

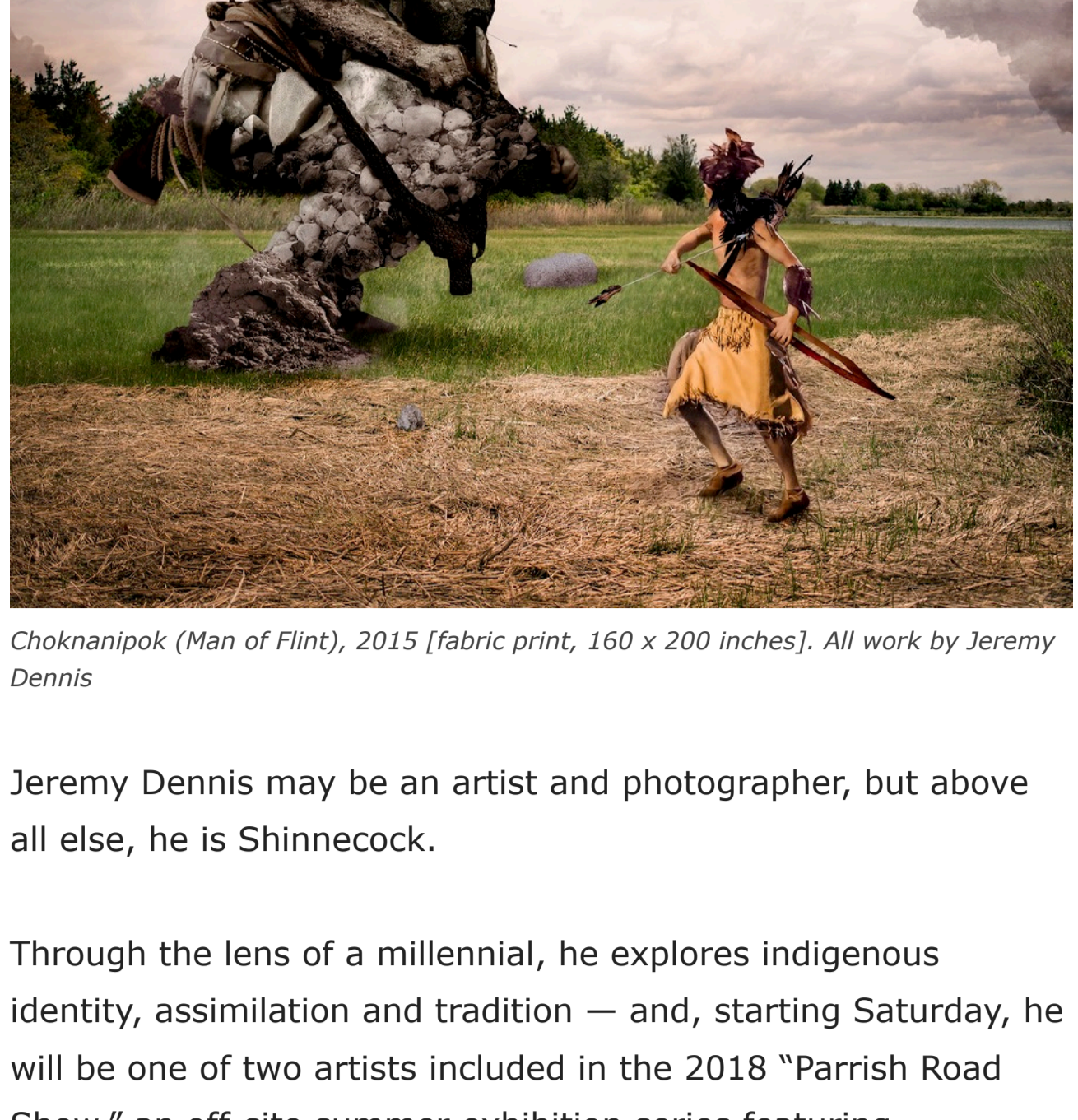
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Arts & Leisure Fine Arts

# Dreams and Myths Part of the Experience with Jeremy Dennis Show

By **Michelle Trauring** · August 8, 2018

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*Choknanipook (Man of Flint), 2015 [fabric print, 160 x 200 inches]. All work by Jeremy Dennis*

Jeremy Dennis may be an artist and photographer, but above all else, he is Shinnecock.

