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## Dale Lamphere: Dignity and the Land

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# Dale Lamphere

## Dignity and the land

interview by **Leda Cempellin\***

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at South Dakota State University.

On March 9<sup>th</sup> I visited the studio of Dale Lamphere, the South Dakota Artist Laureate living in Sturgis. As we toured the studio, we extensively talked about the evolution of his career. This is an edited extract from our conversation specifically focused on a studio model of *Dignity*, a 50-foot monument scheduled for inauguration in Chamberlain in September. The interview gives a unique insight into the conceptualization phase occurring during the work-in-progress of this monumental project.

**What is the working title of this sculpture?** The working title is *Of Earth and Sky*, but the official title is *Dignity*. Here is the armature for the piece, so you get a sense of scale. It is all stainless steel, so no bimetal corrosion will take place. This is a very heavily engineered structure. Everything in the studio is exactly 1/8 scale, so this slender rod represents an inch and a half pipe. Selectively there will be openings like this, in stainless steel. Lighting will be inside the piece, so in the daytime this will appear as a dark line, but at night it will describe the figure and create these striking movements of light in the piece. LED light now is very exciting, long-lasting and discreet in scale. These elements here move like an aspen leaf in the wind, so when the wind blows, it will describe the wind visually and air can move right through the figure. I am not sure exactly what the effect will be, so we will have to build it to find out [laughter]. This little sculpture shows an earlier concept, before I realized that I could make the piece kinetic. These are stainless radial bearings with sealed ceramic bearings in them, so they should never require any lubrication and they should not rust. There are stops on the shaft and they touch the perimeter around each diamond, so that limits the movement to the aspen-leaf aspect, rather than having it spin. I am researching the very best materials that we can use. We are done with the quilt and this week I am ordering materials for the figure. We are doing an automotive finish for the painting, so primer coats, color coats, and clear coats, a thorough process that it will be just like an automobile, and so will last for a long time. Of course, durability a big factor, along with the aesthetics. **Speaking about aesthetics, there are those stark beautiful lines like the wind that is coming in and sweeping the form, and that's Lamphere [laughs]. We see those sweeping lines also in the dress of *Dignity*.** It is an expression of my interest in that natural, lyric line that nature provides.

**By the way, are those lines in the head, which almost look like scratching, going to be visible in the final sculpture, or is the face going to be totally smooth?** No, they won't really be visible.

**Because they look like scars and could have another symbolic meaning to them.** Yes, they certainly could. I would have liked to have the face be transparent in some way, to let light emanate from it as well, but I am not certain. I saw a computer-generated image, with random rectangular forms that had coalesced into a head, and there was space in between with light and air. That was a thought and we can still go there, but I am just experimenting at this point.

**Where will the sculpture be placed?** It will be near Chamberlain,

View of Dale Lamphere's studio,  
photo LC, courtesy the artist



South Dakota, on a bluff above the Missouri River. It will be adjacent to Interstate 90 right at the crest of the hill. You will look up and see a beautiful star quilt unfurled on the horizon, and there is nothing but air, sky, water next to it and nothing to block the view. This makes it really exciting: the sunlight can play through all of these diamonds and as they move, that will change; they will be constantly in motion, as the wind is always blowing there.

**When will the sculpture be inaugurated?** On September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016. I am trying to understand the clothing types in both of these, which are typical Lakota dresses with beaded yokes [he is showing me images in a book]. I am using those patterns, adding color to them, and letting the light come through, so it will have a similar effect to the beads. This will all be stainless steel, but with a unique texture to it, and all of this will be sand-blasted. I do not want to make it too busy: there has to be a distillation, an openness that lets the environment integrate with the piece. I do not want something of this scale that would just stand in resistance to the environment; rather, I want the environment moving through it.

**You mentioned [in our conversation outside recording] that this is a private commission by a non-Native American individual: what is this person's intention?** I know he has a good heart: he wanted to give something as a gift to the people of South Dakota, acknowledge and celebrate the Native culture and peoples that continue to thrive in our state and inspire the coming generations. Those are his stated objectives. The team that is putting the event together for the dedication, whose name is Mitakuyepi, meaning "my relatives", is composed by two Lakota women and one white woman.

**So, Native Americans approve of this work.** Yes, that has been the response. I have been meeting off and on with a Lakota quilting circle that's in Rapid City, asking them "what do you think of this?" I want to be respectful: I've had Native friends all my life, growing up near Bear Butte, a very sacred place in the Plains. *Dignity* is a tangible, contemporary expression of a renewed respect and celebration of the first people of the Great Plains. The indigenous people of South Dakota started us on a trajectory of understanding that all people are sacred and in a sacred place. We need to continue this journey together.

Dale Lamphere's website: <http://www.lampherestudio.com>