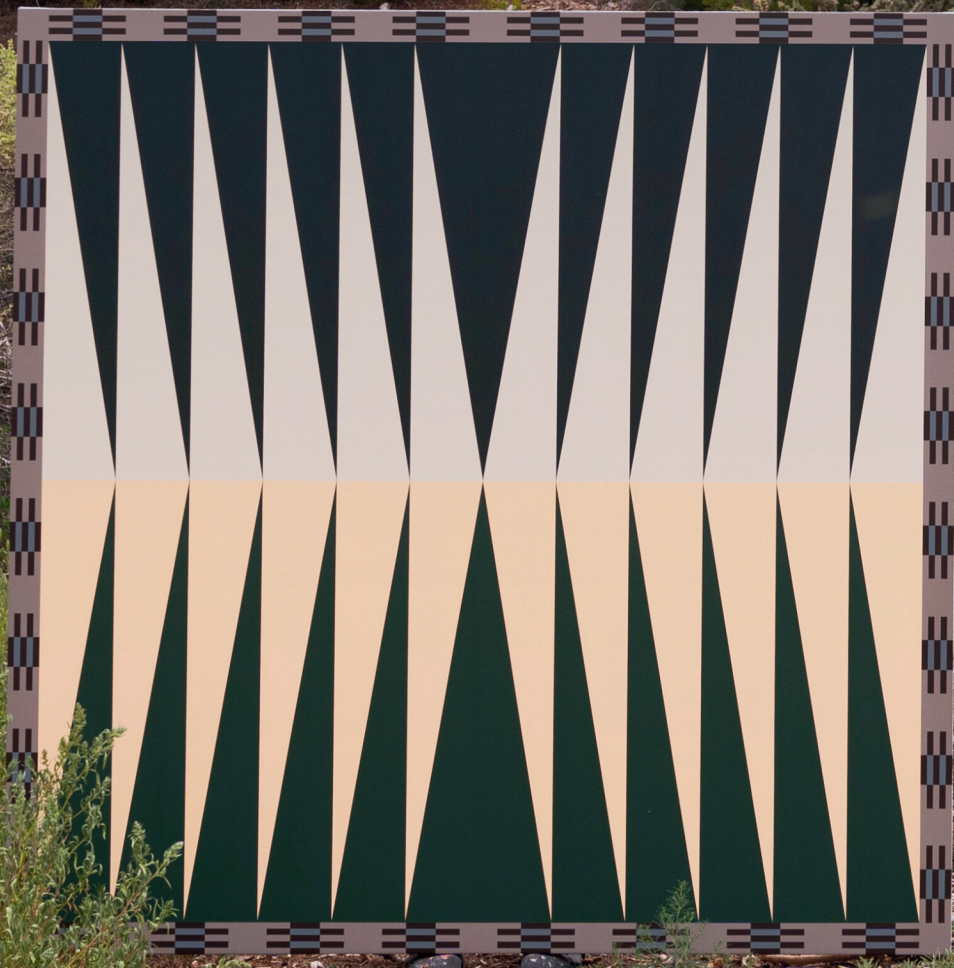


Northwestern | **THE BLOCK**
museum of art

JANUARY 25-APRIL 13, 2025

*it takes a long time
to stay here*

Paintings by
Jordan Ann Craig



Putting Down Roots

Essay by Jacqueline Lopez, 2024–25 Interdisciplinary Graduate Fellow



Jordan Ann Craig at home in New Mexico. Photograph by Nicholas Valdes, 2024

Artist Jordan Ann Craig (Northern Cheyenne, born 1992) is known for her bold, large-scale geometric paintings. For *it takes a long time to stay here: Paintings by Jordan Ann Craig*, she has chosen a selection of seven works with a notably muted palette. By bringing together these quieter paintings for the first time, Craig highlights the emotional depth and precision of her practice. The softer tones allow the intricate patterns and painstakingly detailed compositions—signature elements of her work—to come to the forefront, inviting a deeper engagement with the layers of meaning embedded in each painting.

For example, in *Baby You're So Blue* (2021, fig. 1), the exhibition's most subtle painting, alternating shades of pale blue are arranged in a series of vertical and horizontal lines. The painting's soft hues and structured composition stir a range of emotions—calm, melancholy, or nostalgia—depending on the viewer's perspective. For Craig, these works are deeply rooted in her personal connections and memories, which imbues them with a contemplative quality that encourages viewers to reflect on their own experiences.

