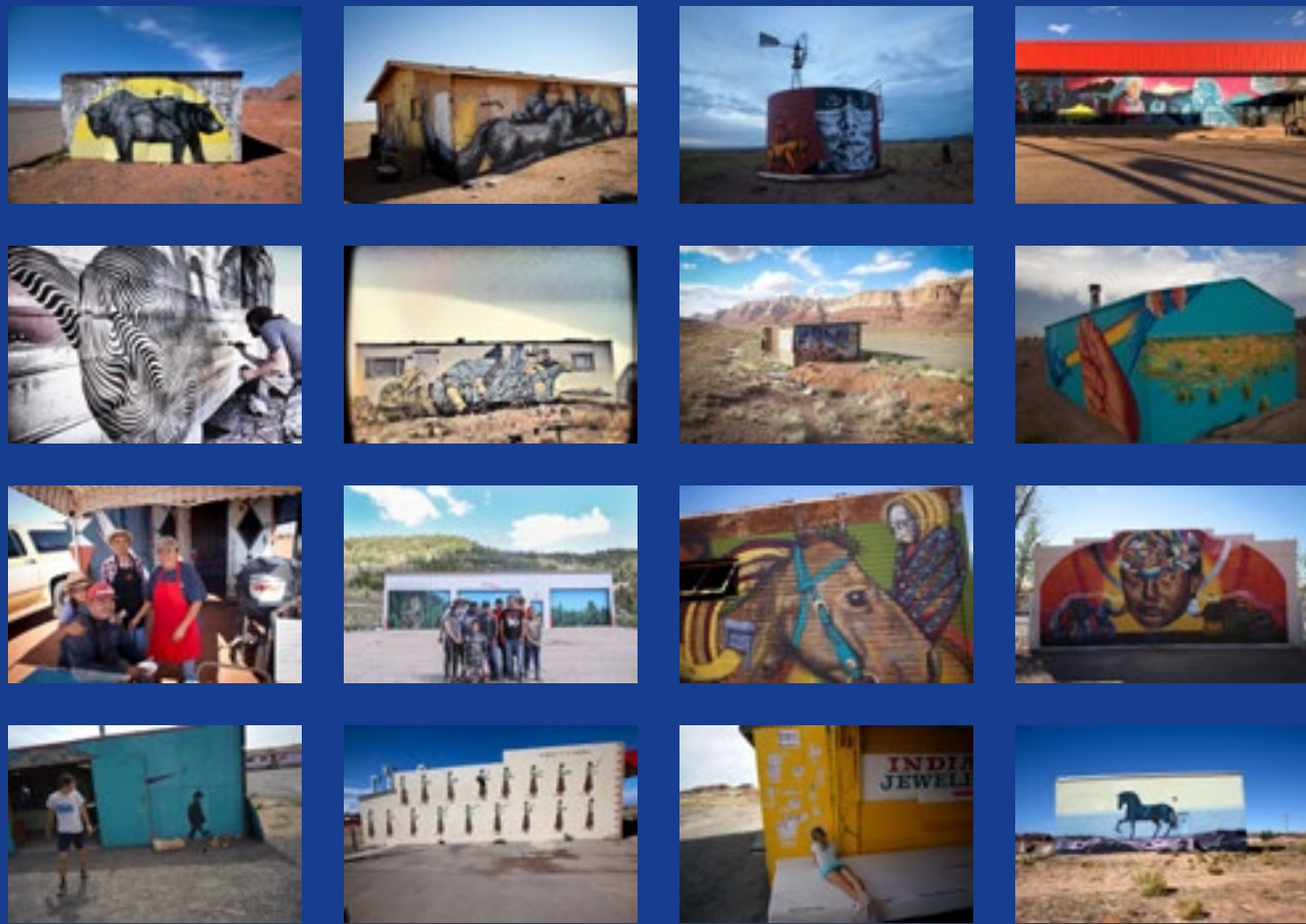


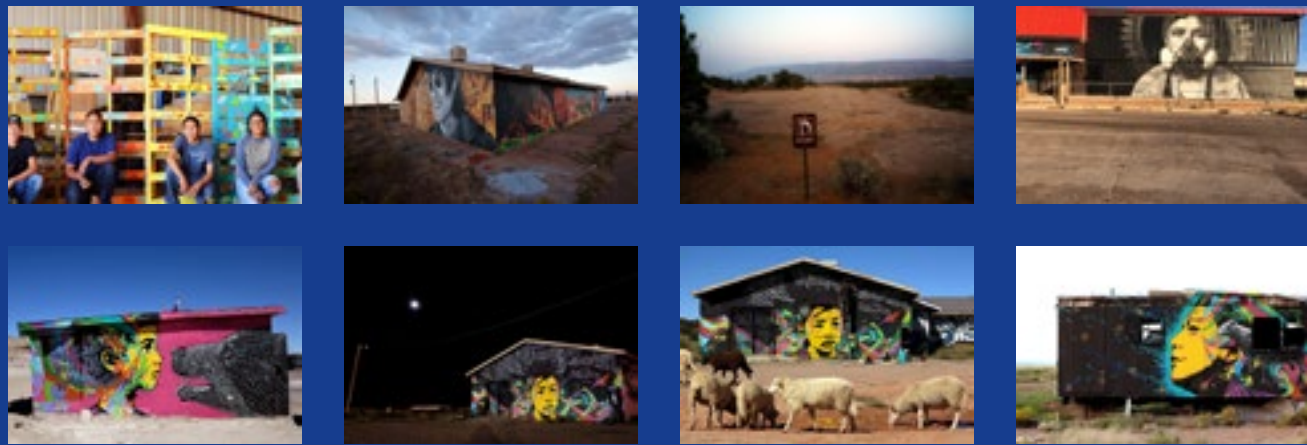


THE PAINTED DESERT PROJECT

In 2012, Thomas developed the Painted Desert Project, a residency program in which he has invited street artists from around the world to explore and execute work in the desert landscape. More than twenty-five artists have participated over the past decade, enlivening the region's public spaces with various distinct styles. Works placed in the desert are understood to be ephemeral as they are vulnerable to weather, vandalism, or retagging by other artists. This is embraced as an essential aspect of both public art and Indigenous attitudes toward humankind's relationship to time and nature.









ABOUT THE ARTIST

Chip Thomas is a photographer, public artist, activist, and physician who has been working since 1987 between Monument Valley and The Grand Canyon on the Navajo Nation, where he coordinates the Painted Desert Project. He is a member of the Justseeds Artists Cooperative, an organization dedicated to climate awareness. Thomas was a 2018 recipient of a Kindle Project gift and, in 2020, was chosen by the United Nations in recognition of its 75th anniversary to help promote the UN's goal of "envisioning and shaping of a more resilient and sustainable future."





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