

De colo nizing Al aska

As the world's attention shifts to the shrinking polar ice cap and the future of our planet, Alaska's place in the world has moved from the fringe to the center. Concerns about climate change and cultural survival resulting from colonization have pushed Alaska to the forefront of global conversations. Decolonizing Alaska is a multi-media visual art exhibit that explores how 31 diverse contemporary Alaskan artists grapple with these issues and present new possibilities for cultural sustainability. Artists create and express resilience and adaptation through a confluence of indigenous, global, traditional and contemporary concepts, technologies and media.

STUDY GUIDE

This guide is intended to support inquiry into the exhibit, led by parents and teachers of students ages 9 to 18. This Guide accompanies the exhibit and full color exhibit catalog which features images of all the artwork, artist statements and artist biographies. Visit the exhibit with your students. Delve into the art works' meaning with this guided Q & A. Artists speak for themselves about complex issues concerning identity, power and representation. Some of the wording and themes are challenging. Explore quotes from artists and the curator to deepen the discussion. Select the questions most pertinent to students' range of age and experiences.

Why is this exhibit important?

This show "Decolonizing Alaska" recognizes that Alaska Native artists, or any artists in Alaska, must go back to value of art, in the meaningful sense to the art maker. We're no longer making just ivory seals and totem pole models. We want to be recognized as artists. We don't want to be labeled as souvenir artists, which has been going on as long as colonization. We want to go beyond that. We are equipping ourselves with MFAs, which recognizes a broader sense of art in the world. Other ethnic groups such as Saamis and Northern Canadians are entering into the realm of free art of their choice. We are redefining ideas put forth by colonizers about what Alaska Native art is or can be. We are free to choose how we want to represent ourselves. We don't have to be defined by outsiders.

- Ron Senungetuk

What does decolonization mean in the context of this exhibit?

When Alaska was colonized by pioneers, outsiders tried to change us to American ways of thinking and being. We were still functioning as people of the land. Along the way, Alaska Native art, as we know it, became art of their choice, not necessarily ours. It became commercialized, for example, and sometimes not meaningful to us, except for meager pay in return. And then we said goodbye to the meaningful art of our ancestors. We no longer had that value of hunting or relationships with hunted and what we wanted. We became producers of remnants of our art form.

- Ron Senungetuk

How do artists transcribe history?

Growing up on Kodiak Island, I wasn't exposed to the language, history and dance of my ancestors. Many Elders in our communities grew up only hearing of 'devil dancing' with masks, as it was called by the new religions that had been forced upon the Alutiiq people. We had a lot of catching up to do, to accept a new mask carving and Alutiiq dancing tradition. If our dancers were dancing our masks now what would they look like? My art explores this question and reflects what I see, marine and animal life, hunting and fishing, how we live and our local sense of pride. - Lena Amason

As a contemporary Alaskan artist, how has colonization impacted your work?

Xperiences of Northern life--berry picking, fishing, splitting firewood, bike riding, camping and sitting around a campfire--collide with my concerns about trophy hunting, fish quotas, wilderness depletion, the oil industry, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, industrial mining, industrial waste, climate change, politics and paying the bills. I examine the

complicated act of living within a state largely colonized by mega industries that literally extract Alaska's essence. - Rachele Dowdy

I am a White photographer. I live in Alaska, a place that belongs to the "real people," the indigenous people of time immemorial. I don't think of these people as the "other." I am the other. To document the world around me, to decolonize my body of work, I also turn the camera and its gaze on myself. - Michael Conti

What connections can you make between concepts and art?

- Art material choices and traditional foods
- Art materials and health challenges
- Artworks and Alaska's indigenous life forms

Do any objects or art in this show represent your culture or experience?

How do artists respond to climate change?

The Mantle series examines the earth's protective outer covering, and the dismantling of these surfaces... In a wave of new colonialism to the arctic, international corporations producing hydrocarbon energy have fueled a petroleum dependent economy and culture, with harmful consequences. Alaska's vegetative layer significantly affects global climate health. In this cycle of destruction global warming is compounded by development and wild fires, which remove protective tundra causing permafrost to melt, releasing methane, and contributing to rising temperatures. Warming allows invasive species to migrate north and colonize the arctic. Indigenous vegetation is relatively free of polluting contaminants or genetic modification, and holds vital DNA stores of nutrition and healing. Arctic vegetation literally and figuratively holds the earth together and it is in our own best interest to preserve and protect this resource. - Sheryl Maree Reily

In Western culture, commerce rules, while Nature has no standing in this judicial system. If Nature does not have legal standing then neither do the peoples and cultures who depend upon it. Decolonization is a paradigm shift away from exploitation for short-term profit, toward recognition that, for long-term survival, all living things have an equal voice and integral place in a tightly woven system of interdependencies. - Rika Mouw

How does the artists' use of material, like fish skin or antler versus bottle caps, or bullet casings, etcetera explore the impact of colonization?

