

THE TREATY OF 1868: AN EPIC



"The Treaty of 1868: An Epic" is a series of eight oil paintings by Joan Waltemath addressing her relationship to the American Indian culture of the Great Plains. Emulating the vast and uninhabited nature of the prairie landscape, these neutral-hued canvases are near fifteen feet on each side. Appearing sparse at first, they in fact abound with narrative, expressive, symbolic, conceptual, and formal layering.

Waltemath is known as a geometric abstract artist, but in this series she alludes to real events. Her grids, always based on the golden section, are innately proportioned to the human body; in this series they are sewn units of natural and black canvas.



Pale floating rectangles and slim black slices hold the space, the grid loosely corralling various markings. Tracts of cloud-like billowing whites, indicating the spiritual realm, abut areas of intricate pictographic writing, rust brown as in rock-art, suggesting episodes in material life. Floating throughout is the occasional neon patch, charcoal smudge, whisper of pencil, an incongruous mechanical diagram, and countless other enigmatic shapes still to be named, all indicating transitions between visible and invisible planes. The artist makes her own paints, and employs an extensive range of light-reflecting materials so that, as the viewer moves, the surfaces ripple and shift in an endless dance of appearances and disappearances.

Abstract art, originally devised to convey spiritual realities -- by Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, Delaunay, Kupka, and the recently acknowledged Hilma af Klimt -- is the ideal language to recount the story of the First Peoples. Waltemath, born in Nebraska on Treaty land, was compelled to attest to these sagas after her immersion in the ceremonies of Lakota spiritual life. She was also compelled to stay true to her own abstract trajectory. The result is a new form of history painting, open to interpretation and fully resonant with the contemporary era.

In initial showings to the Native American community, all instinctively knew the ceremonial world her paintings expressed, all could immediately see and feel the drama.



VIMEO of Joan Waltemath discussing the TREATY of 1868 Series at the Bemis Center in 2018. [click on image to play - 5 minutes long]

The 8 Paintings:

PALLIUM

The land is coveted.

THE FALLEN

There is a fight.

TORQUE MIRA

Vanquished.

M'S CROSSING

Ancient ways.

SMOKE

Legally human.

GROUND PLAN FT. CROOK

Ceremonial power.

