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Silvester Hustito a.k.a. Sobé, *Why Am I Alive Now?*

May 3 - June 9, 2024

Opening Friday, May 3, 5-7pm

With a bat to the head, I fall towards sweet earth. I can see the stars in the sky, pulsating with each throb. I wish I had listened to mom, but here I lay, severely injured, maybe dying. I'm given a second chance to visit the stars, to visit the spirit beings. Finally, I am done with earth, I can move on to be with my ancestors. I can RIP.

The sounds of the morning birds bring me back from the darkness. The city is coming back to life. The spirits are not letting me join them so fast. I have work to do. I smile and ask myself "Why am I alive now?"

Why Am I Alive Now? is the first New York solo exhibition by **Silvester Hustito a.k.a. Sobé**, a self-taught A:Shiwi (Zuni) artist born and raised in Zuni Pueblo, New Mexico, a vibrant artists' colony. After living in the Bronx for the past six years, Sobé recently returned to Zuni. Alongside a lifelong art practice, Sobé has previously launched a gallery space, zines, and magazines, creating space for contemporary Native artists. *The Santa Fe New Mexican* noted, "Hustito, an avid magazine fan [...] grew up pouring over auction catalogs, spending hours studying the images and descriptions of artwork."

This love of art's printed matter permeates Sobé's practice, with ongoing series of paintings that utilize the pages of auction catalogs or *The Andy Warhol Diaries* as ground. The artist correlates the transformational act of creating skins for paintings – dipping the paper of magazine pages into glue to create living surfaces – to private Zuni practices of reverence for all living things. Watching films from Warhol documentaries to *Basquiat* has also informed the artist's intersectional sensibility, noting of the latter, "Watching this movie based on a minority living on the edge of both instant fame and homelessness, I understood what this character was facing in this vast world that did not know how to accept him."

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An iconic image of Divine aiming a gun was featured on one version of the invitation for *The Happy Show: Expressions in Gay Native American Art* (curated by Sobé for Winterowd Fine Art Gallery, Santa Fe, 2016), and another featured their artwork depicting an arched Two Spirit entity being impaled, painted on a found lenticular photograph of a tiger in the snow. An historic image of We'wha, a Lhamana (Zuni Two Spirit) artist, spiritual leader, and cultural worker born around 1849 is featured in Sobé's paintings and digital works. For Zuni people, "Lhamana constituted a socially-recognized third gender role within the tribe and often held positions of honor in the community. [...] We'wha was among the first Zuni to sell their pottery and textiles [crafts predominantly learned and produced by women], helping to bolster Indian arts more widely [and] was a member of the men's kachina society, which performed ritual masked dances." (Mariana Brandman, "We'wha," National Women's History Museum, 2021. www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/wewha) Among the earliest works in the exhibition, two crystal bedazzled Mudhead Clown Kachina sculptures from 2016 form reliefs, one on a ground of collaged fashion magazine pages with superimposed images of Zuni pottery, the other on a ground of found expired HIV medication. Along with works produced in 2018, including portraits on found floral and landscape paintings (*Two Spirit in Holland* and *Two Spirit Prayer*), *Why Am I Alive Now?* centers a new series of acrylic on canvas portraits that depict figures in transformational states, evoked through their morphing, multicolored faces. Not only troubling traditional portrait-painting style, their subjects also elude fixed gender identities, perhaps in an effort to unlearn assimilationist erasure.

"We'wha's headline-making visit [to Washington D.C. in 1866] ensured the Zuni were one of the most well-known Indian tribes among Americans in the 1880s. But name recognition did not stop the U.S. Office of Indian Affairs from extending its policy of assimilation to the Zuni and other Pueblo Indians in the years following We'wha's return. [Christian missionaries arrived at Zuni the following year, imprisoning the Lhamana.] Such policies furthered the dismantling of tribal culture – including pressure to abandon the recognition of Lhamana individuals – and the absorption of Indians into Anglo society." (Brandman)

In 2022, the exchange of a gift between artists Sobé and ANOHNI led to a studio visit with ANOHNI and Participant Director Lia Gangitano. The resulting exhibition of recent painting, sculpture, and works on paper borrows its title from ANOHNI and the Johnson's *Why Am I Alive Now?* a song from their 2023 album *My Back Was a Bridge for You to Cross*, which features artwork by Sobé and Alvin Baltrop. ANOHNI has noted of the work:

"Some of Sobé's work portrays abstract faces and spirits of feminine, intergenerational, Two Spirit figures in states of presence, radiance, and, at moments, suffering. The painting's visceral effect startled me, and I asked Sobé if we could include the painting in the artwork of my last record. Sobé's work has a charge of urgent disruption, emotional clarity, and vividness, with portraits that reflect centuries of gracious tradition, violence, moral authority, inspired curiosity, and confounding survival strategy. The way Sobé has at times bound Two Spirit portraiture in conversation with images of Western figures from 20th Century underground queerness is complex, decisive, and clarion. Sobé's work is a revelation, articulating a new conversation, and drawing a generous teaching window."

In the first issue of *Contemporary Native Art Magazine* (published by Hustito), the publisher's letter noted: "Contemporary Native Artists have worked twice as hard to bring forth a vision that is not only coming from a Native American perspective, but also from a very American perspective."

Silvester Hustito a.k.a. Sobé (born 1979) currently lives and works in Zuni. Group exhibitions include *Out of Control*, 2018, curated by Peter and Sally Saul, Venus Over Manhattan, NY, and *Immaculate Heart of Margaritaville*, 2023, curated by Devendra Banhart, NICODIM, Los Angeles. Sobé's work is included in the collections of National Museum of the American Indian, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and New Mexico State University Art Museum, and numerous individuals. Sobé was the publisher of *Contemporary Native Art Magazine* and curator of "The Happy Show: Expressions in Gay Native American Art," 2016, Winterowd Fine Art Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Image: Silvester Hustito a.k.a. Sobé, *John Singer Sargent with We'wha Portait*, 2018, digital artwork

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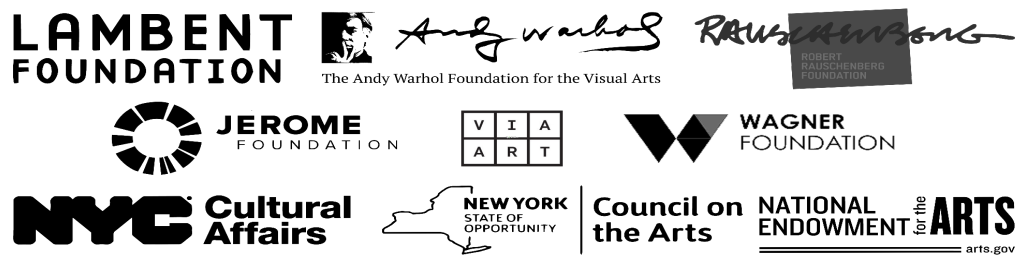
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PARTICIPANT INC is located at 116 Elizabeth Street, floor one, in Chinatown, between Broome and Grand Streets. The closest trains are the J/Z (Bowery) and the B/D (Grand); the closest wheelchair accessible stop is the 6 (Canal). Entry is on grade and the gallery is barrier free throughout with an all gender, wheelchair accessible bathroom. Service animals are welcome.