Craig's paintings invite slow looking—one might say they are a slow burn—evoked by the exhibition title, "*it takes a long time to stay here*," a quote from the poem "spinning air," by m.s. RedCherries (Northern Cheyenne).¹ For Craig, the line speaks to something

deeply personal yet ambiguously universal. "It has a mysterious quality . . . like something being whispered in your ear. You have to sit with it to know what it means to you." It also suggests putting down roots with intention. To stay enables growing in place, connecting to the people, cultures, landscapes, and experiences that shape her life and drive her practice.

Although Craig's family is originally from Montana, she spent her early life in northern California. After earning her BA in Studio Art and Psychology from Dartmouth College in 2015, she traveled and worked all over the United States and abroad. It wasn't until her 2018 residency at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico, that she felt a deeply personal connection to a place "that felt like home—a place to put down roots." The distinctive landscape of Santa Fe County, where Craig lives and works, has played a significant role in shaping her approach to painting, profoundly influencing her vision and process.

This influence is seen in her diptych *The Space Between the Clouds and the Horizon* (2024, fig. 2) shown here in the landscape of the Pojoaque Valley. This painting features columns of abstract clouds stretching across the width of the canvas. The clouds and the surrounding sky are made up of a quillwork pattern in shades of red, green, and other earth tones that represent the distinctive multi-hued palette of the natural world in New Mexico and the vastness of its skies. Putting down roots reminded her of the interconnectivity between herself and the world around her. "I used to think that everything had to be unique and stand-alone—in a constant state of reinvention. But I can draw from everywhere. m.s. RedCherries's work has opened me up to so many beautiful stories that add depth to the way we are all connected."

m.s. RedCherries first encountered Craig's work when the publisher of *mother* suggested a painting from the series *Sharp Tongue* for the cover. Craig and RedCherries share similar histories as Northern Cheyenne women raised outside of their community, which shapes the stories they tell through what they create. While RedCherries was immediately struck by the beauty of the painting, the crisp contrasts evoked through color, pattern, and title made it an obvious choice for the cover. "The light and dark, and the sharpness in the title—it just felt perfect for my book, which in a lot of ways is about existing in two contrasting worlds in a sort of balance."

¹ m.s. RedCherries, "spinning air," in *mother* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2024), 35–36. All other quotes come from my personal interviews unless otherwise noted.