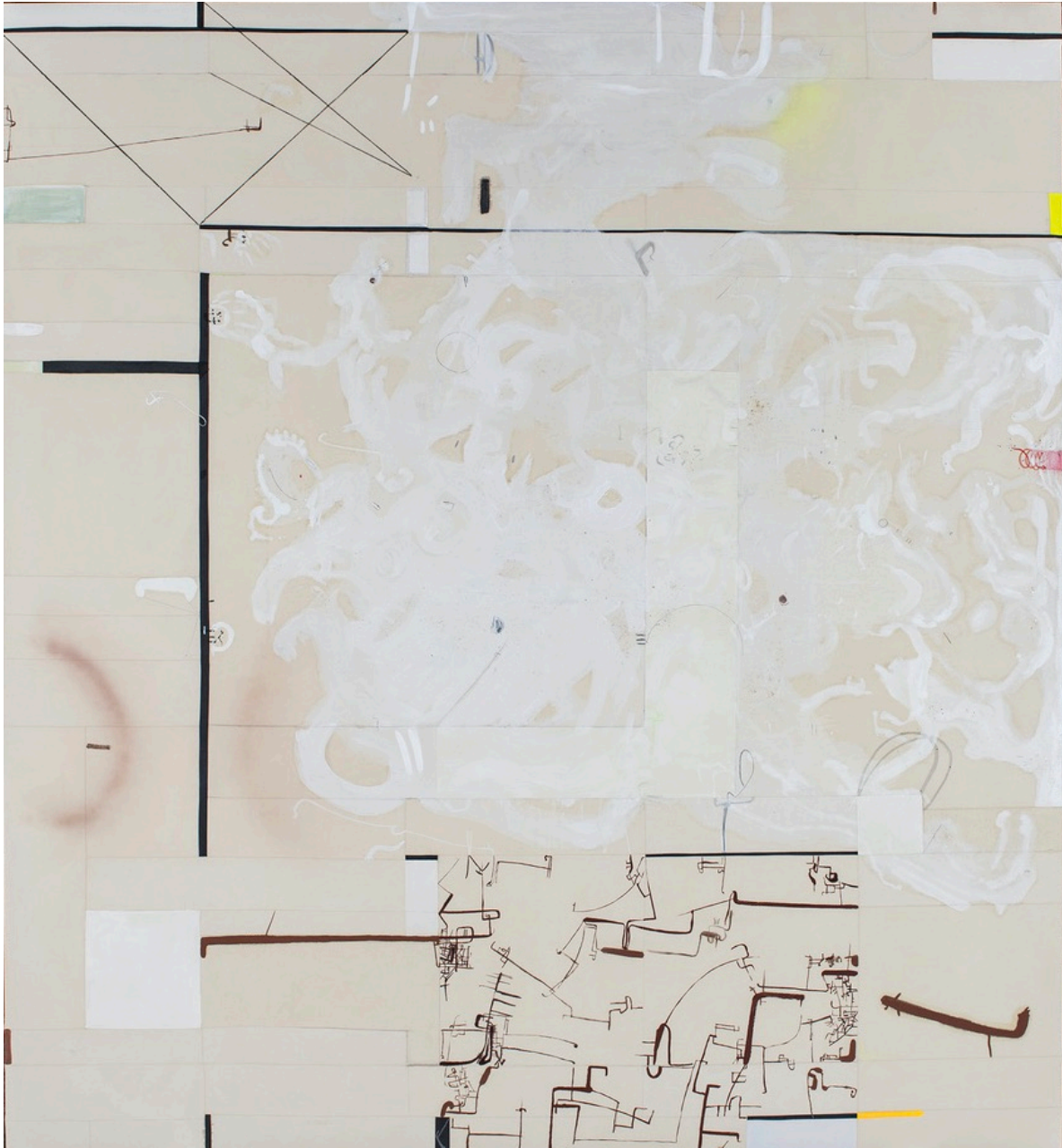
OYATE

The People.

COMING HOME

Celebration.

PALLIUM



Sewn 2009, painted 2017

174" x 160"

Oil, lead white, graphite, Spanish hematite, copper, iron oxide, florescent, interference, polar silver, diamond silver, phosphorescent, mica, lapis lazuli, and malachite pigment, oil stick, oil crayon and spray paint on prepared natural and black canvas sewn from individual pieces.

PALLIUM: A triangular apparatus in the upper left hovers over a large square area surging with white turmoil, an area indicating the First Peoples spiritual realm. In the lower area, reddish-brown pictographic writing channeled by the artist alludes to events on the earth plane.

The Treaty of 1868 is confirmed between the United States government and three Plains tribes, the Lakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho. In exchange for an end to decades of fighting, the First Peoples are given a vast track of their own land stretching from Nebraska to Wyoming and Montana. The agreement brings to an end the ancient nomadic way of life of the Indian, one which existed in harmony with Earth and nature.

The American government's *coup de gras* was hunting the buffalo to extinction in the Treaty territory, thereby depriving the tribes of their primary food source. In exchange for promises that they wouldn't starve, native tribes must now conform to the foreign standards of the incoming dominant culture, including living in permanent settlements, learning to herd or farm, and converting to Christianity.

Over the next 40 years, in violation of this Treaty, the government incrementally confiscates most of what remains of Indian territory, while European settlers are granted their land in the Homestead Act.

Pallium refers to the vestment draping the shoulders of the Pope.

THE FALLEN



Sewn 2010, painted 2016-17

152 1/2" x 140 1/4"

Oil, lead white, graphite, hematite, copper, iron oxide, florescent, interference, phosphorescent, mica, and malachite pigment, oil stick, oil crayon and spray paint on prepared natural and black canvas sewn from individual pieces.

THE FALLEN: The large center, bounded by two black strips, is peppered with small phosphorescent coral and transparent blue crosses, undulating in and out of view as one moves, in honor of those who died in battle.

