

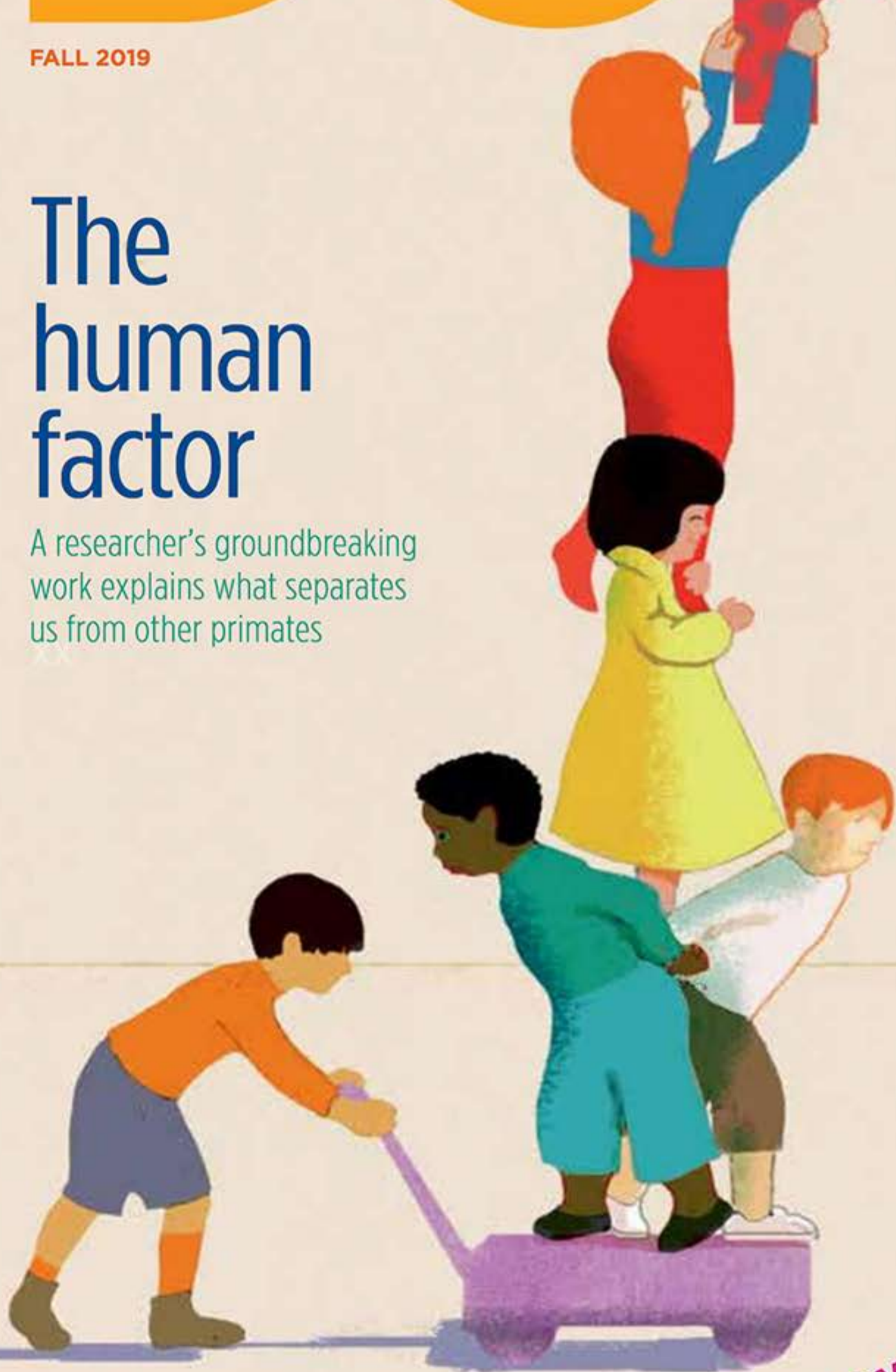
DUKE

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The human factor

A researcher's groundbreaking work explains what separates us from other primates



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Drone images by Rory Wakemup, Oceli Sakowin Camp, 2016

FINALLY SEEN: Above, *Mirror Shield Project*, conceived by artist Cannupa Hanska Luger

Revising the nation's origin story

By featuring contemporary works created by indigenous artists, the Nasher's latest show suggests a broader narrative.