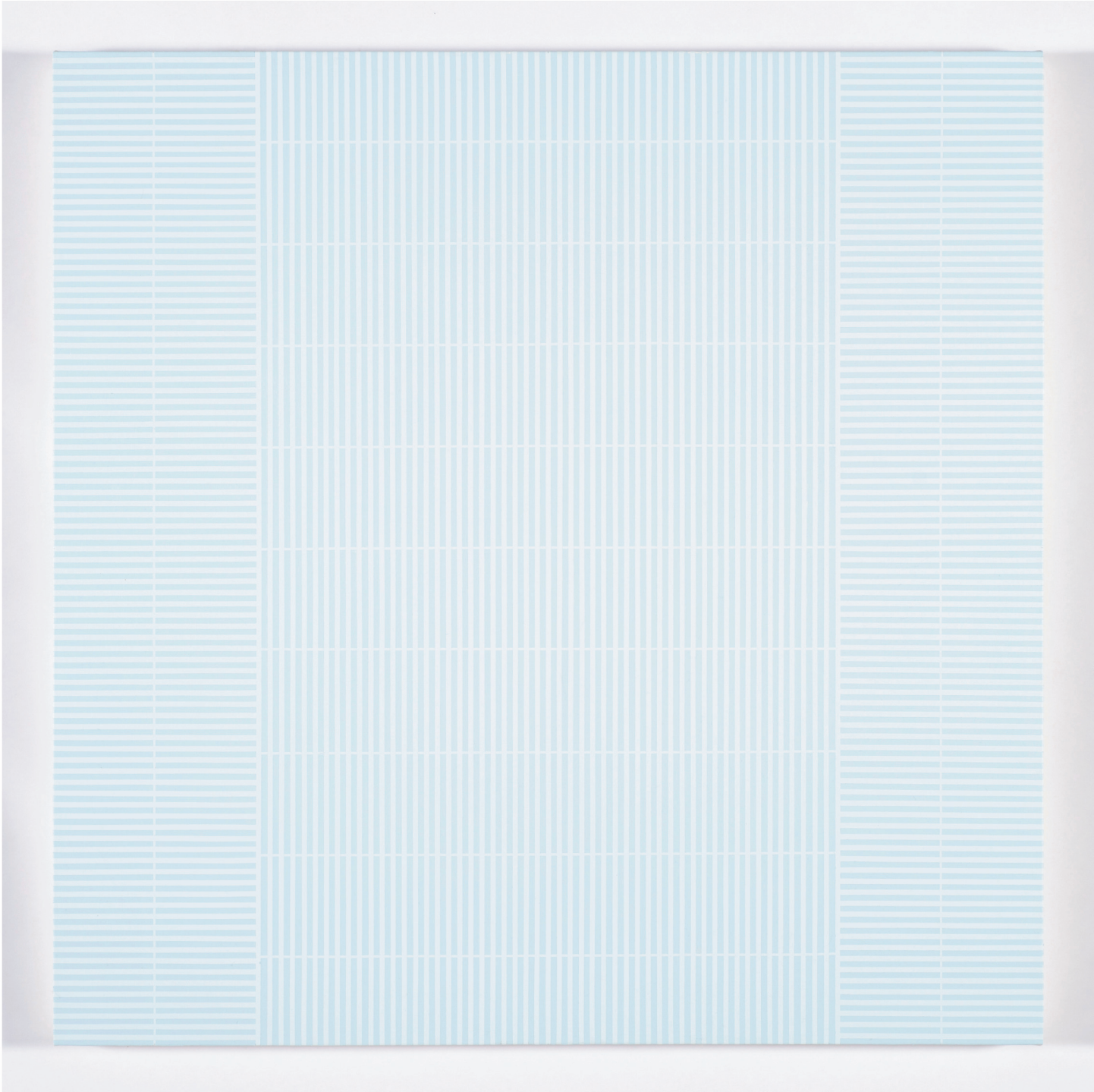
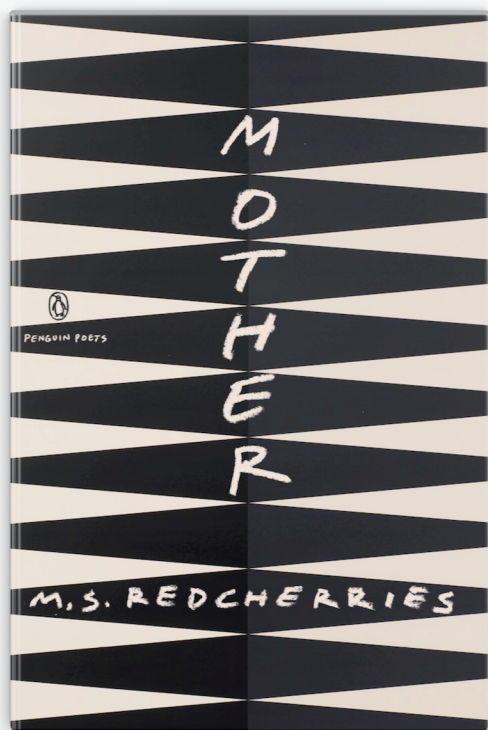


Fig. 1:
Baby You're So Blue (2021)
Acrylic on canvas, 44 7/8 x 44 7/8 in.
Gochman Family Collection
Photo by James Hart Photography

“it takes a long time to stay here” is the last line of the poem “spinning air,” which RedCherries wrote for her father; however, she recalls writing it first. She knew the line was meant for her father and her time reconnecting with him at his home in Oklahoma. “My father spent a long time looking for me and himself. He and I are both quiet people, full of hesitancy. But in that line and in our way, we could sit in silent communication, saying nothing and everything.” According to RedCherries, her poem conveys some of her father’s experience, feeling simultaneously at home and alien in Oklahoma and his ancestral lands in Montana. This sense of dislocation is familiar to many Indigenous people in North America. Though chance initially brought Craig and RedCherries together as collaborators, they quickly connected over how they each tell stories of resilience, family, and home through their work, deepening their mutual sense of interconnection as relatives.



Cover of *mother* by m.s. RedCherries with *Sharp Tongue 2* (2022). Courtesy of Penguin Random House.