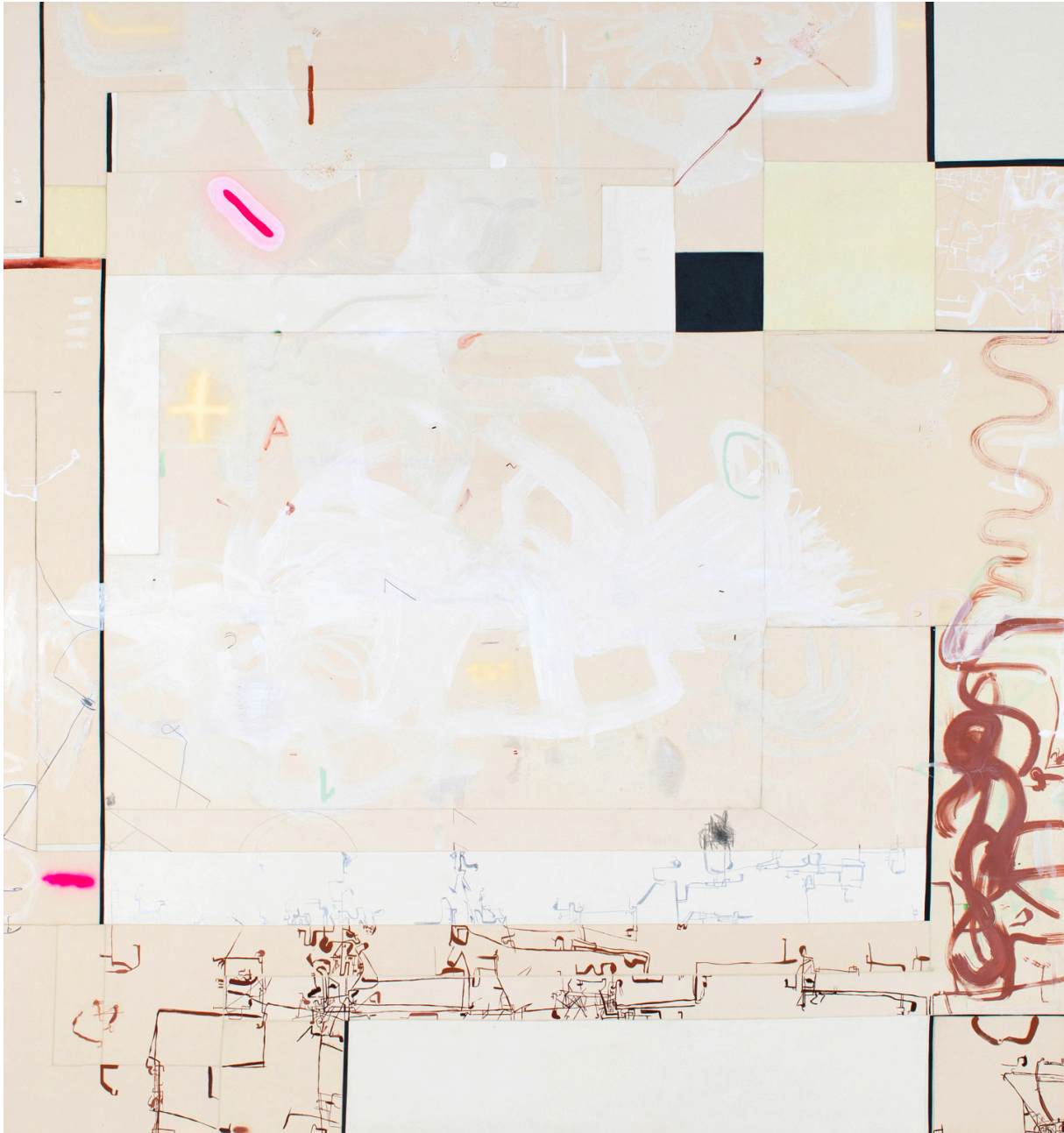
In the summer of 1876 thousands of Indians from all over the Treaty territory journey to the Little Bighorn River in southeastern Montana for Sundance, the most important sacred ceremony of the year.

