



## Reflections of the Great Bend: An Interview with Artist Angelo Cortez

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**As part of the campaign** to secure permanent protections for the Great Bend of the Gila, and in my role as campaign director, I (Sky) collaborated with [Angelo Cortez](#), a Phoenix-based artist. We were introduced by [Cahokia Phoenix](#), an Indigenous-led art space. Angelo helped elevate the values embodied by the Great Bend of the Gila through his art. On June 9, I interviewed Angelo about his background as an Indigenous artist and his experience creating art for the Respect Great Bend campaign. Our discussion has been edited for length and clarity.



Angelo Cortez, an Akimel O'odham and Chicano artist.

**Sky:** Where did you grow up, and where do you call home currently?

**Angelo:** I grew up in the central Phoenix area, and it is the place that I still call home today.

**Sky:** And what are your Tribal affiliations?

**Angelo:** I am Akimel O'odham from [Gila River Indian Community](#) and Chicano.



One of Cortez's murals in the Phoenix area.

**Sky:** Take me through how you first got interested in art and in what part of your life that happened.

**Angelo:** I've been down with art for as long as I could remember. I would say my interest really grew when I got into my teenage years. I got into graffiti and that really sparked my attention. It was at that point I really knew that I wanted to pursue art in a more positive way. I knew I wanted to pursue it deeply.

**Sky:** How would you describe your progression and your evolution as an artist since you started?

**Angelo:** I would definitely say I grew up. My art grew up. Progression-wise, though, I would say I started to approach it in a more detailed and smart way. After a while, I knew that I could use my art to speak a language, I guess. And that's where I am now. I just really like the fact that my art has progressed to a certain standard that I'm able to hold. So, I'm thankful for that.



Another of Cortez's murals in the Phoenix area.

**Sky:** And did you always work with canvas and paint? What media did you start with?

**Angelo:** When I was a kid, I mean, obviously I had the coloring books and all that stuff. And then when I started working at Gila River, I started at one of the Cultural Resources departments here and I got involved with archaeological illustrating. So, that was all pencil and graphite. I think I really started there. And from there I kind of turned into paint and acrylic.



Cactus Bloom, © Angelo Cortez



Saguaro Sunset, © Angelo Cortez

**Sky:** Did you always instill your heritage and background into your art?

**Angelo:** Yes. My parents, they were really into the arts, and they had lots of paintings all over our house. Indigenous paintings, shall I say. And I just kind of grew up seeing the different symbols, the different designs, the Tribal designs from all of the Tribes. And I just really liked it! I think the designs really spoke to me and I always wanted to incorporate that into my work. Even when I was doing graffiti, you know, I would instill those designs into my piece because it was just a little bit different. And I was really into my heritage, my culture, and I wanted people to know that I was an Indigenous person. So, I would use a lot of the same symbols in my graffiti pieces and stuff like that. I would say it kind of stood out more than the average artist's would. But yeah, I can say that I was always into the symbols, the designs, and I've used them for as long as I can remember.





Cortez's work incorporates Ancestral O'odham symbols and motifs. Both of these works incorporate designs seen on Ancestral O'odham pottery.

**Sky:** I want to move on to the Cahokia Art Space. How would you describe Cahokia, and when did you become a part of their community?



Cahokia is home to one of Cortez's murals.

**Angelo:** I think Cahokia Art Space is a really great social hub to network, not only for Indigenous Peoples, but also anybody in general who has an interest in anything art-wise. Cahokia, they do a number of things. It's not just an art gallery of paintings. They host workshops, there's jewelry makers, there's poets, writers, and all walks of art are in that location. I think it's a great location to be, to network, and just meet different people from all walks of life. I got involved with Cahokia through my friend Zachary Justin, who was a member at the time. He was having an all-Indigenous art show and he happened to ask me if I was interested in being a part of it. So, I was like, "Yeah man, sign me up, I'm willing to do that." Ever since then, we kind of kind of clicked with Cahokia and I started coming around more.

