

LEARNING MATERIALS

# MA'S HOUSE

Living Reciprocity

By Jeremy Dennis (Shinnecock)



MEANING



# Reciprocity

**The way of life that centers mutual exchange and sharing amongst all beings — past, present, and future, seen and unseen — and the Earth**

## ARTIST

# A balanced perspective of what reciprocity means to our people

## ARTISTS' STATEMENT

"Making this film about Ma's House was a wonderful experience. After working to rehabilitate our family home over the past year, it was important to reflect on the progress and how far the house has come. The work was tiresome and financially draining but it all came together thanks to the individual contributions of many friends and family members. When we began, there was so much love and passion behind the mission of turning the home into a future communal art space for artists of color on the Shinnecock Reservation. I hope the film conveys our gratitude towards those individuals, shows where the space is going, and creates a better image of what Ma's House is all about." – Jeremy



### Jeremy Dennis Shinnecock Nation

Jeremy Dennis is a contemporary fine art photographer and a tribal member of the Shinnecock Indian Nation in Southampton, NY. In his work, he explores Indigenous identity, culture, and assimilation. Dennis was one of 10 recipients of a 2016 Dreamstarter Grant from the national non-profit Running Strong for American Indian Youth. His project, On This Site, uses photography and an interactive online map to showcase culturally significant Native American sites on Long Island.

Most recently, Dennis received the Creative Bursar Award from Getty Images in 2018 to continue his series, Stories—Indigenous Oral Stories, Dreams and Myths. Inspired by North American Indigenous stories, he staged supernatural images that transform these myths and legends to depictions of an actual experience in a photograph. Dennis holds an MFA from Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA, and a BA in Studio Art from Stony Brook University, NY.

FILM SYNOPSIS

# A community gathering place

Ma's House was once the heart of a community. As Ma's grandson, artist and photographer Jeremy Dennis is on a quest to restore the family home to its central role as a community gathering place for a new generation of diverse artists. Through personal mementos, intimate narratives, and a touch of celebrity gossip, Dennis and his family reveal generations of history and hope contained within the walls of their home.



## THEMES

# Caring for the Land, Nurturing Arts and Culture

### HISTORY & CULTURE

In Ma's House, viewers are introduced to the history and culture of the Shinnecock Indian Nation, in what is today known as the Town of Southampton on Long Island, New York. Ma's House accomplishes this through the story of photographer and filmmaker Jeremy Dennis's family home, an important site for the transmission of Shinnecock culture since the 1960's. Vacant for years, Jeremy's grandmother's house is now being renovated and converted into a museum and art space for Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC), with the goal of establishing a residential program where they can share space and co-create community. Ultimately, the purpose is the perpetuation of Shinnecock culture and Black culture through "art events, history lessons, and workshops."

### ABILITY TO SURVIVE

The story of Ma's House is about far more than the fate of an abandoned old house. In a real way, the house is emblematic of the Shinnecock's ability to survive four centuries of invasion and ongoing encroachment into their ancestral homelands. Seen in this light, Ma's House is about the survival of Shinnecock culture against all odds. The restoration of the house presents viewers with a story of resilience and the determination to not just survive but to thrive in a way that transcends outmoded ideas about who Native American people are. It is also about the rejection of binary thinking that would separate people into artificial categories based on race and misperceptions about culture. Shinnecock people like Jeremy's family are the embodiment of cultural blending. They have also retained the knowledge of what it means to belong to land in an unbroken relationship that spans millennia.

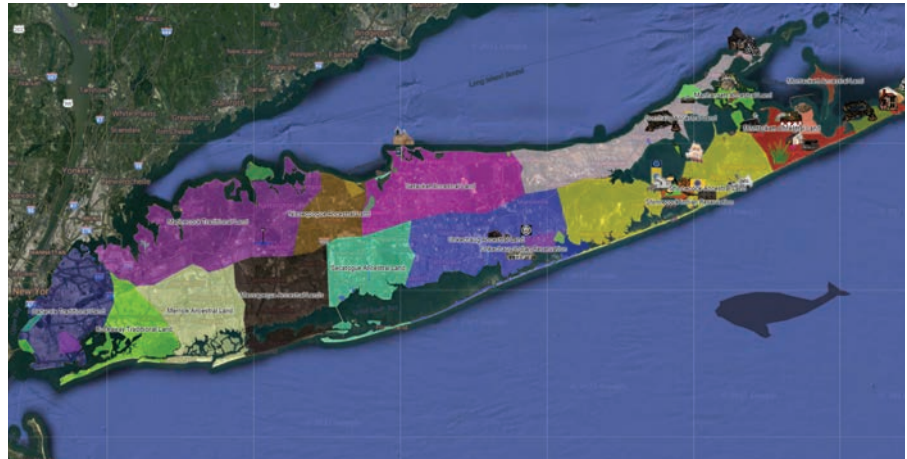
### UNDERSTANDING RECIPROCITY

Jeremy teaches that "If I take care of the house, the house will take care of me." According to this understanding of reciprocity, caring for the house literally guarantees Jeremy's well-being and by extension, presumably, that of his family and larger community. All people regardless of their cultural background can relate to this way of living in reciprocity. Shinnecock views on reciprocity highlight people's connection to land and place, especially when we hear Jeremy talk about his people's location on the peninsula. According to his grandmother, Shinnecock Bay has provided protection for the community and prevented it from being completely forced off their land, although over time their land has been diminished to only 800 acres. Thus, it is the earth itself that ensures Shinnecock people's ability to survive on their homeland in the face of relentless pressure to dispossess them.

