

Sammy Jo Bird  
"Tséhésenéstsestotse"





"Tsehésenéstsestse," 2020, acrylic on canvas, 3 x 3 ft (top: 12 x 24 in; center: 12 x 36 in; bottom: 12 x 24 in)

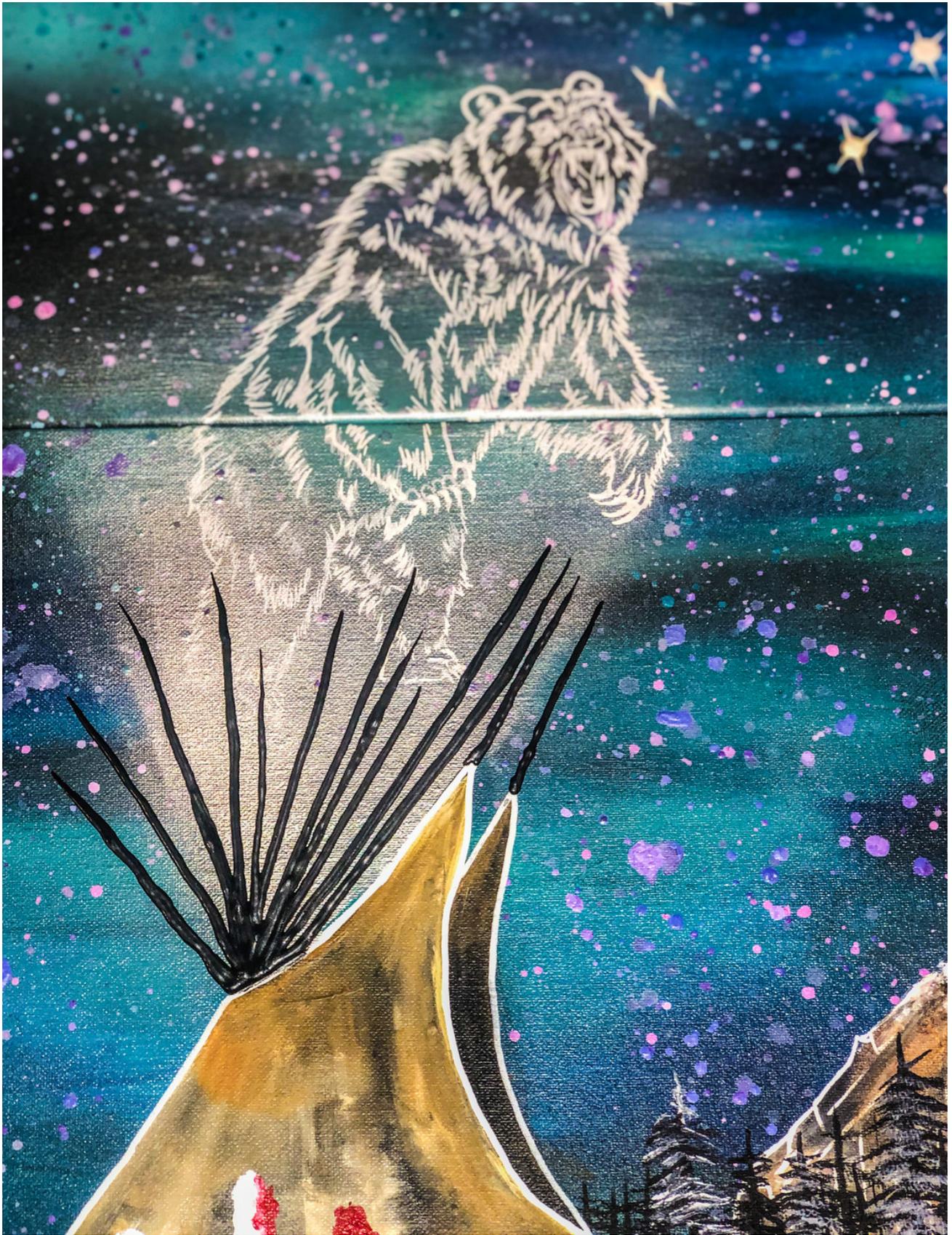
Sammy Jo Bird's three-part canvas "Tséhésenéstsestse" depicts the Northern Cheyenne Creation Story of The Big Dipper, or the constellation Ursa Major. She was inspired to paint this work after listening to Ruthie Shoulderblade tell the story in her Native Cheyenne language. Bird describes the words of the elder as "brushstrokes" that wash over the listener.