Process and Titles: Precision, Ambiguity, and Perception

Archival research is a central starting point for much of Craig’s work. Many paintings draw from Native American material culture—notably Craig’s own Northern Cheyenne community and the various Indigenous nations in what is now the American Southwest. Before any paint touches a canvas, Craig’s practice begins digitally in Photoshop, where she

constructs intricate abstractions that honor Indigenous design and natural landscapes. Using opaque paints and the principles of color theory, Craig expertly crafts hues that create the illusion of light and shadow, accounting for tonal shifts as the paint dries. The front of each canvas is prepared with gesso, while the edges are intentionally left raw. Craig prepares the surfaces of her paintings using a technique called wet-sanding, inspired by the practices of Pueblo ceramic artists. This method creates an exceptionally smooth, almost silky texture on the canvas before any paint or tape is applied. First, she stretches the canvas and applies 4-6 coats of gesso, carefully wet-sanding between each layer. This labor-intensive process is essential, as it builds a pristine, thoughtfully crafted surface that serves as the foundation for her work. Then, often working on a flat surface, such as a tabletop or the floor, she carefully tapes off sections of her large-scale design. Only after this detailed groundwork does Craig begin to paint, layering shapes, stripes, or washes of color. At this stage, she reintroduces brushstrokes and thick, textured ridges, adding depth and contrast to the composition. The preparation of her canvases is as laborious and time-consuming—if not more so—than the act of painting itself, reflecting the deep care and intention Craig dedicates to every step of her practice.

Craig draws from sources that honor her ancestral roots and the land she calls home. She also draws from the tradition of modernist abstraction in American painting. Craig imbues her paintings with her own unique identity and relationship to these sources. Paintings like *Dyed Quills no. 2; Don’t Quill the Vibe* (2023, fig. 4) show how Craig draws on inspiration from Northern Cheyenne beadwork, quillwork, and textiles as well as from abstract modern artists like Agnes Martin. At first, the wide range of green tones seen here is barely noticeable, gradually revealing itself the longer one observes, creating the illusion of movement. The composition is encapsulated by an outer congruous border that interlocks like puzzle pieces. In this way, Craig blends Indigenous elements with contemporary abstraction, infusing her own interpretation through complex and often unexpected geometric shapes and patterns. Her color schemes are equally complex and nuanced, often juxtaposing myriad shades of a single color and pushing them to their extremes of lightness and darkness.

Much like the dynamic interplay in her paintings, Craig’s approach to titles contrasts sharply with the emphatically structured nature of her work. There is tension between the exacting, geometric abstraction of Craig’s paintings and her often humorous, lighthearted titles. “At first glance, my paintings can seem less like they come from a human hand. They seem rigid and intense—harder to dive into on an emotional level. They can seem to show a detachment, my own detachment, from my Indigenous roots.”



Fig. 2:
The Space Between the Clouds and the Horizon (2024)
Acrylic on canvas, in two parts, 86 x 89 in., installed, each 86 x 43 in.
Toledo Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. Robert J. Barber Art Fund, 2024.175
Photographed in the New Mexico landscape by Nicholas Valdes, 2024

By engaging with Northern Cheyenne art and craftsmanship like quill work and beading, Craig roots her practice to her Indigenous identity while bridging the past and the present through her imaginative exploration of contemporary abstraction. “My mother was adopted and raised apart from her [Northern Cheyenne] culture. My titles are a way for me to relate to these paintings and to those familial roots.” Her conversational and often playful titles provide an additional entry point into her work, both for herself and for viewers.

Craig keeps a long and ever-evolving list of potential titles drawn from her daily life. These ideas are inspired by her surroundings, interactions with friends and family, and observations on art, literature, and poetry. She often pulls titles from snippets of conversations: a favorite saying of her grandmother (*Too Slow, Go Back to Crow*, fig. 5), a sweet memory of her two-year-old cousin on the Northern Cheyenne reservation in Montana (*Worries About the Moon*, fig. 7), a creative description of the New Mexico sky from a game with a friend (*The Space Between the Clouds and the Horizon*, fig. 2). For the viewers of her work, these titles read as enigmatic and open to interpretation and new connections. As she has grown in her practice, she has learned that “not everything needs to be so overly potent—not every painting needs to be a constant reinvention. It is ok to have roots in your practice as well.” This realization allows her to embrace the subtlety and depth of her work, where meaning unfolds gradually rather than being directly imposed.