## THEMES (CONTINUED)

# Caring for the Land, Nurturing Arts and Culture

## LONG ISLAND, NY



<https://www.jeremynative.com/portfolio/on-this-site/>

## THE SHINNECOCK

The Shinnecock are an ocean-based people whose identity is integrally tied to the lands and waters that surround them. Having lived in this region for thousands of years, they first came into contact with Europeans when colonists arrived at Conscience Point in 1640. In 1650 the first Presbyterian church was built in the Shinnecock homeland, beginning the process of aggressive religious conversion that characterizes colonialism and violent encroachment onto Indigenous lands.

By the end of the Revolutionary War, the destabilization of the Shinnecock nation resulted in the scattering of many of the people to Brothertown, on Oneida land in western New York. The state of New York imposed a foreign system of government onto the remaining Shinnecock population in 1792, one which the tribe has adapted and remains in place today. In 1859, a fraudulent treaty resulted in the further theft of Shinnecock lands, thus shrinking tribal boundaries to the 800 acres in today's Town of Southampton. The Shinnecock Indian Nation was ignored by the federal government until 2010, when it gained official recognition.

<https://collections.dartmouth.edu/occom/html/ctx/orgography/org0157.ocp.html>

<https://www.southamptonschools.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=1906&dataid=9337&FileName=shinnecock%20history.pdf>

**THEMES (CONTINUED)**

# Caring for the Land, Nurturing Arts and Culture

**PORTRAITS OF  
SHINNECOCK**



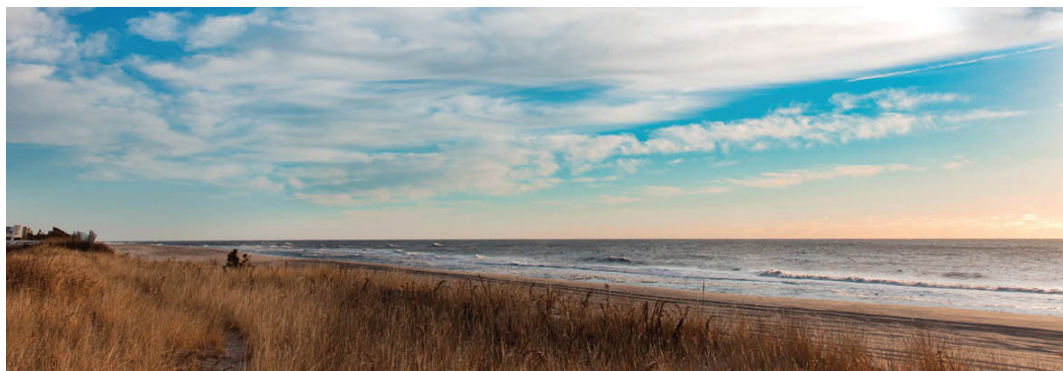
<https://shinnecockportraits.com/>

**SHINNECOCK  
BAY**

Shinnecock Bay has been subject to degrading environmental conditions for decades. Warming temperatures lead to harmful algae blooms in the bay, in addition to the depletion of fisheries and wildlife habitat, and the impacts of Superstorm Sandy in 2012. The degrading environment makes the area more susceptible to sea level rise and storm damage, contributing to the ever-present threats to Shinnecock sovereignty. The Shinnecock Nation has been working together with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County to restore the area and mitigate shoreline erosion by working with nature, not against it. In 2013, the tribe created a formal climate change adaptation plan to address the compounding problems brought by modern life.

<http://ccesuffolk.org/marine/habitat/coastal-habitat-restoration-project-shinnecock-indian-reservation>

[https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2016-09/documents/shinnecock\\_nation\\_ccadaptati on\\_plan\\_9.27.13.pdf](https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2016-09/documents/shinnecock_nation_ccadaptati on_plan_9.27.13.pdf)



