

# Artist Spotlight: IAIA Continues to Shape New Generations of Artists

**Mike Webb, Public Engagement Manager**

**Tell us about yourself.**

I am IIWAA, and my pronouns are he/they. My tribal affiliations are with the Piipaash and Quechan peoples, and I'm an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian Community, representative of District 7 Maricopa Colony.

**Where did you grow up?**

I grew up in a town called Casa Grande, in the epicenter of Gila River near Sacaton. Our family continues to live there.



Where do you currently live?

I've been a resident of Flagstaff for 11 years now. Initially it was to attend school at Northern Arizona University.

**How did you end up attending IAIA (Institute of American Indian Arts)?**

I was only familiar with it in a larger-than-life sense, thinking about it as the stomping grounds of Joy Harjo, Fritz Scholder, TC Cannon and other prominent Native artists. It was not necessarily a space I saw myself in yet, but a friend suggested I at least apply to IAIA and check it out. Leading up to that conversation, I had been writing poems every single day. This started in October 2017, and it was maybe two or three months of writing poems daily.

The day I received my acceptance was very heavy emotionally. It was Bike to Work Week and also my birthday. I crashed on the way to work and ended up being very late. As I walked in, they sat me down and immediately fired me. This was a day or two after getting my acceptance to IAIA. That experience felt like a confirmation that I should dedicate the majority of my time to developing my craft. That moment felt very appointed and, in a sense, divine.

**What degree did you graduate with?**

I graduated from IAIA with a master of fine arts in creative writing with a poetry emphasis.

**Reflecting back on it, was your journey as a student at IAIA helpful for your path as a musician?**

I think those two years at IAIA, as an artist and even as a person, were the most formative years of my life. I was going through so much privately, like letting go and uncovering my sense of self. Being a student there was opening so many doors for me in my life. At the start of each semester, I was spending a week on campus in dialogue with Indigenous people who are incredible creatives, amazing writers, but also just people, you know, having a lived experience of bowing under the weight of all the oppressive systems in the world that Indigenous people move through collectively. These people were defying the odds in a lot of ways to make their art, and I just really appreciated the conversations. The summation of the experience was transformative because of those great people around me. Ideas around what it means to be queer were so gently presented, and I had people there walking me through what facets of queerness could mean or look like. It presented a new color palette to identify experiences and emotions through.

**Where has your journey led you now?**

I felt empowered to begin making art colored by my experiences as a whole and specifically as a queer-identifying person, both outward and inward. So the experience led to rebuilding my relationships with other people, but also just letting people into my inner world.

Project-wise, in 2021 I put out an EP titled *Dysphoria* that I wrote while I was at IAIA. That project not only birthed some new poetry but also a new sense of my poetic Self. But what I've done since then is just begun to contribute to the world as a recording artist and as a

writer. I've released another collection of music since then and I've done collaborations as a songwriter for sports television in association with ESPN International and affiliated organizations like the NBA, MLB, NHL and WNBA. That's a huge milestone, personally and professionally. This affirmation of putting myself out in the world as a performer, and as a conveyor; that's been such a huge part of the last few years.

**How does IAIA continue to influence you right now and into the future?**

In the right now, IAIA is influencing my role as an educator. I educate students in grades 6 to 12 in music. It is important for me to stay near the pulse of community and continue create from that space. It shows me that my body of work is really important and impactful and has brought me to a very important place. Beyond that, I have come to accept the imperative of continuously interacting with other Indigenous creatives. The landscape of Indigenous music is broader and more accessible than ever before.

For me, it's important to highlight, promote and support other Indigenous creatives, including not only musicians and artists, but also craftspeople—people who make soap, people who make ribbon skirts, people who vend delicious cultural foods. It's important for me to center them. Those are the people who I'm looking to collaborate with. It is important for me to be near the pulse and continue to create. It shows me that my body of work is really important and impactful and has brought me to a very important place. I truly believe my work is more valuable as part of a tapestry of other artists who do different things, who come from different places, and have different experiences.

**When you say it's valuable, what does that mean for you in the wider tapestry? Why is a ribbon skirt maker just as valuable to you as your skill?**

Well, I have such a love for and belief in Indigenous people doing things that bring joy, and I think ancestrally we have a generational understanding and embodiment down to our cellular being of creating joy. Our ancestors lived that way for so long before the vines of colonialism and genocide took hold.

I see that value of joy in our lives, including anything that ties us into our sense of self and identity as part of an individual tribe or collectively as Indigenous folks.

I want to see more of it in the world, and I want others to take notice of it in a way that isn't limited. I think one of the concerns is it becomes compartmental in the wider discussion of art's influence—others saying Indigenous artists are great, but still compartmentalizing it as "Indigenous Art." Our creations and ways of creating are becoming so undeniably part of popular culture that there is no longer a container big enough to hold it.

**How would you describe this current iteration of IIWAA?**

IIWAA is currently at this convergence of sports, culture and music. So I am interested in the way those things intersect creatively. I am interested in holding space in a live performance setting to experience joy, healing through movement, and Indigenous excellence. Beyond that, the thing that tethers it all is just the cultural teaching as a Piipaash person. Our people believed so much in their dreams that their daily lives were guided by their dreams. I might even say that dreams are at the center of my vision for IIWAA. That's how I'm proceeding in all things.

**Who are some writers that inspire you?**

I'm reading Stephen Graham Jones, Stacie Denetsosie-Mitchell; I've read Marie-Helene Bertino and even Tommy Orange's *Wandering Stars*. The work *Dissolve* by Sherwin Bitsui is one that I have returned to often. It's a collection of beautiful poems. It's one of my greatest sources of inspiration. I could carry on about amazing writers like Sydney Freeland and Migizi Pensoneau and Ryan RedCorn. They are adding Indigenous stories, lifeways and points of view to the cultural narrative at large. I just feel really honored to be part of that lineage and heritage as an IAIA alum.

*Photograph courtesy of IIWAA.*