Everybody knows me as the 'Indian comic book guy,'" Arizona artist Ryan Huna Smith told Pasatiempo by phone from his Tucson home, "and I've gotten used to it." Smith, a member of the Colorado River Indian Tribes whose heritage is Comanche and Navajo, is no stranger to Santa Fe. He attended the Institute of American Indian Arts before completing his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the University of Arizona.

"A lot of my friends have been trying to get me to participate in Indian Market, so this year I'm giving it a try. I participate regularly in the Prescott Indian Art Market and the Heard Museum Guild Indian Fair and Market. The reason I don't participate more in the Santa Fe market is because I'm not a full-time artist," Smith teaches college prep at Hasam Preparatory & Leadership School, a charter high school in Tucson for Tohono O'odham youth and other Native students.

Smith's paintings bear a striking resemblance to comic-book illustration — and for good reason. "I liked comics as a kid, but I didn't go to a comic-book shop," he said. "In Needles, California, where I lived, there wasn't one. I had to go to a little five-and-dime store to get them. I really didn't get that into them until I started looking at a lot of Heavy Metal fantasy comics and work by European illustrators." Smith didn't embrace superhero comics until he entered college and discovered titles like X-Men. It was then that he became fully enamored of the graphic style and sequential storytelling process of the comic-book format.

"I didn't realize at first that a comic-book style had begun to bleed into my work. But I started to notice that heavy-line-driven drawing style
and broad color palette in my paintings and prints. After a while I didn't fight the fact: that it was happening and just let the work do its own thing. I liked what I saw in combining exaggerated human forms and really bright colors. To me, the real beauty of Native people is best captured in bright colors. These real-life people and scenes felt larger than life, and that's reflected in my work."

Smith also entered the comic-book-illustration business. One of his early comics was *Tribal Force*, a short-lived project that saw the release of just one issue in 1996 before its publisher, Mystic Comics, went bankrupt. Smith's collaborative partnership with writer Jon Proudstar dissolved soon after the bankruptcy, but Proudstar reportedly plans to revive the *Tribal Force* title and serve as both illustrator and writer. The premise of the *Tribal Force* comic book combines a modern twist on familiar events from Native American history with the common superhero archetype: in 2006, the U.S. government devises a plan to claim Indian reservation land, which is brimming with valuable natural resources. The government decides to use a bomb to scare people off the land and threatens to detonate the device. Soon afterward, a group of Native Americans draw together and mysteriously receive supernatural powers. They assemble as one force, the *Tribal Force*, to halt government's evil plans.

"There were already a few Native American superheroes out there, and that's why we decided to do *Tribal Force*—precisely because there were only a few," Smith said. "There was *Sure Shot* from *Sgt. Rock*, *Warpath* from *X-Men*, and a handful of others. But usually when Native characters got introduced in comics, they got killed off early, or they were the villains. We wanted to create a world where we got to distance who the superhero was. And with us, there was more than one of them."

*Superheroes Basho Yazzaz, Gabriel Medicine God, Thunder Eagle, Gan (a character Smith created and drew), and others had troubled pasts, as most superheroes do, but their origin stories didn't include run-of-the-mill conflicts familiar to American comic-book readers in the mid-90s. They included anti-Indian racism, lethal alcohol syndrome—heady material for the time, but it spoke loudly to Native readers. (Incest, something that wasn't really explored honestly or openly in American comics before the release of *Tribal Force* #1, is confronted head-on in the character arc of Basho Yazzaz, an incest survivor and law student.)

Taking a supernatural slant on the trials and tribulations of Native life sometimes leads to misunderstandings when racism or ceremonial aspects of Native life are depicted in art or comics, Smith said. "We had non-Indian people who read the book and probably didn't like how Anglos were being portrayed in that first issue. But we also had some Natives who were weary of the project. They weren't really sure what we were going to do with the book. And we were indeed going to depict some things that were sacred, in fact very sacred. We felt like we needed to show these things, because it was a part of who we were. It's somewhere non-Native comic creators can't go, you know: they admire Native culture and they

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think they know everything about it, but the truth is, it's an area they
don't and really shouldn't venture into.

"As Natives, we weren't giving ourselves the right or permission
to put ceremonial aspects into the stories, but we felt that the only
way to tell the tales honestly, from a Native perspective, was to do so.
Some people had a problem with it, but you know, you can't please
everyone."

In 2009, Smith was contacted by Graphic Classics, which publishes
literature in comic-book form, including work by Edgar Allan Poe,
Oscar Wilde, Louisa May Alcott, and Bram Stoker. Graphic Classics
wanted Smith to illustrate a condensed version of American author
John G. Neihardt's story "The Last of the Siouxans" in a 2011
collection of illustrated tales titled Western Classics. The story deals
with drought, religious dogma, bigotry, and the struggle of a Native
American shaman to hold onto ceremonial traditions while the
younger members of his tribe adopt more Anglo ways. Smith is in
talks with another publisher to develop a graphic novel or comic book
with a creative team made up entirely of Native American writers
and illustrators.

Smith is also working with the Arizona State Museum to develop
a digital comic book with a diabetes-prevention story line. A side
project of the digital comic is a diabetes prevention and awareness
mobile-device
application. In November, the museum has an exhibit that celebrates
healthy living and diabetes awareness and features the comic book.

Through his paintings, Smith said, he can explore and celebrate his
Native heritage while telling a story through a single image, instead
of with a series of panels, as in a comic book. "I love the ceremonies,
craft traditions, and the dances of Native peoples. No other culture in
America exercises that so completely and as emotionally as they do.
That's what I try to depict in my work, whether it's a woman holding a
cradle board with her baby or the Apache Mountain spirit dancers."

Viewers of Smith's work often notice the size of his human subjects' hands, and that stylistic choice has a New Mexico connection. "It's partly a leftover influence from New Mexico neo-romantic painter
Paul Pfeiler, whose work I absolutely love," Smith said. "He does a
lot of figurative work, and the Native American people he depicts
always have these huge hands." (In an artist statement on the Zaplin
Lampert Gallery website, Pfeiler writes, "When I was a youngster
and first enchanted with Indian costume, lore, and artifacts, I would
sometimes pretend I was an Indian.

I soon realized that was not intellectually reasonable: I am not an
Indian. I am simply an interpreter.")

Because of his comic-book-influenced style, Smith has been accused
on occasion of trying to be overly humorous about Native life and
traditions. "But if you look at the bulk of my work, there's a seriousness
there, a real respect for the subject matter. I'm proud of my culture.
And again, not everyone going to get it. Native or non-Native. I can't
help that."

Smith uses humor to examine issues many Native Americans face
and to explore the uneasiness many Anglos feel in confronting those
issues. For instance, his Frybread Man piece expresses a part of Native
life, but it also examines colonialism's role in creating it. The piece
creates an interesting dilemma for some viewers. Is it OK to be an Anglo
and laugh at the pooh-bahed Indian in a superhero suit surrounded by
fried bread, especially considering that Native Americans didn't eat fried
bread before the mid-19th century, when they were relocated and
confined and forced to use U.S. Army food rations and government
commodities to survive? "It's no accident that Frybread Man's suit is a
total Superman rip-off," Smith said with a giggle. "An American hero,
a Native American health epidemic. ... It means a lot more than the
image immediately implies."