Through the lens of a millennial, he explores indigenous identity, assimilation and tradition — and, starting Saturday, he will be one of two artists included in the 2018 “Parrish Road Show,” an off-site summer exhibition series featuring temporary projects by East End artists in unexpected places.

In his case, a selection of photographs, “Stories—Dreams, Myths, and Experiences,” will show at the Arts Center at Duck Creek in East Hampton, the former studio of abstract expressionist John Little.

To create them, Dennis stages supernatural images that transform Native American myths and legends into depictions of virtual experiences — which he discussed with *The Sag Harbor Express* before the opening, as well as growing up Shinnecock and embracing his heritage through his art today.

*The Stone Coats, 2014 [vibrachrome print, 30 x 40 inches].*

### The Sag Harbor Express: What do you think about participating in the Parrish Road Show?

Jeremy Dennis: It is such a monumental achievement to be working with the Parrish Art Museum for the Road Show, especially because of the goal of the Road Show being to close the gap between common, everyday places and fine art institutions. Specific to the mission of the Arts Center at Duck Creek in Springs and the legacy of artist John Little, I think the venue is an incredible crossroads between historic art history and contemporary art.

### Tell me about the body of work you pulled from. What was the inspiration behind it?

Dennis: The body of work is titled “Stories,” curated by Corinne Erni, curator of special programs at the Parish Art Museum. “Stories” is a collection of digital photographs depicting specific scenes from oral stories, dreams and recorded experiences from anthropological and historical sources. The stories range from specific landscapes on Long Island to the west coast of North America — but always represented in a North Eastern Woodland tradition related to the Shinnecock Indian Nation.

The stories relate to origins of the world, important cultural figures and interactions between early humans and the deities who once roamed North America.

The project was inspired by art history classes at Stony Brook University. So much art history is based on religious texts, and commissioned by religious institutions. Although I wasn’t a member of the religions [in] the paintings that inspired my work, I believe that this same rationale can be applied to the exhibition for the Parrish Road Show.

### How do you create these photographs?

Dennis: Since 2013, I have been collecting North American oral stories and legends to pull from. These stories vary depending on the region they come from, the time they were recorded, and who is telling them — potentially the original source or from a local community member hundreds of years later. There are so many that some get filtered and prioritized. In my mind, I believe the stories that are still immediately relevant are pursued first, but eventually all of them will be done.

*The Legend of O-Na-Wut-A-Qut-O, 2017 [vibrachrome print, 30 x 30 inches].*

I have a very visual imagination while reading, most of the time it is easy to imagine how the image might be composed for the camera and laying out the important characters and objects in my imagination. The process behind the camera is a combination of theater, cinema and painterly approaches. In the end, the most important goal is to execute an image as closely as what I imagined in my mind.

One image included in the Parrish Road Show titled “The Moon Person” is based on a short story attributed to the Biloxi Nation in Louisiana. It describes the moon as once being an anthropomorphized figure who was interested with early humans until their bright white dress is stained by the innocent touch of a child. In my depiction, the moon becomes intangible, out of touch as it is today. I thought the story was quite sad, but an interesting story behind the large craters we can see on the moon.

### How long have you been creative?

Dennis: As a child, I had an interest in art through my mother, Denise Silva-Dennis. She studied art in college and later went on to be an art teacher at the local school district. Then, in middle school, I remember that art was always my favorite class, which continued into high school.

### How did you realize art was more than just a hobby?

Dennis: I think out of everything that allowed me to pursue art professionally is support of my family. Art is not the most practical profession for making a living, and before I attempted to be an artist, I was studying computer science, and I think that helped me to think more logically and practically while also maintaining the belief in pursuing art professionally.