The work is comprised of three canvases, which reflect the unique experience of listening to the creation story. According to Bird, the painting has a "build-up" or a beginning, climax, and ending, just like the narrative. She paints in acrylic with various application methods, including several key symbolic elements from the tale: the teepee, devil's tower, river, bear tracks, and bear.

Indigenous stories are often told in the evening, which is reflected in Bird's artistic decision to paint the scene at nighttime. The night sky's magical quality takes on an appearance similar to the Northern Lights, highlighting the Big Dipper constellation. Bird's work calls attention to another Cheyenne art form: beadwork. The sides of the center canvas are decorated in ornate beaded patterns, modeled on traditional Cheyenne beading in which specific colors and patterns take on their own significance.



"Tséhésenéstsestse," 2020, detail



"Tséhésenéstsestotse," 2020, detail



"Tséhésenéstsesttse"

Told by Ruthie Shoulderblade of the Northern Cheyenne tribe

Recorded October 2020, Lame Deer, Montana, USA

*I am going to tell a story about a young girl and six brothers. This young lady lived with her mother among the Cheyenne people. The young girl was very skilled in porcupine quillwork. She made mocassins and clothing and the people in the village, the Cheyenne camp, were amazed with her handiwork. She was very talented in that way.*

*The young lady lived with her mother and sometimes she would take walks away from the camp. One day the weather was beautiful and she walked further than she usually did. She saw a lone camp, with a single teepee. When she saw the lone teepee she was very happy and thought she would go and meet new people. And so she walked to the lone teepee. When she got to the camp she found three little boys who were alone and she asked them, "Where are your father and your mother?" The youngest boy told her, "We are orphaned but we have three older brothers who have gone out to hunt."*

*So she stayed with them and helped them with whatever was needed around the camp. After a while, she left her teepee and returned to her mother's camp. When she got home she told her mother, "I've found my brothers!" "There are six brothers, three older brothers, and three younger brothers!" This she told her mother. She started to make mocassins and clothing for the boys. She did a beautiful job. Her mother and the people in the camp asked her what she was going to do with these things.*

She replied, "I have brothers and I'm going to give them these things that I have made with my hands." She told them that she was going to give these things to the boys and set out for the lone teepee where the orphans lived.

When she arrived there, she gave the gifts to all the brothers. They were amazed and very happy to receive the gifts of mocassins and brightly-colored garments. She stayed with the boys at their camp and she helped them to cook and with anything else they needed around the camp. She stayed with the brothers a while, without going home.

They would play games together and one day, they played "Bear Game." The children were playing "Bear Game" and in those days the Cheyenne people forbade children from playing "Bear Game" in case bears heard the call and were summoned. But the youngest said "Bear" accidentally during the game! After a while, they could hear something coming and bumping and crashing as it ran towards them. When the children looked to see what was coming, they saw it was a bear! The bear had a very long tail, long and sharp claws, and teeth that were long and sharp.

They started running! The children ran and ran. They ran a long way but the bear was still chasing them! Finally, they came to a clearing. A prairie land. The children were so tired. When they were running by a rock, a voice told them: "Get on that rock and I will save you!" Being so tired, they got on the rock. And when they got on the rock, the rock grew wide and very tall into the sky.

The bear was still coming, but when the bear got to the rock, she went all around the huge, tall rock and scratched and scratched to get to the top but could not. And she peeked over the edge of the rock and said to the young men, "Give me your sister and you will be safe!" "I want your sister!"