**Sky:** I learned of them through DJ Portugal, who's a part of [GreenLatinos](#) there in Phoenix. He introduced me to Mike Webb, and it was through Mike I learned about you. I was super-excited when he sent over your bio and some examples of your work, because I thought it fit so well with what we were trying to do with this project. How did you feel when you learned of this project, and what were your first feelings and thoughts?

**Angelo:** You know, I got really excited and I was like, man, this is exactly everything that I've worked towards. Or, you know, this is right up my alley. And I felt comfortable with taking on the campaign. I have a background in environmental resource management, so, I mean, anything that has to do with conservation, preserving the land, I'm always for.



Cortez's work shows up in unexpected ways.

**Sky:** So way back in early April of this year, 2023, I got a chance to spend a day with you and Mike in Gila Bend and in the Great Bend of the Gila. Can you retell some of your experience that day, and just describe how you felt connecting with the land?

**Angelo:** Yes. I think going out to the land and walking it, that was probably one of the best things that I could have done for the project, just because it really puts you in that zone and connects you with the land. I was just trying to think of it from a different perspective. While I was there, I kept thinking, this is really amazing! And just to think that I'm walking in the footsteps of my ancestors, you know, at one time. I felt welcomed and I felt at home.

**Sky:** What are some of your thoughts on creating art specifically for an advocacy campaign like [Respect Great Bend](#)?

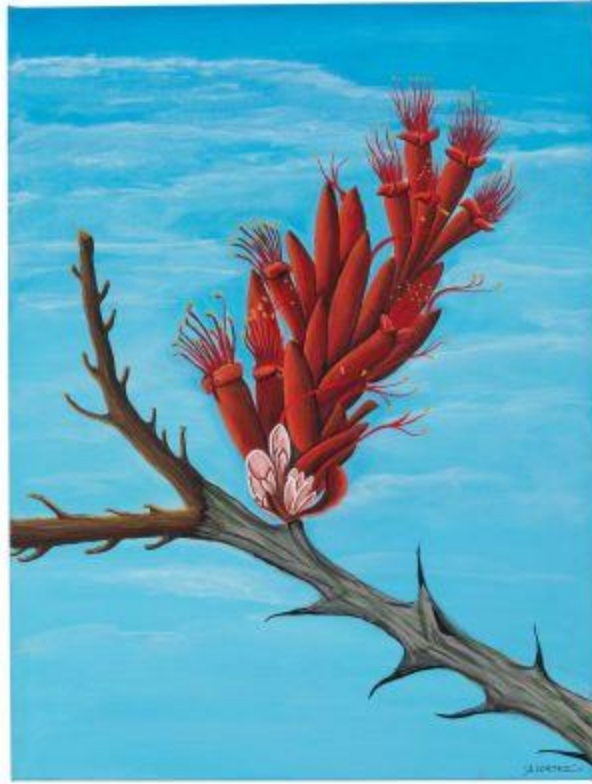
**Angelo:** Since this was for an advocacy campaign, I felt compelled to tell the story of the Great Bend of the Gila and really to create a spark. I wanted to capture the attention of my audience by using key points or things that I felt that really represented the Great Bend. That's probably why I chose the Desert Bighorn and the Ocotillo that I kept seeing. Creating art specifically for this project, I really wanted to give it my all to grab the attention of whoever's on the other side. So, it took a lot of thought. It took a lot of energy. Nonetheless, hopefully I got my point across.

**Sky:** That's a good segue into the next question. When we met up and I picked up the paintings, you mentioned that it took a lot out of you to create the paintings. I was wondering if you could go into some greater detail about that?

**Angelo:** Yeah. Like I stated earlier, I didn't want to just do some stuff and that's it. You know, I really wanted to feel it from the heart and really speak the language of the land. I probably over-thought it a little bit more than I should have, but I felt like that extra planning and that extra review was needed. I really went out of my way to do research on the land to find out all I could. I even read the journals that Archaeology Southwest published and all that. I think just researching and just doing my due diligence on the land was like its own work. And once I had all this information, I felt like, how am I going to tell the story now? I swear I must have gone through hundreds of sketches and pieces of paper. Just ideas. Nonetheless, I would say I got it and I was comfortable with the end results.

