



# Alumna Illustrates Native Identity in New Exhibit

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By Samantha Boden



***Monica Zavala, CSUSM graduate and project coordinator of the California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center (CICSC), will be showcasing her art in Kellogg Library's spring Context Exhibit Series. Photo by Kirra Robusto***

Hands tell a story.

Wrinkles, scars, jewelry.

They open a window into the collective and unique life experiences of the individual. For artist Monica Zavala, hands are an opportunity to represent her American Indian culture.

Zavala has been working on a collection of paintings for the past year that depict the hands of American Indians engaging in traditional and ceremonial Native practices, including basket weaving, beadwork, burning of white sage and more. The exhibit, entitled "All Our Relatives," pays homage to Zavala's California Indian heritage and highlights the diverse customs of Native tribes.



To reflect such diversity, Zavala connected with members of different Native communities and painted portraits of their hands, emphasizing their distinct regalia and traditions. She pays special attention to details such as nail polish and tattoos to accentuate the personality of each subject. Her subjects are from a wide range of tribes; her own, the Gabrielino tribe, and others such as the Kumeyaay, Cahuilla, Serrano, Hoopa, the Pauma Band of Luiseño Indians and more.

As part of the Cal State San Marcos library's spring [Context Exhibit Series](#), Zavala's collection of paintings is on display on the third floor of Kellogg Library and available for members of the community to view in person or [online](#) through May 10.

"I hope visitors get a little bit of education through this exhibit," Zavala said. "I want people to know we're not all just the stereotypical image of war bonnets and bows and arrows. We're very diverse when it comes to regalia. We have many traditions and instruments, and you'll see in the exhibit that there's not just one type that fits all kind of Native American."

Zavala's work being featured in the library's exhibit is especially meaningful as she graduated from CSUSM with a bachelor's in art, media and design in 2021. Today, she continues to be a prominent member of the CSUSM community as project coordinator of the [California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center](#) (CICSC), where she also worked as a student assistant.

"I wouldn't change coming here for anything," Zavala said. "I found a really good community with the American Indian students and the American Indian professors. It's more than just teachers and students. It's like a community, a family. It's very close-knit."

It was through her CSUSM family that she connected with American Indian Studies professor Eric Tippeconnic, a fellow artist in the Native community. As her mentor, it was Tippeconnic who encouraged Zavala to expand her collection of paintings for the Context Exhibit Series and pursue her idea of illustrating representation through hands.

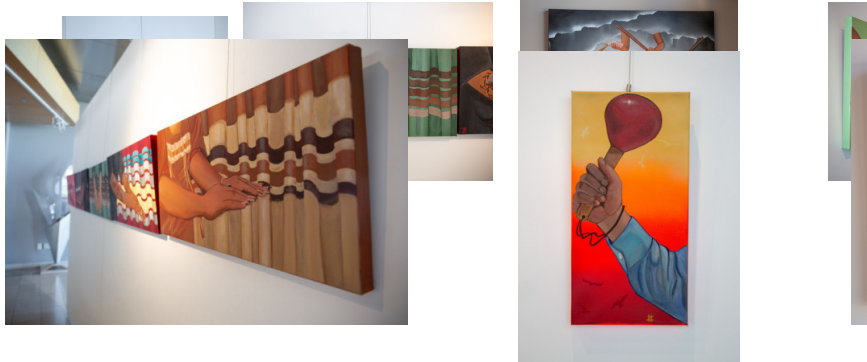
"He's been taking me under his wing and showing me the ropes on curating my own exhibit," Zavala said. "I started my journey doing exhibits with him at Cal State Fullerton, and now I get to do my first solo exhibit here at my alma mater."

Visitors can get an inside look at Zavala's first independent exhibit and learn more about her proud depictions of American Indian culture at [Kellogg](#)

[Library's free reception on March 14 from 6 to 8 p.m.](http://www.csusm.edu) An RSVP is required to attend, and it is open to all students, faculty, staff and community members.



“I enjoy the aesthetic qualities of Monica’s work and emphatically applaud her analytical approach in rendering contemporary Native life,” Tippeconnic said. “By guiding the viewer's gaze to the hands, Monica underscores the value of community and reciprocity to reflect traditional Native American values.”



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