Edges “Signs of Life”

The tension in her use of titles is similarly evident in the physical presence of the paintings themselves. When viewed from the front, they appear pristine and even mechanical. Craig’s technique is exacting, and she works diligently to diminish the visible traces of her labor, rendering her paintings with meticulous precision that challenges viewers to locate the human hand in their making. By deliberately removing any trace that her work was hand-painted, she honors the intricate craftsmanship of the historical objects that inspire her—such as beaded pouches, moccasins, and baby carriers—and preserves their timeless artistry.

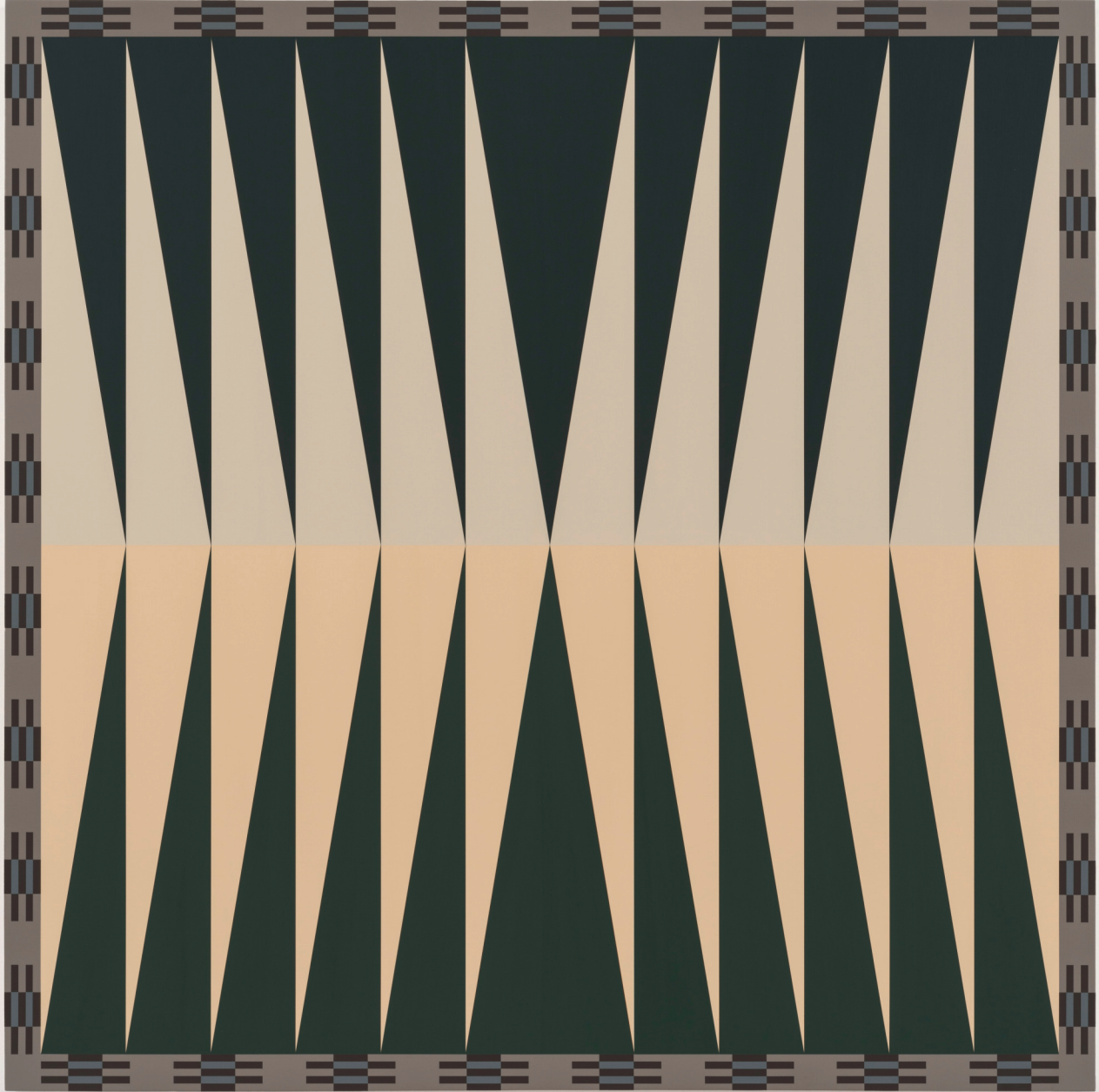
The edges of Craig’s paintings tell another important part of her story—they show evidence of the exhaustive physical labor Craig pours into executing her designs. She intentionally leaves the edges of her paintings raw to call attention to what she calls “signs of life.” “You can see drips, thick layers of paint, daddy longlegs, pawprints, fingerprints—all the signs of life extracted from the front.” By leaving the edges of her canvases unfinished, Craig invites a



