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Layered color, fractured geometry and Navajo creation stories converge in the work of artist Sheldon Harvey.

By Paula M. Bodah | Portrait Photography by Chris Loomis

Long before sunrise, Sheldon Harvey is at work in his northern Arizona studio. The high desert is still dark and quiet when he begins to paint. “It’s peaceful,” he says. “There’s a sense of serenity in that early morning time. I’m rejuvenated. I tend to focus more.”

By midmorning, the direction of a painting has revealed itself. The rest of the day may turn to galleries, logistics or family. But the work begins here, in the quiet.

Harvey, a Diné (Navajo) artist, has built his career on translation, carrying Navajo cosmology into a visual language shaped by modernism. As a member of the Red Running into the Water Clan, he grew up among artisans, and worked alongside his grandfather, a silversmith and jewelry maker, learning patience and precision. Though largely self-taught, he took art classes at Diné College in Tsaile and absorbed what he could from watching other artists. “I didn’t have an apprenticeship,” he says. “I sort of taught myself.”

Drawing came first, then painting and, nearly three decades ago, sculpture. Carving felt instinctive. Years of construction work had trained his body for rigor. “With chisels, saws and sculpting tools, I find myself in that mode,” he says. Sculpture allows him to push two-dimensional ideas into space, “to see how far I can take the concepts that evolve in the mind.”

His subjects draw from Diné creation stories, particularly the First World and its Air-Spirit Beings, yet Harvey avoids literal narrative. Influenced by other Indigenous artists, including R.C. Gorman and Dan Namingha, as well as by European modernists, he gravitates toward Cubism’s fractured geometry and the emotional charge of color. “I wanted to discover what it meant to really create abstract geometric formations,” he says. “Not focus on features, but create simple shapes that represent a figure or a landscape.”

The palette is unmistakably of its place: the radiance of desert sun, red earth, deepening gold at dusk. Layers

build through over- and underpainting. Oil has been Harvey's primary medium for the past decade, though experimentation remains central. "Sometimes it doesn't work out," he says. "But it's a learning experience."

The paintings are often dense, with intersecting planes, rhythmic patterns and faceted forms. Increasingly, however, Harvey is searching for restraint. "A lot of the work I create is very busy," he reflects. "I want to find some peace and quiet in my work." It's refinement rather than retreat—distilling ideas he has long explored.

Altamira Fine Art gallery owner Jason Williams believes that balance between reverence and innovation sets Harvey apart. "Sheldon isn't just preserving tradition, he's actively expanding it," Williams says. "His work is deeply rooted in Navajo cosmology, but he approaches it through a contemporary, highly refined visual language. Rather than simply illustrating traditional stories, he interprets them. That confidence in abstraction and form feels modern and intentional while still honoring cultural lineage."

Dr. Karla M. Cabaret Britton, professor of art history at Diné College and a collector of Harvey's work, sees that tension as essential as well. "Sheldon's best work speaks of emotional and spiritual truths about Navajo ways of seeing the world," she says. "But he's very generous in making his work universal, something everyone can enter into."

The layered geometries, she adds, are as much about thinking as seeing. "He can look at a theme from multiple perspectives, and that draws in a wide audience."

Williams notes that collectors often respond first to the visual strength of the work. "They're drawn in by the clarity of the design," he says, "and then they discover the deeper narrative layers. The work feels contemporary in execution but timeless in spirit."

Balance—*hózhó*, the Diné concept of harmony and right relationship—threads through Harvey's practice. The waterbird, a ceremonial symbol associated with protection and equilibrium, appears in abstracted form. For Harvey, these stories are not relics. "It's about looking at the ancient past and how it can evolve here in modern times," he says. "How we live with these ancient ideas today."

Recognition has followed. Harvey has earned top honors at the Santa Fe Indian Market, including Best of Show, and his work resides in major collections in the United States and abroad. Yet success, he insists, is measured differently. His grandfather once told him that real wealth lies in family, in staying close to one's wife and children, and to creation itself.

Harvey's sculptures, Williams observes, carry a different kind of weight. "The sculptures feel ancestral and grounded," he says. "Their physical presence gives them a sense of permanence while also capturing a cultural continuity. They occupy space in a way that feels protective and enduring."

The early mornings continue. Painting first, then sculpting; ideas move from sketch to canvas to carved form. In

the quiet before dawn, as color emerges from darkness, Harvey is not illustrating myth. He is inhabiting it—building a bridge between histories, forms and ways of seeing.

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-Jason Williams, gallerist

The angular figures and shifting planes of “Struggle” (36”W by 36”H) signal Sheldon Harvey’s fascination with Cubism, translating Diné creation stories into a contemporary visual language.

Intersecting forms and layered color in “Universal Duality” (52”W by 46”H) suggest the balance and tension that run through Navajo cosmology—ideas Harvey explores through abstraction rather than literal narrative.

Inspired by the Air-Spirit Beings of the Navajo creation story, “Graces of the Air” (52”W by 46”H) reduces figures to simple geometric forms that emerge through rhythmic pattern and layered paint.

Fragmented shapes and shifting perspectives in “Deer Way #4” (62”W by 48”H) echo the artist’s interest in European modernism while remaining rooted in Diné storytelling traditions.

Radiant reds, golds and desert tones in “Full Harvest” (36”W by 48”H) reflect the landscapes of northern Arizona, where Harvey often begins painting before sunrise.

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