<https://www.jeremynative.com/onthissite>

## QUESTIONS

# Discussion Questions

<b>FEEL</b>	What did you feel when watching the film? What questions came up for you?
<b>CREATING COMMUNITY</b>	The film puts a spotlight on the intentional creation of collectively-held and shared space to build community and nurture culture. What is the significance of Jeremy Dennis's choice to create community in this way and what is he trying to accomplish?
<b>MAIN MESSAGE</b>	What do you think is the main message the filmmaker is trying to convey? <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What stood out for you the most?</li><li>• What larger story is the filmmaker trying to tell?</li><li>• To what extent do you think they succeeded?</li><li>• What choices did the filmmaker make to shape your understanding of Ma's House?</li></ul>
<b>STOLEN LAND</b>	As you learned in the previous section, most of Shinnecock land was stolen by European settlers who did not compensate the Shinnecock Nation. What larger historical and social forces do you think help to explain this history?
<b>SOVEREIGNTY</b>	What does "sovereignty" mean? Why does Jeremy's mother say that today Shinnecock peoples refer to their land as the "Shinnecock Nation," not the "Shinnecock reservation?"
<b>PERCEPTIONS</b>	What were your perceptions of Shinnecock Nation before watching Ma's House? What are your perceptions of Shinnecock Nation after watching the film? If there was a shift, how do you explain it?
<b>MISSION</b>	What words would you use to describe the mission of Ma's House?
<b>LAND PROTECTION</b>	Historically, what words would you use to describe how the Shinnecock Nation protected the land? What words would you use to describe how Shinnecock Nation protects the land today?
<b>CONTEMPORARY PEOPLE</b>	Shinnecock are contemporary people with present-day lives. How did the film convey that message?
<b>CHALLENGES</b>	What unique challenges do you think the Shinnecock Nation faces today in its relationship with the Town of Southampton?
<b>ART MUSEUMS</b>	In what ways do you think art museums are prepared to meet the moment and in what ways are they lagging behind what is required of them as stewards of culture?
<b>BENEFITS OF INDIGENOUS-LED ART</b>	What are the benefits of Indigenous-led art and museum spaces? What are the challenges and opportunities to make these new spaces possible?



## KEEP LEARNING

# Additional Learning Resources

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Jeremy Dennis's  
personal website

[↗ https://www.jeremynative.com/about/](https://www.jeremynative.com/about/)

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Indigenous Long  
Island map

[↗ https://www.jeremynative.com/onthissite/](https://www.jeremynative.com/onthissite/)

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Ma's House Studio

[↗ https://www.mashouse.studio/](https://www.mashouse.studio/)

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History of  
Shinnecock Tribal  
Trustee Governing  
System

[↗ https://www.jeremynative.com/onthissite/wiki/tribal-trustees/](https://www.jeremynative.com/onthissite/wiki/tribal-trustees/)

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Southampton  
Schools Shinnecock  
teaching materials

[↗ https://www.southamptonschools.org/Page/6069](https://www.southamptonschools.org/Page/6069)

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Educational  
resources

[↗ https://www.jeremynative.com/onthissite/educational-resources/](https://www.jeremynative.com/onthissite/educational-resources/)

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New York Times story  
on Shinnecock Bay  
restoration

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[↗ https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/climate/shinnecock-long-island-climate.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/climate/shinnecock-long-island-climate.html)

STILLS

# Behind the Scenes



Settlement project film crew with Jeremy Dennis.



Ma's House in early spring.  
Photo Credit: Jared Lank



Jeremy Dennis working on the interior of Ma's House.  
Photo Credit: Jared Lank



Dennis family portrait.  
Photo credit: Jared Lank



Behind the scenes construction with community.  
Photo Credit: Jeremy Dennis



Behind the scenes while making the Reciprocity Project film about Ma's House.  
Photo credit: Jared Lank

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

# Resources

<b>REQUEST</b>	Request an educational screening or someone to speak online to your class.
<b>LISTEN</b>	Listen to a pre-recorded introduction to the film and post-screening conversation.
<b>NEXT EPISODE</b>	Ma's House is the sixth of seven episodes in the Reciprocity Project, Season One. In the next episode, viewers can see PILI KA MO'O, about keepers of generational practices on Oahu.
<b>DISCUSSION GUIDE</b>	This discussion guide was written by Dina Gilio-Whitaker and Mishy Lesser, Ed. D. in consultation with the filmmakers and Reciprocity Project producers.

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## CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS



RECIPROCITY  
PROJECT

The Reciprocity Project embraces Indigenous value systems that have bolstered communities since the beginning of time. To heal from the climate crisis, we must recognize that we are in relationship with Earth, a place that was in balance until the Industrial Age. This short film series and multimedia platform, made in partnership with Indigenous storytellers and their communities worldwide, invites learning from time-honored and current Indigenous ways of being.

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



NIA  
TERO

Nia Tero is a US-based non-profit working in solidarity with Indigenous peoples and movements worldwide with a mission of securing Indigenous guardianship of vital ecosystems. Nia Tero is committed to an antiracist and inclusive culture centering Indigenous rights, wisdom, practices, worldviews, and protocols.

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



UP  
UPSTANDER  
PROJECT

Upstander Project encourages decolonization and upstander behavior through compelling documentary films and learning resources. Upstander Project's goals are to overcome indifference to social injustice, develop the skills of upstanders, and contribute to action-oriented campaigns in response to vital social issues.

<https://upstanderproject.org/>

In Association With

REI CO-OP  
STUDIOS

Recreational Equipment, Inc. also known as REI, is an American retail and outdoor recreation services corporation. It is organized as a consumers' co-operative and dedicated to outdoor education. Across films, podcasts, and editorial programs, REI Co-op Studios develops and produces stories that entertain, enrich, and explore the power of time spent outside, while complementing the co-op's broader climate and racial equity, diversity, and inclusion commitments.

<https://www.rei.com/newsroom/article/rei-co-op-studios>



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