"Fish Fingers" is sewn from the skins of halibut and yellow eye rockfish that my husband Marvin and I caught, and from the skins of salmon that we caught. The patches tell stories of wear on my hands from constant use, as well as the care of the fish. Each stitch connects past, present and future. Our fish sustains us year round. The contrast between these handmade fingers and commercial fish fingers or fish sticks is an intended irony. I think about the fragility of the food web, the problems inherent in industrial colonization of our resources and the hand we have as humans in protecting our resources. Industrial deep sea trawling undermines stewardship of the sea. Harvesting fish by hand, on a small boat, I constantly reflect on the delicate beauty of the food web and my dependence on the ocean for my livelihood, my art and my identity. - *Annette Bellamy*

Before colonization young women were given one of these necklaces at the time she was considered the most powerful, her first menstruation. The necklace was embellished with the tools needed to protect herself and community from her inherent power. These tools sole purpose was to help her retain balance and remind her of her importance. At puberty I was diagnosed with type-one diabetes, an autoimmune disease that like colonization, attacks the body with reasons unknown and foreign. In place of a puberty necklace I was give a syringe and insulin bottle, tools of a colonized environment. - *Melissa Shaginoff*

Why do some Native artists use contemporary materials?

I struggle with how my culture is criticized for we want to preserve and carry into the future. Our culture interacts with the world differently than Western society. Decolonization means lifting Western ideas and judgments about how I as a Native person live, work, and make art. It means that I can use electricity, a computer, and newer technology for harvesting animals. I live a shared mixture of Western and indigenous culture...Decolonizing doesn't mean becoming better than everyone else; it means embracing others. It means embracing cultural reciprocity and working toward universal acceptance of human beings. Dena' ina people have been adapting and borrowing technology and materials from our neighbors for hundreds of years. Today we simply have different options to choose from. - *Joel Isaak*

How have artists and artwork been limited in traditional museum displays?

Culture cannot be contained as it unfolds. My art enters this stream at many different points, looking backwards, looking forwards, generating its own sound and motion. I am inspired by generations of Tlingit and Unangax creativity and contribute to this wealthy conversation through active curiosity. There is no room in this exploration for the tired prescriptions of the 'Indian Art World' and its institutions. Through creating I assert my freedom. - *Nicolas Galanin*

What role do artists play as historians?

Artists are theorists too, mapping and writing about decolonizing in their bodies of work. It's time to empower

artists as the central theorists, the primary producers of representation. The challenge is not left to Alaskan Native artists alone. Excluding non-Native artists from the conversation only perpetuates colonization. - *Asia Freeman*

Why were these Alaskan artists chosen to be part of the exhibit?

These 31 artists are shaping their own stories, while challenging and expanding historic definitions of Alaska art. The critical point is that these artists ask how museums and galleries should tell the story of colonization... Artists how museums and galleries should tell the story of colonization and challenge the museum tradition of exoticizing Native art through exclusive traditions of display and discussion. - *Asia Freeman*

What does "intergenerational trauma" mean?

I did this portrait to talk about alcoholism in our communities today, to bring awareness to this 'old' problem. The issue is so much bigger than it appears, as we all know. Colonization and historical trauma lead to loss of identity. Loss of place in the world and in our communities are just some of the issues we need to discuss when looking at the 'symptom' of alcoholism. What can each of us do? When our own family and friends are out of control we have to look deep beneath the symptoms to the historical trauma at the root of the problem. - *Holly Nordlum*

How do artists address racism and Alaska's socio-cultural divisions?

I struggle with how many people draw boundaries and create categories about what kind of people and what kind of artists we are. I fear this perpetuates colonization. I wish we were all able to live as one, work as one, with a shared goal of boundless creative expression...As a white man I often struggle with what can I do to dismantle these categories. Do I stand on the sidelines screaming my guilty apologies? Instead, I choose to listen, observe and transmit the power of a leading voice in the struggle for freedom. White man suppressed this power when he colonized Alaska, creating false divisions. I hope these divisions will dissolve in the 21st century and the voices of today's leaders will resonate with the wisdom of our indigenous ancestors and hopeful humans of the future". - *Michael Walsh*

How is contemporary Alaskan art relevant to shaping the future of Alaska, and beyond?

