

# Lesson 3: Knowledge

## Osage Allegory

Native people have long used various art forms to communicate and carry forward cultural knowledge in the form of weaving designs, beadwork patterns and pottery motifs. Contemporary art acts in the same way in that it communicates knowledge in the symbols and designs featured in the artwork. Lunch boxes, acorns, elk and sirens, however, are not the kind of things someone would expect to find in a painting that expresses Native cultural knowledge. At first inspection of Norman Akers, painting *Power Chords to the Past*, one might be a little confused by the meaning of the composition. The layers of imagery seem to be saying something, but what? Norman Akers is a member of the Osage Tribe and uses his art to explore issues of identity, culture, Osage mythos, place and the dynamics of personal and cultural transformation.

In all of his art Akers uses color, line and form to create a visual vocabulary. The vocabulary consists of images and symbols drawn from his Osage heritage, personal life experiences, and contemporary culture. The symbols and images he incorporates in his art are influenced by tribal oral histories, maps, art historical references and nature. The use of narrative in his work acts as a continuation of the Native American storytelling tradition. Ancestral tribal stories and sayings have served to explain the world in which the Osage lived. New and emerging stories serve as *allegories* of transformation in an ever-changing world.



‘Power Chords to the Past’– Norman Akers

Akers explains, “As these images freely mingle between the past and present, they become a *metaphor* for the experiences I encounter when I am at home in Oklahoma, traveling across ancestral lands in Kansas, and participating in ceremonies, suggest that there are no clear boundaries between my culture’s past and present beliefs.”

Symbols with traditional meaning are featured in his artwork, for example, the red oak tree trunk speaks to the Osage origin story of how sky people landed in the oak tree, the acorns are a hybrid symbol representing rebirth and renewal, and the whistling (bugling) elk is reference to the earth.

Akers has interpreted the lunch box as a cultural symbol and personal metaphor for being Osage today, the skin of the lunch box is pressed metal, Western on the outside, what is inside the lunch box is Native.

The power cord is a play on the idea of Native people being “plugged into” cultural tradition as well as modern society. The siren speaks to Native people being alert of critical situations happening within society.

### Activity: Create your own narrative painting

- Think about an important moment in your life that you would like to paint or draw.
- Think about who and/or what will be in the painting.
- Think about how these people or things will be represented. Will they look like they do in real life or will they be painted as something that represents them?
- When you compose your art piece think about how Akers composed his painting. There is no *hierarchy* to how and where things are placed in the painting, it is all important. Consider these ideas as you create your art piece.
- After you have finished your art piece, write your interpretation of what it means and the story it tells. This is your “artist’s interpretation.” Share with the class or your friends about your artwork.

Newspapers for this educational program provided by:



NEWSPAPERS IN EDUCATION  
THE OKLAHOMAN



the  
*Chickasaw*  
Nation