*The Moon Person 2, 2017 [vibrachrome print, 30 x 40 inches]*

### What is your relationship with your indigenous identity?

Dennis: It has only been recently that I’ve connected deeply with my indigenous identity. Through a connection to land, history, and community, I’ve improved my self-confidence as an individual. I think it’s essential to know where one has come from and where one is going, and as an indigenous person who still remains in their homeland despite the legacy of colonization, I find great motivation in that fact.

### How would you describe growing up Shinnecock?

Dennis: Growing up on Shinnecock was not so different than growing up anywhere else, I imagine. We have our own reasons to be proud and our own issues that are not exclusive to Shinnecock. One thing that I enjoy and miss when I am away traveling is the sense that everyone knows one another and greets each other as family.

### What is the socio and political climate like for Native American communities today?

Dennis: For over 500 Federally Recognized indigenous communities in North America, there is a government-to-government relationship with the United States. Because of this, there are constant strives toward being self-reliant economically and socially. There is a struggle toward achieving sovereignty and self-reliance due to how the country’s wealth was accumulated and Native values.

For Shinnecock, there is a sharp division between our living conditions and those immediately surrounding us in Southampton, and we are always working to improve.

### How do you think art can help propel social issues forward for Native Americans?

Dennis: As an individual representing Shinnecock, I feel a great sense of accomplishment in providing proof of our continued presence and cultural contribution on the East End. This seems so basic, but so many of our neighbors are unaware of our presence or voluntarily believe we have long been gone.

All art can help in a practical way of dealing with taboos and difficult subjects including feelings of hopelessness and lack of connection. The work presented during the Road Show is part of a larger body of work partially aimed at eternal stories of tragedy, triumph, love, loss and human experience. I believe that when difficult work is shown, whether in content or interpretation, positive change can be made in how we see the world and ourselves.

### What do you hope people take away from your body of work at the Parrish Road Show?

Dennis: I hope that visitors leave with an appreciation and curiosity of indigenous people and culture. One of the motivations for “Stories” is continuing the aesthetic and public education involved in annual Labor Day Shinnecock Powwow and allowing that momentum to continue through the year.

*“Jeremy Dennis: Stories—Dreams, Myths, and Experiences” will open with a reception on Saturday, August 11, from 3 to 5 p.m. at the Arts Center at Duck Creek, located at 127 Squaw Road in East Hampton. Admission is free, but reservations are required. The exhibit will remain on view through September 4. An artists’ talk with Jeremy Dennis and Eslly E. Escobar will be held on Thursday, August 23, at 5 p.m. at the Parrish Art Museum, located at 279 Montauk Highway in Water Mill. For more information, call (631) 283-2118 or visit parrishart.org.*

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**Michelle Trauring**  
Michelle Trauring is an associate editor and arts and living writer for The Sag Harbor Express.

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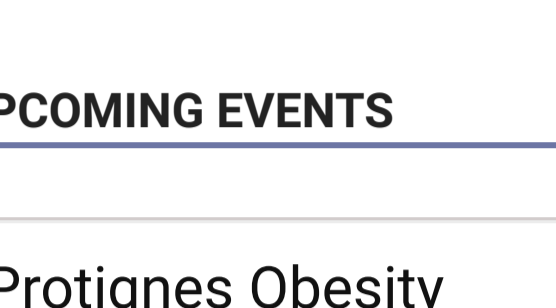
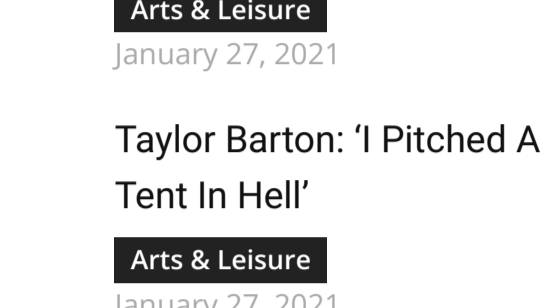
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