Sharp Tongue: Used to Cut Deep (2024), side view

level of chance into her practice, allowing her paintings to be influenced and changed by unplanned interactions with the environment.

The sometimes startling contrast between the faces and the sides of her paintings builds a rapport between structure and chaos that is also representative of Craig herself. “I trained for years as a gymnast where a sense of structure and perfection was engrained—as part of who I am. And that really comes out in my practice—but the unfinished edges that are not neat and orderly; that are layered, messy, human. That is important to me as well, in thinking of them as more than paintings but as objects.” Because the edges of the paintings are not gessoed, the imperfections remain and the raw canvas ages over time. Thus, it is with intentionality that the passage of time and the influence of the environment become a part of each painting. Every layer, every shift in tone, and every subtle change reflects Craig’s ongoing engagement with the world around her. It takes a long time to stay here.



In conjunction with *it takes a long time to stay here*, The Block Museum of Art announces the acquisition of Craig's *Sharp Tongue: Used to Cut Deep (2024)*. The acquisition will directly support teaching and learning across Northwestern University

Fig.3:

Sharp Tongue: Used to Cut Deep (2024)

Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 70 in.

Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Julie and Lawrence Bernstein Family Art Acquisition Fund purchase, 2024.17

Photo by JSP Art Photography

On cover: Photographed in the New Mexico landscape by Nicholas Valdes, 2024



Fig. 4:
Dyed Quills no. 2; Don't Quill the Vibe (2023)
Acrylic on canvas, 62 x 62 in.
Collection of Kristy and Robert Harteveltd
Photo by Silvia Ros



Fig. 5:
Too Slow, Go Back to Crow (2023)
Acrylic on canvas, 70 1/8 x 65 in.
Private Collection
Photographed in the New Mexico landscape by Thomas Meggs