Ceremony, the bedrock of the Plains Indian way of life includes sweat lodge, song, drum, dance, costume, prayer, pipe-smoking, medicine wheels, and feasts. Ancestors come forward in spirit to offer insight, give advice, uncover problems, and in general, to inspire. Rooted in communing with invisible forces, this original way of life was considered by the white man to be pagan, inscrutable, and somewhat unnerving.

Particularly unsettling at this time was the rapid spread of the Ghost Dance. Often led by Chief Sitting Bull, this new ceremony was dedicated to expelling the conquerors from native lands and restoring a peaceful existence to the tribes. Attempting to suppress this burgeoning movement, General Custer took a large flank of soldiers to disperse the Sundance gathering, but underestimating the size of the assembly, he was overwhelmed and defeated.

The fallen on both sides are memorialized here with the many crosses, ideally to be seen in darkness to encourage reflection. Custer's army marches up the left side. A grove of trees hovers at the upper left, witnessing the slaughter.

TORQUE MIRA



Sewn 2012, painted 2017
169" x 158"

Oil, lead white, hematite, copper, iron oxide, aluminum, pipestone, interference, florescent, mica, phosphorescent pigment and oil stick, graphite and conté crayon on prepared natural and black canvas sewn from individual pieces.

TORQUE MIRA: Slight pencil markings struggle to penetrate and map out the central area of transformative light, which now accommodates a small glowing cross. Neon pink wands might be flashlights trying to peer into this dimension so mysterious to the foreigners. On the right, an enlarged ceremonial dancer spins in thick red earth swirls, spiraling up to different levels of consciousness in an attempt to clear the air, understand, and correct.

By the 1880s, the American government intentionally conspires to demolish Native American culture. Congress formally bans all Indian traditions, ceremonies, dances, feasts, language, and manner of dress. The family unit is broken up, children are seized and forced to attend boarding school far from their parents. If a man has long hair, he receives no rations and is eventually imprisoned.

On the reservations, whatever could be preserved of native culture was kept in secret. Sundance continued to be performed annually through a careful system of guards, passwords, and hidden trails. But much traditional ceremony was lost forever.

The title TORQUE MIRA is a play on the Grand Inquisitor Torquemada who executed thousands during the Spanish Inquisition some 400 years before. It also refers to the way that ceremony can reorient a torqued vision.

M's CROSSING



Sewn 2011, painted 2015 -17

172" x 168 1/2"

Oil, lead white, marble dust, hematite, copper, iron oxide, aluminum, interference, florescent, mica and phosphorescent pigment on prepared natural and black canvas sewn from individual pieces.

M's CROSSING: The pictographs in the lower area are enmeshed in tangles but appear to lift up and cross a black strip into an area of blue grey wisps which continue to rise across more black lines and shift into white realms.

Waltemath here re-counts her experience at the Bemis Art Center in downtown Omaha where she had a residency in 2008. The Center was formed from abandoned buildings purchased in the 1970s by the enterprising artist Jun Kaneko. When living and working there, Waltemath was consciously aware of antithetical forces affecting the residents and challenging creative life.

In a lucid dream she was led through the building, coming upon a group of cowboys drinking and playing cards, exuding a familiar hostility. A coincidence the following morning revealed that this building was once the First National Bank, a meeting place for many who had participated in the extermination of the Indians and their culture, and the opening of their lands for white settlement. The building needed clearing. Friends in the native community recognized the situation when visiting her studio, and several traditional ceremonies for this purpose took place. The atmosphere lifted and slowly light returned to the building.

Waltemath had already been developing the harmonic patterns to sew the grounds for her new series of large canvases, but now she knew the subject of the series: The Treaty of 1868. "M" is a stand-in for the "Many" who were released during the creation of this work.

A white square at the upper left turns blue in the dark, indicating how spirits come in as lights flying around the room at night.