Did you see the pink boots?" It's opening night of the Nasher Museum's latest exhibition, *Art for a New Understanding: Native Voices, 1950s to Now*, and two Duke students are debating the meaning of colorful, thigh-high boots in the middle of a nineteenth-century landscape. In the painting, mountains rise majestically in the background, suggesting limitless land. It feels quite traditional. But something is different in this scene; there are nude men scattered about—soldiers who have tossed their weapons and uniforms—and a painter standing at his easel capturing their reverie is also nude except for those boots.

The piece is Kent Monkman's *History is Painted by the Victors*, a tongue-in-cheek take on Albert Bierstadt's classic American West artwork, *Mount Corcoran*.

"Bierstadt painted the scene unpeopled, which would support the theme of Manifest Destiny: 'You can move out West; it's available for the taking,'" says visiting curator Mindy Besaw from Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas, where the exhibit was originally developed. Here, Monkman puts his drag queen alter ego,



"We are still here."

Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, in the foreground. "It's that new understanding when you realize things are not as they appear. It asks you to look twice at the work, think twice about the artists, and think twice about the context and our assumptions."

And that's the goal of the show. While Western art often puts history in a tidy package, excluding Native Americans from the narrative, the exhibition doesn't mind showing that history is messy. It aims to disrupt the tranquil, monolithic image of a forgotten indigenous people while blasting the nation's origin narrative.

Forty-one Indigenous contemporary artists are featured; they're addressing varied themes and using varied formats, including canvas paintings, videos, performance art, and textiles. Marie Watt's *Companion Species (Ferocious Mother and Canis Familiaris)* uses a patchwork of embroidered words on reclaimed wool blankets created by sewing circles of more than two hundred participants to explore the interconnectedness of humans and animals. Artist Brian Jungen's sculptures morph Nike Air Jordans and human hair into semblances of Pacific Northwest tribal masks, as a commentary on cultural appropriation and commodification. In *Fifty Shades of White*, Juane Quick-to-See

Smith created a map that renames each U.S. state with various shades of white paint—"White Peach" for Georgia, "Antique White" for Pennsylvania, North Carolina is "Breakwater White"—while neighboring countries are brightly colored to ask viewers to reflect upon Euro-American cultural and racial authority. "It upends the idea of representation," says Besaw of the exhibition's breadth. "Native American is not one pan-Indian identity. There's not one way of making art that is Native American." Besides the art and the calendar of events accompanying the show, which runs through January 12, the exhibition has special resonance for the Class of 2023, whose summer reading was the acclaimed novel *There There* by Cheyenne and Arapaho author Tommy Orange. That book, too, challenges notions of indigenous identity by featuring the voices of twelve urban Native American narrators as they make their way to a California powwow. Marshall Price, the Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger curator of modern and contemporary art,



HERITAGE: Above, Jeffrey Gibson, *Radiant Tushka*, 2018; left, one panel of Norval Morrisseau's *The Story Teller: The Artist and his Grandfather*, 1978

served as an adviser of the design of the exhibition, determining how the works would be displayed and described. He consulted with members of North Carolina's indigenous tribes and brought in a member of a local Native tribe to help the Nasher staff in their use of language with visitors, when referencing Native peoples. He says the art represents the continued presence of Native peoples whose history has long been silenced. "One of the overarching statements of the exhibit is that Native American cultures are still very much alive, thriving and here."

"We are still here," says Louise Maynor, Ph.D. '83, a member and advocate of the Lumbee Tribe, who attended the exhibition's opening reception. "Through this

art exhibit, so many other people will know that we are here, and that we are proudly producing and generating these art forms as another way of telling our stories. It is a new understanding. It's not the printed word. It's so visual and engaging. That in itself should add to our understanding of indigenous people." —Melody Hunter-Pillion A.M. '12