**Sky:** I was super-happy with the finished paintings. I think they're incredible, and a lot of the staff here at Archaeology Southwest have told me the same. I wanted to go into each painting on their own and answer a couple questions. So, I think we'll start with the Ocotillo bloom.

**Angelo:** OK.



Scarlet Spikes, © Angelo Cortez

**Sky:** So, the first question is: If you had to title each one of these paintings, what would you call them? And the second is: What was the inspiration behind and the creative process for each one?

**Angelo:** I have been calling that one “Scarlet Spikes.” The inspiration behind that...I remember being on the land, walking the land with you, and I was starting to get a little hot. I was starting to get a little thirsty, and I think I remember just looking up into the sky, towards the sun. I remember seeing a big old Ocotillo. It was funny because it seemed like all the Ocotillos that I saw within that area all had their flowers and they were bright red. It just really stuck out to me. It really burned itself into me and I don't know why, but I felt compelled to do that.

**Sky:** Moving on to the Ocotillo with the sunset or sunrise in the background?

**Angelo:** I was just calling it “Morning Ocotillo.” I remember as a kid passing through Gila Bend. My dad would take us to Mexico and we would leave early in the morning. I remember waking up while we were passing through Gila Bend. I remember just looking at this...this beautiful sky. Big old nice morning sunrise, and it always stuck with me. Every time I think about Gila Bend, I would really think about the sunsets, the sunrises. So, I really felt like I wanted to tell that story of the sky they have. Amazing. That area in general has some of the best sunrises, sunsets since it's just open. That's where my creative process came from for that one.





Morning Ocotillo, © Angelo Cortez

**Sky:** And for the bighorn?

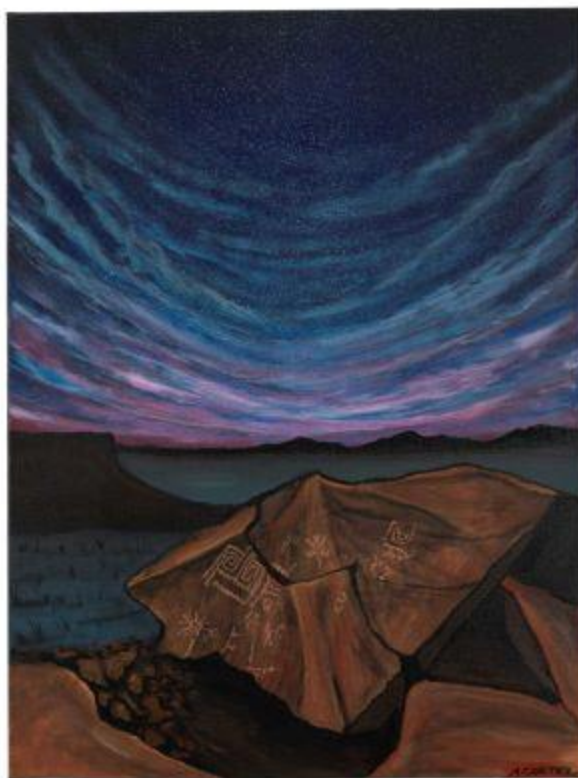
**Angelo:** The bighorn. So, I was calling that one “Desert Range.” My inspiration behind that one was the conservation effort itself. I read and have kind of known it for years too, that the Desert bighorn is beginning to go extinct at some levels. And so I think it was only right to create that. I've only seen a couple of Desert bighorn because, you know, they like their own little space and they're high up in the mountains. It was something new as well so I gave myself a challenge and I just went for it. Looking back at that painting, I really liked how it had the whole range in the background, and that really said “Great Bend” to me. So, I would say that was the creative process for that guy.