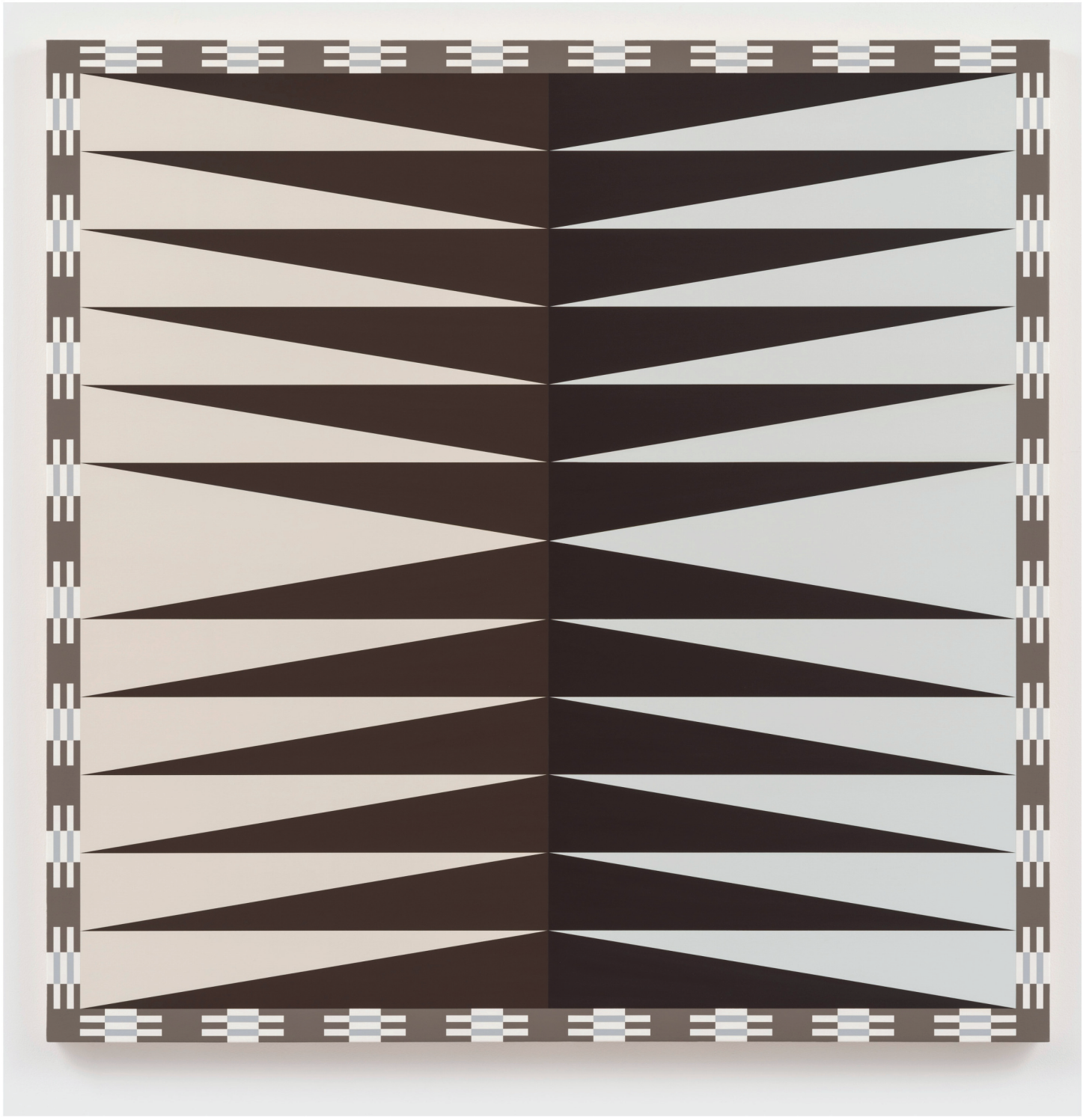


Fig. 6:
Sharp Tongue: Working on Empathy (2024)
Acrylic on canvas, 70 x 70 in.
Collection of Everson Museum of Art, 2024.14
Photo by JSP Art Photography



Installation view with artist, Jordan Ann Craig, *The Armory Show 2024*, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Hales Gallery, London and New York. Photo by JSP Art Photography

JANUARY 25-APRIL 13, 2025

it takes a long time to stay here: Paintings by Jordan Ann Craig

Artist Jordan Ann Craig's (Northern Cheyenne) solo exhibition at The Block Museum at Northwestern University is her largest institutional exhibition to date and her first in the Chicago area. Her large-scale abstract paintings reflect her engagement with Indigenous, especially Northern Cheyenne, aesthetic traditions and her dynamic and innovative exploration of color, line, and geometric form. Craig's practice often begins with research in museum collections and archives—studying, learning from, and engaging in a dialogue with traditional Indigenous artistic forms, such as beadwork, pottery, and textiles. She also draws inspiration from the landscape of what is now the Southwestern United States, where she lives and works.

The exhibition invites a deep exploration of seven paintings, shown together for the first time, highlighting the introspective quality of Craig's work. As one spends extended time with each painting, its meaning is shaped by the interplay of Craig's enigmatic and playful titles, her intricate compositions, and the perspectives of each viewer.

it takes a long time to stay here: Paintings by Jordan Ann Craig is curated by Kathleen Bickford Berzock, Associate Director of Curatorial Affairs; Janet Dees, former Steven and Lisa Munster Tananbaum Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art; and Jacqueline Lopez, 2024–25 Interdisciplinary Graduate Fellow.

The exhibition is partially supported by the Alsdorf Gallery Endowment and a grant from the Illinois Arts Council. Additional generous support is provided by the Alumnae of Northwestern University. Support for this publication has been provided by Hales Gallery, New York and London. The 2024–25 Interdisciplinary Graduate Fellow is generously supported by The Graduate School (TGS), Northwestern University.



Fig. 7:
Worries About the Moon (2024)
Acrylic on canvas, in two parts, 70 x 65 in.
Private Collection, courtesy of Kristy Bryce Art Advisory
Photographed in the New Mexico landscape by Nicholas Valdes, 2024