M's CROSSING was shown in 2018 at the American Academy of the Arts and Letters, where Joan was given the Jacob Lawrence Award for outstanding achievement in the Visual Arts. Here is an excerpt from their press release:

"While all art seems to contain some aspect of deeply understood and personal ritual, through years of study and participation Joan Waltemath has, in some sense, become a part of the highly structured and visionary Lakota Indian Tradition. Through her knowledge of the Lakota ceremonies as well as art history and her extensive explorations into philosophy and harmonics, Waltemath's new paintings take this ancient tradition and magically transform its structure into a new and brilliant visual experience. This understanding presents itself in these paintings so clearly that we, the viewers, are able to become further informed about our own personal journeys."

SMOKE



Sewn 2015, painted 2018
150"x 146"

Lead white, lead white with marble dust, fluorescent white, phosphor red, phosphor blue, iron oxide, hematite, Spanish hematite, Robert's black pipe dust, Pearl Luster turquoise, Pearl Luster Silver, Pearl Luster copper, Polar silver interference, Diamond Silver, Magic White, Micro Silver, selenite, oil pastel, graphite, and charcoal on prepared natural and black canvas sewn from individual pieces.

SMOKE: The pictographic area has a concentrated mass with looser elements around, the highest figure resembling a horseman placing his lance at the exact corner where the spirit realm begins, marked with a small coral square. Across the way a tiny circle of yellow hovers against a bright white reverse L shape. Above and to the side, iridescent cloud shapes float and coalesce, weaving in and out, crossing over the upper black strips.

Waltemath expresses here how, through ceremonial life, time moves in multiple directions, shifting worlds backwards and forwards. In the early 2000s she was introduced to the yuwipi healing ceremonial culture through her brother, a social worker with the Northern Ponca tribe. He was working to help stabilize this devastated, inebriated community through a return to the traditional ways at the heart of their culture.

In one of her first yuwipi ceremonies, lasting all night, she witnessed an historic peace made between traditional enemies from the Ponca and Lakota tribes. It included the appearance of Smokemaker, a Ponca holy man who had been killed in 1868 by Lakota Warriors. When the US gave the Ponca homeland to the Lakota in the Treaty of 1868, the Lakota moved in swiftly for the kill. The remaining Poncas were forced to walk to their new home in Arkansas, their possessions were burned behind them by the government, who had promised to send them along after they arrived in their new home.

On their walk south, the son of Chief Standing Bear died, but a proper burial could only take place on their ancestral homeland. When Standing Bear appeared in Nebraska again, carrying the body of his son, he was arrested for trespassing, and incarcerated. East Coast advocates took up his cause, eventually leading to Standing Bear speaking persuasively before Congress.

In this first civil rights case, in 1879, Standing Bear was declared to be human, for until then Indians and Blacks were considered as animals with no human rights.

Those who remained in the north with Standing Bear became the Northern Poncas and so the Southern Poncas were also formed.

A statue of Standing Bear was recently sent by the State of Nebraska to stand in the US Capitol Building in Washington DC, replacing one of the two statues allowed for each state.

Pigment used in the painting is made with pipe dust given to Waltemath by Smokemaker's great grandson.

GROUND PLAN FORT CROOK



Sewn 2014, painted 2018
151" x 151"

Lead white, lead white with marble dust, fluorescent white, phosphor red, phosphor blue, iron oxide, hematite, Spanish hematite, Rick's pipe dust, malachite, Pearl Luster turquoise, Pearl Luster copper, Pearl Luster silver, aluminum, Pearl silver interference, diamond silver, magic white, oil pastel, graphite, charcoal on prepared natural and black canvas sewn from individual pieces.

GROUND PLAN FORT CROOK: A multitude of whites creates a surface which quivers, shimmers and flashes images as one moves: a bear strides majestically across the fields disappearing into eagles soaring through the white and blue heavens folding into coyotes roaming over the prairies, horses streaking through the winds, and innumerable unidentifiable beings changing shape.



[detail]

At the painting's mid-left is the plan of the original Fort Crook grounds in Omaha, where Chief Standing Bear was imprisoned for trespassing on his dispossessed homeland when he returned to bury his son.

Waltemath painted the pictographic sections of this painting with stone pipe dust presented to her by a descendent of Standing Bear. The sacred pipe is a kind of telephone line to the spirit world, an important way to communicate with ancestors. And in the spirit world, nature repeats in cycles and time collapses.