Desert Range, © Angelo Cortez

**Sky:** And for the fourth painting, which is of the petroglyph boulder and the really awesome sky in the background.

**Angelo:** Titling for that one is just “Nightscape.” And again, I was looking at some pictures of the Great Bend of the Gila. The night sky was just capturing me, and I wanted to show that as well, you know? I know it's probably not as exaggerated as it is in the painting out there, but I felt it was a good way to grab the attention of my audience and really tell that story. And that's why I use the petroglyph right there too, because I think that really sparks interest, as well. I feel like somebody would start asking questions like, “Oh, is that a petroglyph?” and I felt the colors that I used really brought out that boulder with the petroglyphs. And I think anybody who's been to that location, can kind of see that range. I try to depict that same range as close as I could. And so I think anybody who has been to the area is going to be like, hey I've stood in that exact same spot! So, yeah, I really liked that one! That was a good one.



Nightscape, © Angelo Cortez

**Sky:** I really appreciated that you did a night scene. I've spent a lot of time out there camping, sitting beside the campfire, looking at the stars, and it's definitely a different vibe at night out there. Especially being away from the city and knowing some of the history of the region. There's definitely something about it. And the way you captured that, in the night sky on that one...just something about it that gives you a feeling of something bigger than yourself, almost. So, that one right now, I think is my favorite. But every time I look at each one, it's sort of like maybe that one's my favorite, or maybe that one.

So, this is a more general question about each four or the four paintings. Would you say that they're reflections of the Great Bend of the Gila, and why?

**Angelo:** Yeah, I would. The Desert bighorn is something that is a part of the conservation effort. So, I felt that really reflected the area, as well as the night skies. One is almost an exact image of one of the areas, and as I said the Ocotillos are everywhere out there. I felt like that really was a reflection. For the people who actually pass through there, they're going to see that and think maybe that's why he chose to paint that image. I really feel like each piece really depicts the Great Bend of the Gila as best as I could describe it. So, yeah, I think I did my part and hopefully others agree.

**Sky:** I definitely do. I think they're really awesome. They capture a lot of the things that I find most fascinating about the Great Bend of the Gila. They also bring an element aside from just what your eyes see. When you're out there, what you see is half the experience. They capture the emotion and the experience as a person being in that place so well. So, in that way, they are more than a photograph, which I think is the whole point of this project. To try and instill some...*soul* into what we're trying to do as far as protecting this place. Which leads into my next question: How do you see art contributing to the protection and conservation of cultural landscapes and ancestral landscapes like the Great Bend of the Gila today and into the future?

**Angelo:** I think it's really good that you chose an Indigenous artist to depict this place. Just because I feel like they can connect on a certain level that other people may find hard to do. I think that was one of the benefits of using an Indigenous artist for the campaign...to really tell the story from the heart onto a canvas and capturing the audience in that way. So, I think that was a more personal way of connecting with the audience, instead of writing this big speech or giving this big long talk...how about we just use some images? We say a picture's worth a thousand words, so I thought that using art to contribute to conservation efforts was and is key. I think art really speaks to everybody.

**Sky:** I agree with you 100% on that. So, closing up here, where online and in the world can folks find other examples of your work?

**Angelo:** If you would like to follow me or know more about my work, you can find me on Instagram [@angelocortez\\_art](https://www.instagram.com/angelocortez_art). That's my main form of social media that I use. I'm in the process of creating a website right now.

**Sky:** Awesome! Thank you, Angelo, for talking with me today and for sharing your talent with us!

**Angelo:** Thank you!

#### **MORE INFORMATION**

<https://www.respectgreatbend.org/>

**13 federally-recognized Tribal nations** with cultural, historical, spiritual, and ancestral ties to the region include, in alphabetical order: Ak-Chin Indian Community, Cocopah Indian Tribe, Colorado River Indian Tribes, Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation, Fort Mojave Indian Tribe, Fort Yuma-Quechan Indian Tribe, Gila River Indian Community, Hopi Tribe, Pueblo of Zuni, Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, Tohono O'odham Nation, Yavapai-Apache Nation, and Yavapai-Prescott Indian Tribe.