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A New Source of Support for Indigenous Art

The Forge Project, based in the Hudson Valley, is Becky Gochman's initiative to raise the profile of the artists and find homes for their work in collections and museums.



By Ted Loos

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Items included in the Forge Project collection are Raven Halfmoon's "Caddo Dancing in Binger Oklahoma" (2020), center, and Christine Howard Sandoval's "Pillars — An Act of Decompression & Arch — A Passage Formed By A Curve" (2020). Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

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ANCRAM, N.Y. — Some major art collectors begin in the domestic sphere, buying work for themselves to enjoy at home and only later sharing their bounty with the wider world.

But the philanthropist Becky Gochman, 58, skipped right to the second step.

She has been on an art-buying spree, but not for herself or her homes in Manhattan and Palm Beach, Fla.

Her purchases are for an initiative she founded in 2021, the [Forge Project](#), which supports Indigenous art and artists by buying works and then lending and donating them to institutions and making them available for scholarly study.

Forge also sponsors a fellowship and residency program, with grants of \$25,000 each to six artists a year.



From left; Zach Feuer, co-founder of the Forge Project; Candice Hopkins, executive director; Heather Bruegl, director of education; and Becky Gochman co-founder. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

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By getting such work into circulation and capturing the attention of museums, dealers, other collectors and the public, the Forge Project intends to elevate the artists and Indigenous issues. Loan recipients include the Venice Biennale, the Blaffer Art Museum in Houston and the Tucson Museum of Art.

So far it has collected more than 230 works by 42 artists, all from the United States and Canada.

“It’s kind of funny to go from zero to a major art collector within a year,” Ms. Gochman said. “But when it’s done for these reasons, it makes my heart sing.”

Ms. Gochman says she doesn’t collect much for herself, though she owns works by Polly Apfelbaum, Lily Stockman and Kenny Scharf. (She is also passionate about the equestrian life; she owns horses and competes, spending much of the year traveling to shows.)

The Forge Project’s headquarters here on a hilltop in the Hudson Valley — two sleekly modern homes, the only residential structures the artist Ai Weiwei designed in the United States — hold some of its collection, including works by Wendy Red Star, Matthew Kirk, Edgar Heap of Birds and Judy Chartrand.

Ms. Gochman, a former art teacher, is married to David Gochman, whose family made a fortune selling a majority stake in [Academy Sports + Outdoors](#). She has enlisted expert help to make the Forge Project viable.

Her co-founder, [Zach Feuer](#), is a former New York City art dealer who is now based in the Hudson Valley, and they hired [Candice Hopkins](#), a longtime curator, as executive director.

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Ms. Hopkins is of Tlingit descent and is a citizen of Carcross/Tagish First Nation. She was a curator of the 2017 edition of the prestigious exhibition Documenta, in Kassel, Germany, and serves as the curatorial director of the Toronto Biennial of Art.

Mr. Feuer does double duty, also running the Gochman Family Collection, a separate but affiliated entity with a broader collecting mandate — it holds works by Mr. Ai, for instance, as well as Stanley Whitney — leaving the Forge Project to focus on living Indigenous artists.

“We don’t have any bureaucracy so we can move nimbly,” Ms. Gochman said of her evolving new venture. Forge, unlike other art-collector-driven initiatives, does not exist primarily as an exhibition space.

She recalled that she started out with a broader mandate: “Our family wanted to do a social justice project, and we thought it would involve art.”

When she found the 38-acre property where the Forge Project is headquartered, she learned that it was on the lands of the [Muh-he-con-ne-ok](#) tribe. After she met Mr. Feuer and discussed directions for her philanthropy, Ms. Gochman said, “It became obvious that we would do an Indigenous project.”

As the team looked into philanthropic endeavors for Indigenous artists, Ms. Hopkins said: “What we found was there wasn’t really anything like this,” adding “That’s part of what led to its founding.”

The Forge Project is not set up as a nonprofit because Ms. Gochman did not want to take advantage of the tax benefits that such a structure would confer; it is set up as an LLC instead.

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Her philanthropy has other outlets, too. This month Ms. Gochman is announcing that the Gochman Family Foundation is giving \$25 million to [Bard College](#) in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., a donation being matched by the [Open Society Foundations](#), established by George Soros. The money will go to a center for Indigenous studies as well as faculty appointments and student scholarships.

Given the headline-making amounts, Ms. Hopkins said that she appreciated Ms. Gochman's lack of interest in a personal spotlight.

"For Becky this isn't about making a platform for herself as an individual at all," Ms. Hopkins said. "It's thinking about how art can be part of the service of public good."

The Forge Project's website has an unusual feature that demonstrates how seriously it takes Indigenous issues: It makes the user click a land acknowledgment button before proceeding.

It reads, "We acknowledge that we are situated on the unceded and ancestral homelands of the Muh-he-con-ne-ok, the Peoples of the Waters That Are Never Still. We recognize that there is a history to this land that is older than we are and pay honor and respect to this history and to the Elders, past, present, and future."

Land acknowledgments, though still rare, have become more common at art museums and other cultural institutions.

"It's a way of combating historical amnesia," Ms. Hopkins said.

[Sky Hopinka](#), one of the artists in the collection, said that such gestures "seep into the collective unconscious." Two of his works are hanging at the Forge Project currently. Mr. Hopinka, a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation as well as a descendant of the Pechanga

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Band of Luiseño people, works in film and photography and teaches at Bard.

Mr. Hopinka is one of several Forge Project artists based in the Hudson Valley.

“We didn’t set a geographically specific parameter,” Mr. Feuer said. “There are just a lot of great artists around here.”

Although Forge is not open to the public on a regular schedule, visitors can sign up online to see, at no charge, the 30 to 40 works typically on view, displayed as they would be in a collector’s home.

The art rotates in and out as needed. “We really see it as a working collection,” Ms. Hopkins said. “We wanted it to be publicly accessible, we wanted to facilitate loans, we wanted to invite people here to see it and to invite artists here.”

For the artists whose work is bought, “It’s amazing and really needed,” said Mr. Hopinka. “There just aren’t a lot of resources for Indigenous artists.”

Market forces have made it easier for the Forge team to collect the work, largely from galleries and directly from artists, which in turn can make a difference for the creators.

“From a dealer’s perspective, work by Indigenous artists is immensely undervalued and underrepresented,” Mr. Feuer said. “It’s a flaw in the market, and an upsetting one.”

Museums, at least, are increasingly displaying Indigenous work. [“Jeffrey Gibson: When Fire Is Applied to a Stone It Cracks,”](#) featuring an artist in the Forge Project collection, was on view at

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the Brooklyn Museum until January 2021, and current exhibitions include “[Mesh](#)” at Oregon’s Portland Art Museum and “[Each/Other: Marie Watt and Cannupa Hanska Luger](#)” at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass.

Ms. Hopkins said she saw some progress in terms of demand for Indigenous art. “It’s only just starting to change, in the past three years,” she said. “So I do feel like there’s still a need for a corrective force.”

Though Forge is just getting started, Ms. Gochman did not dismiss the idea of someday establishing a permanent, museum-like exhibition space.

For now, she said, “We’re thinking all the time about how to increase the visibility of this work.”