As she painted, a drama of spirits ensued as it was discovered that in the family line of Standing Bear, a century later, there was another incorrect burial. Through efforts with ceremony, prayer, and inipi (sweat lodge), this incomplete burial gained closure.

The pictographs are a narrative of the story. Below are pictographs of severed heads on poles, the ancient Ponca way to handle conquered enemies; the narrative moves upwards through the bands of canvas to depict how events are connected through time.

OYATE



Sewn 2014, painted 2018

152" x 146"

Oil, lead white, lead white with marble dust, fluorescent white, phosphor red, phosphor blue, iron oxide, hematite, Spanish hematite, red pipe dust from many pipes, Pearl Luster turquoise, Pearl Luster silver, pearl silver interference, Diamond Silver, Magic White, Micro Silver, oil pastel, graphite, colored pencil, conté crayon and charcoal on prepared natural and black canvas sewn from individual pieces.

OYATE means The People, one's soul group, here refined by Waltemath to mean a group of people connected through spiritual practice. The Native American spiritual practice is called the Red Road. There is no deity per se on this road. Instead, prayer is offered to the four directions.

In the central area of the painting are four squares: the lower left is West, the direction of the Rocky Mountains and the origin of water; thunder and lightning are spirits belonging to water; its color is black, here painted in iron oxide pictographs.



North is painted with hematite pigment; East, associated with new beginnings is

[detail]

painted with a pipe dust mixture given to Waltemath by several different pipe carriers.

South is associated with transformation, and is painted with copper. Copper was also used by Joseph Beuys who Waltemath acknowledges as an important predecessor in creating works of art intended to transform and heal trauma.

The structure of this painting differs from others of the series which are organized as bottom, middle, and top areas. In OYATE, the earthly realm of pictographs is in the center, and it is surrounded by the divine dimension.

The pictographic elements here are intended to come close enough to recognizable imagery so as to trigger memories and associations by the audience that reflect each individual's own circumstances.

detail OYATE



COMING HOME



Sewn 2011, painted 2018 - present (unfinished)
146" x 141"

Oil, lead white, fluorescent white, phosphor red, black pipe dust, iron oxide, micro silver, fluorescent, Pearl Luster turquoise, red pipe dust, diamond silver, Pearl Luster copper, phosphorescent blue.

At the mid-right center of the painting is a floating yellow square, while at the mid-left are two equal interlocking forms.

Analogous to Mondrian's early abstraction where the figure-ground relationship dissolves into a unified field, we are now culturally moving into a new awareness of our interrelatedness. These middle forms indicate the shift accommodating western thought processes into the way of nature where all is interwoven, interdependent, and honored as a part of the whole. On the Red Road, we are all relations, including the insects, the blades of grass, the winds, rains, and the clouds in the sky.

When you return to the ancient ways it is called COMING HOME. Waltemath describes: "When you experience Sundance with music, theatre, costume, dance, medicine, feast, ritual, marking the calendar, when everything is synchronous, you experience your group, your soul group, and feel that everything is one."

