

# Luzene Hill:



# Revelate



A world in balance and equilibrium was the prevailing philosophy on this continent prior to 1492. Equilibrium imbued daily routines; balance was ingrained in social and political systems.

Olin (motion-change) is the Nahuatl word for the natural rhythms of the universe:

sunrise/sunset    heartbeats    earthquakes    inhale/exhale  
tidal ebb and flow    volcanos    labor/birthing

The rhythm of a world in balance is here.

It has always been here, unrelenting, beneath the white noise of colonialism.

Patriarchy obliterated matrilineal cultures; societies based on balance, in which women had agency and choice.

Revelate revels in Indigenous culture rising up, being heard, being felt. Pulsing, rhythmic vibration resounding, exploding, back into the world – through female energy and power.

—Luzene Hill

An enrolled member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, Luzene Hill advocates for Indigenous sovereignty—linguistically, culturally, and individually. Investigation of pre-contact cultures has led Hill to the idea of Olin in Aztec cosmology. Before Europeans arrived in North America, Indigenous societies were predominantly matrilineal. Women were considered sacred, involved in the decision-making process, and thrived within communities holding a worldview based on equilibrium. Olin emphasizes that we are in constant state of motion and discovery of information. Adopted as an educational framework, particularly in social justice and ethnic studies, Olin guides individuals through a process of reflection, action, reconciliation, and transformation.

Revelate combines Hill's use of mylar safety blankets alongside recent drawings. Capes constructed of mylar burst with energy and rustle subtly, the shining material a signifier of care, awareness, displacement, and presence. Hill works primarily in installation and performance, though drawing has increasingly become an essential part of her practice as she seeks to communicate themes of feminine and Indigenous power across her entire body of work. The energy within her drawings extends to the bursts of light reflecting from her capes or the accumulation of materials in other installation works. Of drawing's significance, Hill states: "Vulnerability is a recurring theme in my work. It's a presence, expressed unconsciously in my drawings. Drawing is relinquishing control . . . smudging charcoal and pastels, ink or tea stain spilling over the paper—the random, spontaneous occurrence that provokes me to make a mark."

Luzene Hill was born in Atlanta, GA, in 1946. She received her BFA and MFA degrees from Western Carolina University. She lives and works on the Qualla Boundary, Cherokee, NC.

This exhibition was organized by the Asheville Art Museum and curated by Hilary Schroeder, former assistant curator, with assistance from Alexis Meldrum, former curatorial assistant, in collaboration with the Artist. Special thanks to Echo Mountain Recording, Asheville, NC, for assistance with sound recording and Darrell Cassell for filming and editing the Artist's performance.



## Indigenous Reflections and Revelations of Luzene Hill by John Haworth

John Haworth is the Senior Executive Emeritus, Smithsonian Institution National Museum of the American Indian. He has held leadership positions in the arts throughout his career and has given presentations at national and international conferences. His essays have been published in museum catalogues, magazines, and blogs. He is a member of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma.

I first met Luzene Hill in 2015 at the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis when she received a Native American Contemporary Art Fellowship. Hill's work was featured in the exhibition *Conversations*. At its core, her work engages us in deeper conversations about complex issues.

What a transcendent experience it was to see her immersive installation *Retracing the Trace* at the Eiteljorg. The gallery with her work was filled with thousands of handmade, crimson-dyed cords knotted according to an Incan system of counting and storytelling. The khipus (the Quechua word for knots) were arranged like a large carpet with a red ring formed on the gallery walls.

Throughout several days while the work was on view, Hill was in residence interacting with the public as she took each individual khipu and hung them on the gallery walls. The knots were meticulously counted as the work unfolded. The 3,870 khipus represent the number of sexual assaults that go unreported each day in the United States. Carefully documented and grounded in research and cultural understanding, her work is daring, eloquent, heartbreaking, and provocative.

Through engagement with her work, we come to learn a deeply personal story about Hill's rape and how her art examines not only her own suffering but also the life-changing horrors of sexual assault on women throughout the world. This installation is an outpouring of her life and experience. Though Hill remained silent for years after being sexually assaulted while jogging in a park in 1994, her art affords her the opportunity to reveal a difficult truth that is both universal and poignant. The work illuminates a serious social issue and urges us to become more engaged with and enraged about this issue as well as related ones. She incorporates an Indigenous cultural practice to connect the silencing of sexual assault survivors to the silencing of Indigenous cultures. The gallery itself became a metaphor for the artist's body as she draws attention to the issue by renouncing the traces of her own trauma.

Social justice issues have been interrogated and illuminated in performances and installations created throughout Hill's career. Although she continues creating two-dimensional paintings and drawings, she is best known for her conceptual installations and performances. Hill's work certainly is not what people think of as traditional Native art; rather, it is work that responds directly to current challenges facing Native people and communities.

