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Nicholas Galanin: Everything We've Ever Been, Everything We Are Right Now

Curated by: Jehra Patrick

Exhibition schedule: Law Warschaw Gallery, Macalester College, September 20–December 8, 2019

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There is so much danger in disconnect . . .

—Nicholas Galanin, 2020

The work of artist Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit-Unangax̂, b. 1979) is both prescient and fearless; his warning about the “danger in disconnect” strikes a chord today.¹ Jehra Patrick chose Galanin’s work for the exhibition *Nicholas Galanin: Everything We've Ever Been, Everything We Are Right Now* for its ability to “redress histories” and “revision humanist futures.”² The exhibition occupied one large room divided by a temporary wall, and several works were clustered to address a single topic, while others stood alone. The largest installations commanded attention by taking up vertical and horizontal physical space: *Creation and her children* (2017, plastic tarp, fabric, cord, wood, horse hair, other materials; collection of the artist), *White Carver* (installation and performance with photos of previous carvers), *The American Dream is Alie and Well* (2012, US flag, felt, .50 cal ammunition, foam, gold leaf, plastic; collection of the artist), and *We Dreamt Deaf* (taxidermy polar bear). Smaller works were displayed on the walls: *Kill the Indian, Save the Man* (photographic series and wood carvings), *Unceremonial Dance Mask* (single-channel video with sound, 2017; collection of the artist), *The violence of blood quantum, half human (animal), half human (animal) after James Luna* (both halves of torn archival digital print, 2019; collection of the artist), *My Ears Are Numb* (Drum, US flag, red cedar nightstick, 2012; collection of the artist), and *Tsu Héidei Shuguxtataan I & II* (two-channel video with sound, 2006; collection of the artist). The messages can reinforce and overlap each other, joining in a chorus for human and land rights.³

Galanin is deeply rooted in Sitka, Alaska, located near Juneau; he is the son, brother, nephew, and great-grandson of musicians, artists, and master carvers all of whom call (or called) Sitka home.⁴ His multimedia installations expose and disarm the aggressive, present-day logic of white settler colonialism using a vocabulary derived from Indigenous knowledge and practices. Embracing the power granted by the formality of a museum exhibition, Galanin wastes nothing. Each work performs with unruffled concision as it loads the medium with its pointed messages—which include a commercialized fake ceremonial mask splintered and repurposed to scorn the consumer and a taxidermy polar bear arching up as if to defy its death sentence. Isolated in a corner and marked off by a velvet rope, a white carver displays his sexual fetish art. The overall impact of the exhibition is to jar the viewer into a new awareness of what has been done by museums, galleries, anthropologists, and the tourist industry—plus what is currently happening to Indigenous people. Through its trenchant critique, the exhibition forces the question of alternatives.

Galanin's activist insights are spurred by the many forms that cultural violence has already taken. Two works completed in 2016 and 2017, *Kill the Indian, Save the Man* (fig. 1) and *Unceremonial Dance Mask* speak of cultural genocide and appropriation. A carved wooden mask is juxtaposed with its shredded counterpart, showing the impact of United States federal boarding schools on Native children. As if to mimic museum protocol, both the intact and the destroyed masks are photographed and framed. Next to them, a lump of wood shavings is adorned with long, scraggly hair, a pathetic gesture to the man who is supposedly rescued by white civilization. Noting that fake Tlingit masks are made by underpaid Indonesian workers and sold to tourists, the artist points out that the cycle of appropriation is fed by white supremacy and also by global capitalism. In the video, Galanin performs a burlesque mini-mockumentary: he smashes the mask to pieces, glues the pieces back together in a faceless lump, holds it to his face, and dances in front of a fire.



Fig. 1. Nicholas Galanin, *Kill the Indian/Save the Man*, 2016, photographic series and wood carvings. Photography by David Turner



Fig. 2. Nicholas Galanin, *White Carver*, 2012, installation and performance with photos of previous carvers. Photography by Christopher Selleck

In *White Carver* (fig. 2), Galanin shifts the parody to another mode: live performance art. A white man in a tie and dress shirt sits in a corner of the gallery, silently working on his craft. He is carving a sex toy for men, purportedly a Native art object. The fetish, labeled “I Looooove Your Culture! Fine Woodworking,” stands for all the items that have ever been removed from their proper context for the enjoyment of ignorant and condescending non-Natives. By enlisting a live, white, male-bodied person to enact his denunciation, Galanin makes it impossible to be confused about who is doing what to whom. Knowing that Galanin’s great-grandfather once held a job as a demonstration carver for Sitka tourists makes the intention behind this satire even more clear.⁵

The body of a taxidermy polar bear on public display would be a shocking and sad provocation in many places. It is even more so in Minnesota, where mounted heads and horns of trophy deer, elk, and moose exist as non-thought-provoking, everyday, kitsch elements. In *We Dreamt Deaf* (fig. 3), the bear creates an imposing impression as visitors enter the gallery, with its massive neck, head, face, pulled-back ears, and open jaw demanding attention. As if hoisting itself up onto an ice sheet, this iconic sea mammal raises its left paw, giant claws intact—a haunting signal of dignity, courage, and agency.



