



Story as Medicine: The Art of Rick Bartow

October 1 – November 29, 2025

Opening Reception: Friday, October 3rd, 5:30 – 7:30 pm

Remarks by Bartow Trustee, Karen Murphy, 6:00 pm

Open during First Friday, November 7th, 5:30 -7:30 pm (gallery opens at 12:00 pm)

Karin Clarke Gallery is pleased to present *Story as Medicine: The Art of Rick Bartow*, a powerful selection of works from the Bartow Trust Collection. The exhibit includes outstanding examples of Bartow's large-format pastels and graphite drawings as well as many of his finest drypoint prints on handmade Japanese paper. Most of these pieces showcase his characteristic use of animal imagery (birds such as ravens, hawks, or sparrows; as well as salmon, coyotes, and even a mouse), which often overlaps with human forms or self-portraits. Each exemplifies the unique mark-making and storytelling ability that brought Bartow recognition not only as one of Oregon's most significant artists but also as a major leader in contemporary Native American art.

Bartow found in art a way of processing the emotional trauma he experienced, including war and addiction, loss of family members, and later, a major stroke. Through richly layered storytelling, his work weaves together his personal experience and the emotions it elicited with his Indigenous heritage and a vast knowledge of traditional art forms and contemporary art practices. His "transformational images," as he called them, drew from Native American mythology as much as from observation of the natural world around him. Working "in an expressionistic manner," Bartow didn't shy away from raw, visceral emotion, which he often leavened with humor and conveyed through a profound understanding of color and value, line and rhythm, and the power of mark-making. "My work has never stopped being therapy," he said.

Bartow's artwork tells visual stories of transformation and becoming, of blurred boundaries between different realms: human and non-human, self and other, body and spirit. These are multi-layered, open-ended tales of inner process and life in flux. With bold, spontaneous, yet precise gestures, Bartow both added and erased his marks, leaving space for ghosts, or the unsayable, or chance. Forms and beings fluidly overlap and undergo metamorphosis, and just as there are no rigid forms, there is no fixed interpretation, no reductive pinning down of the facets of existence once and for all. This embrace of complexity may have been part of the healing power of his art practice, as was the honesty with which he confronted and represented what ailed him.

Born in Newport, Oregon, Rick Bartow (1946-2016) was an enrolled member of the Mad River Band of Wiyot Indians and developed close ties with the Siletz community. He graduated in 1969 from Western Oregon University with a degree in secondary arts education before being drafted and serving in the Vietnam War (1969-71), from which he returned with severe PTSD and alcohol addiction. Art and reconnecting to his Indigenous heritage helped him confront both predicaments, and later, personal loss. In 2013, he suffered a severe stroke and artmaking proved once more to be a curative process. He died of congestive heart failure in 2016.

Bartow's work has been shown in more than a hundred solo exhibitions at national and international museums and galleries, including the major traveling retrospective *Things You Know But Cannot Explain*, organized by the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon in 2015 and accompanied with a fully illustrated monograph. His work is also included in numerous prestigious private and public permanent collections, such as the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, the Whitney Museum, the Denver Art Museum, and the Seattle Art Museum. The Portland Art Museum will soon be presenting *Rick Bartow: Storyteller*, a highly anticipated inaugural exhibition of over forty works from both PAM's collection and loans in their new Mark Rothko Pavilion, demonstrating "the late Wiyot artist's gift as a visual storyteller."

Karen Murphy, Bartow Trustee, and Wilder Schmaltz, Bartow Trust Manager, will be attending the opening reception on Friday, October 3rd, from 5:30 to 7:30 pm. Please join us!

- *Sylvie Pederson*

