

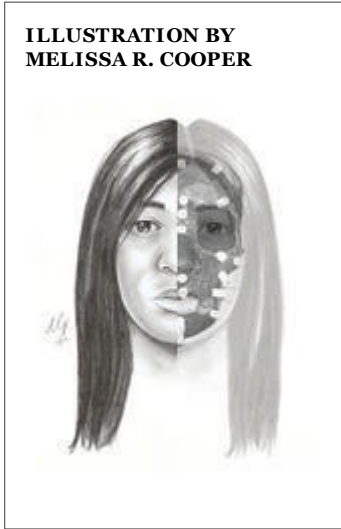
Sticky Situation at the Tar Pits

Amid fears of a political backlash, a drawing of the "La Brea Woman" skull is repressed

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ILLUSTRATION BY
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With apologies to Raymond Chandler, L.A.'s most compelling murder mystery might be the Page Museum's 9,000-year-old remains known as "La Brea Woman." Pulled out of the gooey tar almost a century ago, the oldest known Californian is considered by many to have been a homicide victim. Then again, she may simply have died of natural causes and been ceremoniously placed in the pits — alongside her fox-terrier mutt, whose skeleton was found beside her.

Not that you'll learn much about this if you visit the tar-pit museum or its Web site. La Brea Woman has all but vanished from the museum, and last November museum volunteer Melissa Cooper angered officials by posting images on her personal Web site of a facial reconstruction she'd done from the skull.

Cooper, a forensic artist who sketches criminals for the Santa Monica Police Department, now believes that museum leaders got upset, and refused to exhibit her illustrations, out of fear that her drawing of an ancient woman who was almost certainly Native American could provoke the Chumash Indians of Southern California to demand her remains.

Cooper reached that conclusion after talking with the museum's resident Chumash expert, Richard Reynolds. Reynolds says he can't comment publicly on the controversy, but museum curator John Harris agreed to discuss it with the *Weekly* via e-mail. Harris says he had originally approved Cooper's drawing project, in which she used skull-bone contours to show what La Brea Woman looked like in life, "on the strict understanding that the result would not be published or otherwise disseminated." Cooper says there was no such agreement.

A cast of the skull, attached to the ancient remains of a Pakistani female that was dyed dark bronze, the femurs shortened to approximate the stature of native people, had been on display at the Page for nearly 30 years. It was removed in 2004 to accommodate an emergency exit, but was then replaced by an exhibit of Native American artifacts.

Harris explains: "The museum felt and feels that this exhibit is more respectful to Native American groups" who oppose the public display of ancient tribal remains — even, apparently, of casts of those remains.

Cindi Alvitre, former chair of the Gabrielino-Tongva Tribal Council, likens the removed display to voyeurism. "It's disheartening to me because it's very inappropriate to display any human remains.

The things we do to fill the imagination of visitors. It violates human rights."

In 2006, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that La Brea Woman was taken down because Harris was worried that Native Americans would be offended. Why it took nearly 30 years for the museum to remove its Pakistani–Native American mannequin mash-up from public view is another question. But Harris admitted at the time that he was worried the display might "attract attention to La Brea Woman's [real] remains."

Despite this delicate politicking, Harris and some local tribal leaders agree that La Brea Woman hasn't been linked to any existing Southern California tribe. Harris says, "Speculation that La Brea Woman may have been Chumash is baseless. It is impossible to verify the affiliation of remains that are 9,000 years old." And Deborah Sanchez, co-chair of the Barbareño Chumash Council, says that while "there's a possibility she may be Chumash or she may be from another tribe," all of that is still unknown.

In 1990, the federal government passed the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, requiring museums to inventory Native American artifacts and notify tribes that they possess them, but Harris says no group has claimed La Brea Woman.

Sanchez is suspicious of the museum. "I think it's kinda interesting because sometimes not designating remains can prevent the law from actually triggering — so any institutional group can say, 'Well, these are undetermined, so we don't have to give them back.' That's possibly what's happening here — they're not stating clearly that these are Native American remains, but I think that any knowledgeable person would probably say that if you have a 9,000-year-old skeleton found in the Tar Pits, it's therefore native remains."

La Brea Woman is the only human skeleton ever found amid thousands of fossils of mammoths, dire wolves, saber-toothed cats and other animals and plants in the Tar Pits, located in the Wilshire District, yet today this rare find gets the "vaguest possible" mention on a time line near the museum's entrance, Cooper says.

"She's part of the collection, but they just don't like to advertise or call attention to her," Cooper claims. Even Web pages detailing the "large-scale excavations of 1913 to 1915" — during which La Brea Woman was dug up — fail to acknowledge her.

Alvitre, who believes the remains are of a Gabrielino-Tongva who roamed Southern California, says museum officials are "afraid of the political implications and particular sanctions, as far as scientific research. It's a very common reaction."

However, Wendy Teeter, curator of archaeology at UCLA's Fowler Museum, points out that La Brea Woman had been on display for years. "She's never been not known. The idea she exists and is native is not a surprise," Teeter says.

Which brings the issue back to the detailed facial drawing by police artist Cooper. Last June, she asked her Page Museum lab supervisor, Shelly Cox, if she could create the reconstruction of La Brea Woman's face using a cast archaeologists had created from the skull. "I told her I'd do it for free because it's a win-win situation: I get to do a pretty cool project, and you guys could have it in your museum and get more visitors," recalls Cooper. "She was, like, 'Yeah, that'll be really cool; let me just verify it with the curator, John Harris.'"

Cooper says that when she met Harris at a museum event, "he was, like, 'Oh, yeah, that would be so

awesome if you would do that for us."

Soon afterward Cox told Cooper she'd be doing the reconstruction in a place viewed by the public. But just before she began the project, she was told to work in a nonpublic backroom instead — "only because they don't want to confuse people" by working on human bones in a facility that houses animal bones, aside from La Brea Woman. "That was her reasoning. It wasn't like they wanted to hide it from the public," Cooper says.

Cooper worked from the cast, with the real skeleton beside it. Staff members, including some supervisors, stopped by to take pictures — some telling her that the project was going to be featured in the museum newsletter.

By last August, with the drawings complete, the plan was for Cooper to meet with Harris and Chris Shaw, the Page collections manager, to decide, according to Cooper, how to display the drawings.

This is when Cooper says things got weird. Despite repeated e-mails from Cooper to Harris and Shaw over three months, neither of them responded. Finally, Cooper asked why she was being ignored.

"When I finally got a response from Harris, he said, 'What are you talking about? We were doing you a favor by letting you even see the skull.' So I told him that 'This is my work. You didn't have me sign any papers. If you don't want to display it, that's your choice, I'm going to show it on my own.'" In that same e-mail, Cooper informed Harris that she quit. She then posted the images on her Web site and went public with the story.

In a prepared statement, Harris slams the artist, saying, "Ms. Cooper chose to violate her agreement with the Page Museum and publish her work for her own commercial gain."

But Cooper notes that she sold only a handful of her drawings, and only when people sought her out. "Forensic artists rarely, if ever, do commercial work," she says. "It's all about history, education and helping crime victims."

Indeed, both Sanchez and Alvitre are grateful for the reconstruction. Says Alvitre, "I appreciate what this woman did. She's brought a face to something that's been such a mystery."