Hill's installation in the Asheville Art Museum's exhibit *Revelate* includes drawings adjacent to elevated suspended mylar capes with aluminum and silk armatures which cast shadows and reflections in the space. In performance, Hill wraps herself in a cape and through her movements, there are unexpected shapes and reflections. The soft rhythmic sounds and motion flowing from Hill's outfit and persona are both subtle and powerful. There are layers of meaning in one's encounter with this installation, especially in terms of Indigenous and feminist discourse and perspective.

Many contemporary artists are explicit about their social justice concerns, and Hill is no exception; however, her work also touches us on emotional, psychological, and personal levels. And while her work

is informed by contemporary political discourse and the history of Indigenous peoples, it is grounded in solid studio practice and is technically and artistically proficient. Hill strikes a balance between formality, aesthetics, and the social message. Her deep commitment to social engagement is coupled with a drive to share her stories and beliefs. Rather than lecturing her audiences, however, she provides opportunities for healing, catharsis, and deeper understanding.

Hill takes many risks in making her work – including to what extent her personal life and experiences are shared through the work itself. Though challenging experiences from Hill's life both inform and are expressed through her work, she manages to strike a balance between aesthetics and formal values with an using her informed worldview. There is much exuberance and expressive energy in her recent work.

Hill understands how best to include ephemeral materials in her work, including tea stains, delicate fabrics, bees wax, mylar blankets, and cochineal dyed materials. Her choice of materials is central to her artistry as is performance. Often draped in fragile-looking materials and textiles, her body also becomes a central feature animating her work. Her discipline in drawing and sculpture anchors all that she creates in her installations and performances. Grounded in cultural and historical understanding, her work has a poetic quality. In creating museum and site-specific installations, she helps her audiences understand complex issues on a deeper level. In communicating tough issues, she also manages to create visually stunning work.

During this current period of tremendous social, cultural, and political upheaval, artists are challenging our assumptions about the most significant and complex contemporary issues. Luzene Hill brings needed attention to key issues while engaging our hearts and minds.



Luzene Hill, *Untitled*, 2012, tea and charcoal on paper, 11 x 14 inches. Collection of the Artist. © Luzene Hill. Courtesy the Artist.

## Luzene Hill by Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle

There is both weight and weightlessness in the presence of Luzene Hill's latest installment, *Revelate*. It brings a delicate counterbalance of sound and space that invites us to listen—listen for the peace and listen for the untold stories. Yet, it also reminds us of the white noise of colonialism that has silenced and subdued Indigenous female voices for centuries. Her work, whether in the mylar cape form or in her earlier sketches, is an unapologetic empowerment of the female figure. These emerging, erupting manifestations seek to return the equity and equilibrium of a world subdued by colonial, patriarchal violence.

In Cherokee culture, the concept of *to-hi*—a term that is most closely related to the English term "health" but includes a deeper state of equilibrium that embraces all physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a person and community—is this balance that Hill incites in her work. However, Hill acknowledges that this work is not only representative of Cherokee culture or of the loss of Cherokee matrilineal dynamics. Her research has led her to study Indigenous cultures in South America as well. For example, Nahuatl is a language that was once spoken throughout the Aztec empire and is still spoken today in certain regions, including parts of Mexico. *Olin*, the Nahuatl word for the natural rhythms of nature, is a term Hill uses to remind observers that counterbalancing energies of bodily contractions are essential to life though they are repeatedly tamped by colonial powers. Women have been taught to minimize the space they inhabit and to still their life forces.

In response to global colonialism, Hill's figures seem, even in their minimal lines and shades, to resist the pressures and forces opposing feminine energy. Her performances reveal the potential of these rhythms to rise against suffocating noises and methodically emerge in full, sexual prowess.

As an adult college student, Hill "fell in love with" the human form and later became interested in bones as sculptural elements as well. While she begins her sketches with a surrealist automatic drawing method of simply making unintentional marks on paper, the drawings evolve into this bone-based structure that Hill connects to the bones exposed in an archeological site. While these archeological bones are unearthed for the purpose of study and scientific classification,



Hill's unearthing of form is a life-giving ceremony of resurrection—resurrection of the rhythms.

These rhythms are breaths, contractions and heartbeats of her ancestors. And yet, they are no different than the rhythms of all people. Hill notes that high incidences of violence against women have a clear connection to cultures who do not revere women as integral to society—who do not connect the feminine to those life-giving rhythms. In this way, her work is a call-to-action to all societies. To witness her work requires engagement. The viewer is surrounded and cannot simply walk past unchanged. Or rather, the viewer cannot help but be moved by the implied rhythm of each piece.

Hill believes her work has undergone a transformation since returning to her Cherokee home in North Carolina. Her connection to place, land, and people is evident in her most recent work as if her geographical shift has inspired the emergent shifts of her subject-matter. Her forms have risen with the mountains of Cherokee Country, and her art has broken through the trappings ever-present in non-Indigenous societies. In this ancestral land, Hill's forms are alive in all their feminine glory.



Luzene Hill, *Untitled*, 2017, ink and gouache on Arches paper, 13 x 16 inches. 2022 Collectors' Circle purchase, 2022.42.01. © Luzene Hill. Courtesy the Artist.



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