It was getting dark and the bear was still trying to climb the tower. That night, the girl and her brothers went to sleep on the rock. They were sent into the sky. They are now the seven stars you see up there in the sky. They formed the Big Dipper.

Today, we can sit out under the night sky and see the Big Dipper. Today you can see those seven stars. The story is complete.



"Tséhésenéstsestotse," 2020, detail



## Artist Statement: Sammy Jo Bird

Growing up on the Blackfeet Reservation in Northern Montana, I was raised with the "ponoka'o'mitta" (Blackfeet for horse). I have always had a close relationship with the horse, they have played a huge role not only in my art but in my life. Rodeo has allowed me to spend the majority of every day with these amazing creatures. I am a barrel racer, breakaway roper, and have competed in many horse races. Horses have given me my greatest highs and achievements, but yet continue to keep me humble.

In this crazy world, horses and art are my escape. They are my escape from all my stress, my escape from my worries, they are my escape where I can go take a deep breath and realize everything is going to be okay. They are my escape where I feel the most blessed.

While growing up on the reservation helped me to appreciate and respect not only the horse but all of mother nature's animals. It also showed me how unjust, tragic, and hard life can be not only for the animals but for our people. That's what fuels my passion for painting. I truly believe that just one painting can make a difference. It can make a difference in a community, it can make a difference in a home, it can make a difference in the world if it can influence just one person. Rather than auctioning off a painting for someone's benefit or just simply someone glancing at a painting and it making their day a little better.

The drive and passion behind my art is not only my love for animals but my love for people. I want my paintings to help people, make people smile, and make a positive statement. I want my paintings to be someone's escape.

# First Voices

Empowering the youth of the Native American Nations

Thresh's groundbreaking educational initiative, First Voices, serves students at Title I reservation schools within Native American communities across the USA. Conceived during the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing project inspires young adults from the First Nations to find and develop their own unique voice in the contemporary world through re-connection with the ancient stories and the wisdom of the tribal elders.

The project is currently in partnership with Lame Deer Junior High School, situated on the Northern Cheyenne reservation east of Billings, Montana. Tribal elders from the Northern Cheyenne, as well as teaching artists drawn from neighboring tribes, are working with the students alongside project director Preeti Vasudevan (Founder and Artistic Director, Thresh).



---

Sammy Jo Bird

"Tséhésenéstsettse," 2020

Acrylic on canvas

3 x 3 ft (top: 12 x 24 in; center: 12 x 36 in;  
bottom: 12 x 24 in)

For pricing and more information, email [aseneca@threshdance.org](mailto:aseneca@threshdance.org)

The proceeds of this Thresh-commissioned work will support the commission of more artwork, thus paying artists fairly. The First Voices Project reaches First Nations elders, artists, and youth, empowering the community through the preservation and documentation of ancestral stories.

Thresh is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization, EIN 20-3777322. All contributions are fully tax-deductible. No goods or services will be provided in exchange for your contribution.

# ]Thresh[

Thresh is a New York-based, female-led performing-arts organization. Founded in 2005 by award-winning Indian choreographer Preeti Vasudevan, Thresh creates a provocative dialogue between Indian and western performing arts, connecting heritage cultures with contemporary lives.

The two-fold mission of Thresh is to educate and to entertain. Thresh's work revolves around the art of storytelling in all its forms—from creating cross-cultural productions that deal with issues of identity, race, gender and inclusion, to outreach programs with marginalized and underserved communities in the US and overseas.

Thresh's work on and off the stage and online provides a safe space in which individuals from diverse groups can explore their own personal stories, gaining confidence and authentic leadership skills as a result.

Thresh has recognition and support from leading US institutions including Lincoln Center for Performing Arts, US Department of State, National Endowment for the Arts, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Guggenheim Museum, and arts leaders like world-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma and Jacques d'Amboise, legendary ballet dancer and founder of the National Dance Institute for children.



Preeti Vasudevan conducting a life skills workshop with Junior High School students in partnership with Silkroad. Lame Deer, Montana, USA, Spring 2019