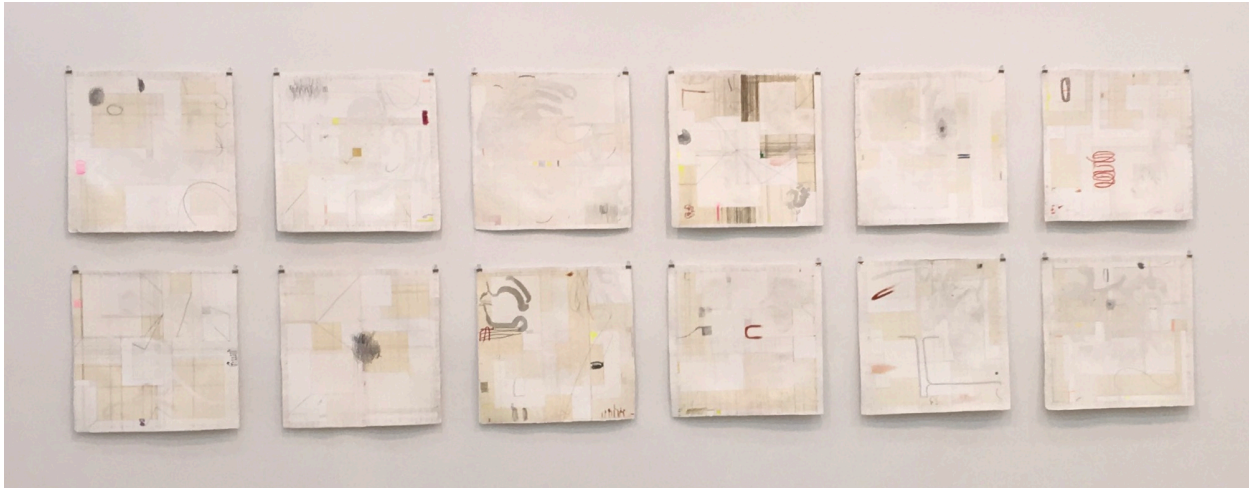
She has now completed fifteen years of Sundance. The third cycle of 4 years, considered a mastery of self, leads to giving back - passing it on to future generations. Decisions made by the council of elders in most tribes are made with a view to the next seven generations and how it will affect them.

The pictographs of the lower squares delineate visions of the artist's movements though different dimensions of life times.

TREATY OF 1868: A LAMENT

The Drawings

There are a number of works on paper in the Treaty of 1868 Series, all of which Waltemath subtitles "A Lament". The image below is from an installation in 2019 at Mana Contemporary in Jersey City NJ, as part of the exhibition "Flat Out: Works on Paper from 2000-2019", curated by Ysabel Pinyol and Karline Moeller.



Mixed materials on cotton and linen paper, 22" x 22", 2016-17

1. 1 2 3 5 8 west* **FOUR-LEGGED WISDOM**
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, crayon, conté crayon, casein, gouache, egg tempera, bronze and metallic paint
2. 1 2 3 5 8 above **INSIDE THE CIRCLE WE STILL HEAR YOU CRYING**
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, crayon, casein, gouache, egg tempera, bronze and metallic paint
3. 1 2 3 5 8 above **THE FROTH OF EXUBERANCE**
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, crayon, casein, gouache, egg tempera, bronze and metallic paint
4. 1 2 3 5 8 east **BEGINNING OF ENDLESS ENDS**
pencil, colored pencil, conté crayon, oil pastel, iridescent crayon, casein, gouache, egg tempera and metallic paint
5. 1 2 3 5 8 east **LEIBNIZ'S GOD OR WALKS WITH LIGHTNING**
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, crayon, casein, gouache, egg tempera

6. 1 2 3 5 8 below MIND/HAND MINE/HAND MY HAND
pencil, colored pencil, casein, gouache, egg tempera and metallic paint
7. 1 2 3 5 8 below DARKNESS AT THE CORE
pencil, colored pencil, conté crayon, casein, gouache, egg tempera, and metallic paint
8. 1 3 4 7 above RED JOURNEY
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, conté crayon, iridescent crayon, casein, gouache, egg tempera and metallic paint
9. 1 3 4 7 east FAINTLY: YOU STILL HEAR THEM IN THE BACKGROUND
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, casein, gouache, egg tempera and metallic paint
10. 1 3 4 7 below VOICES OF THE DEAD ASKING TO BE SEEN
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, casein, gouache, egg tempera and metallic paint
11. 1 3 4 7 below FERRO PHARAOH
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, crayon, iridescent crayon, casein, gouache, egg tempera, and metallic paint
12. 1 3 4 7 below INNER EYE
pencil, colored pencil, oil pastel, crayon, conté crayon, casein, gouache, egg tempera and metallic paint

* "1 2 3 5 8 west" etc. refers to the area of the grid wrap from which the drawing was created, a notation Waltemath maintains in titling her works on paper. The same grid wrap was used in all the Treaty of 1868 works. The notation helps her locate the area within the grid wrap for reference.