Fig. 3. Nicholas Galanin, *We Dreamt Deaf*, 2015, stuffed polar bear. Photography courtesy Law Warschaw Gallery

Galanin procured the bear not as a living creature but as an already stuffed vintage object, the result of a 1970s kill by a white hunter near the coast of Shishmaref, Alaska.⁶ The United States Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 made it illegal to kill polar bears. By international treaty, Native people are allowed to hunt polar bears, which they do to survive;

survival involves cultural and spiritual practice. By repurposing a taxidermy polar bear captured by a non-Native hunter who most likely killed for sport, Galanin broadens and politicizes the underlying question: Why did the bear die?

In recent years, environmental scientists have determined that *Ursus maritimus* is suffering an “anthropogenic flank attack,” on the verge of losing its icy sea habitat to pollution from the combined effects of drilling, mining, and climate change.⁷ This bear is not the only one in danger. As it turns out, the culture and lifeways of the villagers of Shishmaref—and dozens of other villages along six thousand miles of Alaskan coastline—are also in peril as the waters rise and the ice melts.⁸ What will happen to these coastal peoples once they are dislocated far away from the sea?

Spiritual growth and cultural longevity are among the many casualties of modern industrialization. *We Dreamt Deaf* captures both the subtle and the egregious consequences of environmental neglect and capitalist economic development. Sheer avarice propels the industrialized societies to pollute with carbon gases despite full knowledge and ample scientific evidence of the devastating results. The hunted polar bear and the abandoned coastal villagers dream the world is deaf to their suffering. When, if ever, will our ears open to this urgent truth? The question implicates us all.

The title of the exhibition, *Everything We've Ever Been, Everything We Are Right Now* manifests Galanin's defiant approach to language and time. According to the dominant logic of white settler colonialism, Indigenous cultures begin and end in the past; the present begins precisely at the moment of Indigenous erasure (in favor of so-called civilization). Using the perfect tense to indicate a past that has concluded, Galanin then declares that the past continues into the present. Moreover, he gestures to a total and universal expanse of time and being—“everything we've ever been”—one that is not collapsible or available to be compartmentalized or commodified. Indeed, the dualities and disconnections that white Western society takes for granted and foists upon others—past/present, human/land, freedom/collectivity, progress/domination—are nothing more than fantasies. These fantasies, because they are based on greed and ignorance, face their negation in the righteously persistent and life-giving forces of Indigenous values, beliefs, relationships, and rituals.

While the notion of a total and continuous past drives this exhibition, one work in particular conveys the possibilities of a coexistence based on contribution rather than exploitation and domination. *Tsu Héidei Shuguxtataan I & II* (the title of a Tlingit song), translates into a stunning declaration: “We will again open this container of wisdom that has been left in our care.” Two videos playing on a loop each depict a single dancer moving to music. A non-Tlingit dances in T-shirt and jeans, surrounded by the blank white walls and concrete of an urban warehouse. Limbs and joints flow and swing like rubber, inspired by the beat of the Tlingit song. Then a second dancer moves, this time against a backdrop made of a gigantic Tlingit wood carving, with many eyes watching. With drum and headdress, the dancer gestures with solemnity and purpose, as if communicating an important message from centuries ago, even though this music is contemporary, not Tlingit.

The two videos do not counter each other; Galanin is not posing an either/or situation. Carrying forward the idea of a cultural continuum that evolves over time, the two scenarios depict methods of interaction, participation, and exchange that do not destroy values or

lives. The combined effect is salubrious, a nod to the convergences that are still possible, and to the wisdom that might still be available in a time beyond COVID-19.

Notes

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¹ Nicholas Galanin to the author, April 4, 2020.

² Jehra Patrick to the author, April 3, 2020.

³ The exhibition was amplified by a September 24, 2019, panel discussion on “activism and artistic practice” including Galanin and Twin Cities–based artists Jonathan Herrera Soto and Jim Denomie (Ojibwe); and a December 7, 2019, conversation on “ending museum violence” between artist Andrea Carlson (Ojibwe) and poet Heid E. Erdrich (Ojibwe). See “Nicholas Galanin: Everything We’ve Ever Been, Everything We are Right Now,” Law Warschaw Gallery, Macalester College, accessed April 14, 2020, <https://www.macalester.edu/gallery/pastexhibits/2019-20/nicholas-galanin>.

⁴ Carol Richards, “This is My Home: ‘Kiks.ádi Land’” (profile of Nicholas Galanin), Rasmuson Foundation, 49 Writers, accessed April 3, 2020, <https://www.rasmuson.org/49writers/nicholas-galanin-2>. Galanin’s artist wife, Merritt Johnson, edited the essay that accompanied this 2018 exhibition.

⁵ Richards, “This is My Home.”

⁶ Patrick to the author, April 3, 2020.

⁷ Bjørn M. Jenssen, Gro D. Villanger, Kristin M. Gabrielsen, Jenny Bytingsvik, Thea Bechshoft, Tomasz M. Ciesielski, Christian Sonne, and Rune Dietz. “Anthropogenic Flank Attack on Polar Bears: Interacting Consequences of Climate Warming and Pollutant Exposure.” *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution* 3 (2015): 16, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fevo.2015.00016>.

⁸ John D. Sutter, “Tragedy of a Village Built on Ice.” CNN, March 29, 2017. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/03/29/us/sutter-shishmaref-esau-tragedy/index.html>. According to the United States Government Accounting Office, many Alaska Native villages do not qualify for FEMA disaster relief even though their future is clearly imperiled by climate change. See “Alaska Native Villages: Limited Progress Has Been Made on Relocating Villages Threatened by Flooding and Erosion” GAO, June 2009.