As we grapple with challenges of living at the leading edge of global environmental change, Alaska's traditional arts and technologies, which depend on the complex web of a healthy ecosystem, are more vulnerable than ever. Yet, in Alaska's diverse artistic production we see courage, ambition and ingenuity blazing from one generation of artists to the next, leaping across vast geographic distances and cultural experiences. Artistic invention and imagination are reshaping traditions and infusing Alaska with resilience. May new possibilities for cultural identity and sustainability emerge in an environment of respect and innovation. - *Asia Freeman*

Traditional territories of Alaska Native Cultures



Explore the map referencing the following regions and artists participating in the exhibit:

Regions of Alaska:	Origins of the participating artists:
Unanagax (Aleut)	Anchorage
Sugpiaq (Alutiiq)	Ester
Athabascan	Fairbanks
Eyak	Halibut Cove
Inupiaq	Homer
Saint Lawrence Island	Kenai
Yu'pik	Ketchikan
Yu'pik	Port Lions
Tlingit	Sitka
Tsimshian	St. Lawrence Island
Haida	

Further reading/ references:

A History of Schooling for Alaska Native People by Carol Barnhardt, University of Alaska Fairbanks Published in Journal of American Indian Education, Jun 19, 2012

Alaska Native Heritage Center <http://www.alaskanative.net/>

Alaska Native Knowledge Network <http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/index.html>

<http://www.adn.com/alaska-news/2016/05/23/obama-signs-measure-to-get-rid-of-the-word-eskimo-in-federal-laws/>

The success of an exhibition like this shouldn't be measured in answering questions regarding the assertion of identity within a post-colonial Alaskan context, but rather by begging more extensive, more invested, and more soul-searching questions. How can direct engagement with materiality - from fish skin to paper to paint to the ephemerality of video - offer insight into diverse perspectives and systems of making? In what ways do these artists embrace the complexities and inherent asymmetry of creative practice in the 21st century which goes well beyond binaries of craft/fine art, traditional/non-traditional, or local/global? The artists in Decolonizing Alaska are engaging with dialogues around these histories and practices of making while at the same time reframing what culture truly is and can be.

Sanjit Sethi, Corcoran School of the Arts and Design Columbia College of Arts and Sciences George Washington University Washington, D.C.

This study guide is sponsored by The CIRI Foundation and written by Brianna Allen and Asia Freeman. Thank you, Annie Calkins, Projects Evaluator and Advisor to the Alaska Arts Education Consortium and facilitator of the Alaska State Council on the Arts Initiative on Arts Education; Debbie Harris, Kenai Peninsula School District Art Specialist; L. Saunders McNeill, Alaska State Council on the Arts Community and Native Arts Program Director; Nadia Jackinski-Sethi, art historian and Program Officer, The CIRI Foundation.



Glossary

ALASKA is the largest state of the US, in the extreme northwest of North America. Russians made the earliest White settlements in the mid 1700's. Alaska was purchased by the US from Russia in 1867. Alaska received an influx of settlers during the Alaskan Gold Rush of the 1890s and was admitted as the 49th state in 1959. Alaska includes a vast area of Arctic wilderness and diverse Alaskan Native people.

ALASKAN NATIVES Alaska Native people comprise roughly 20% of the state's population and belong to 229 federally recognized tribes (as well as at least five unrecognized tribes) and ten broad cultural groups including Aleut (Unangan), Alutiiq (Sugpiaq), Athabascan, Eyak, Inupiaq, Saint Lawrence Island Yupik, Yup'ik, Tlingit, Tsimshian and Haida peoples. Some of these cultural groups are more culturally and linguistically related to each other than others, but each group has unique histories, stories, languages, and material culture.

The **ALASKA NATIVE CLAIMS SETTLEMENT ACT (ANCSA)** was signed into law by President Richard M. Nixon on December 18, 1971, constituting at the time the largest land claims settlement in United States history. ANCSA was intended to resolve long-standing issues surrounding aboriginal land claims in Alaska, as well as to stimulate economic development throughout Alaska. The settlement established Alaska Native claims to the land by transferring titles to twelve Alaska Native regional corporations and over 200 local village corporations. A thirteenth regional corporation was later created for Alaska Natives who no longer resided in Alaska. Some people chose not to sign up under ANCSA because at the time some people did not feel comfortable identifying as Native, and then some individuals have been denied membership because they are "Afterborns" (born after December 1971) and didn't receive shares or affiliation.

COLONIZATION is an ongoing process of by which a central system of power dominates the surrounding land and its people. The term is derived from the Latin word colere, which means "to inhabit".

CONTEMPORARY ART is art produced at the present period in time. Contemporary art includes, and develops from, postmodern art, which is itself a successor to modern art.

CULTURAL IDENTITY is the identity or feeling of belonging to a group. It is part of a person's self-conception and self-perception and is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION is the adoption or use of elements of one culture by members of another culture. When a minority culture is oppressed by a cultural majority, this is seen as wrongfully oppressing the minority culture or stripping it of its group identity and intellectual property rights.

DECOLONIZATION is defined as the act of getting rid of colonization, or freeing a country or people from being dependent on or controlled by another country or foreign power.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, ABORIGINAL PEOPLE, or NATIVE PEOPLE, are groups protected in international or national legislation as having a set of specific rights based on their linguistic and historical ties to a particular territory and their cultural and historical distinctiveness from other populations.

A STEREOTYPE is a preconceived notion, especially about a group of people. Many stereotypes are racist, sexist, or homophobic.

SUBSISTENCE refers to the hunting, fishing, and gathering activities that traditionally constitute the economic base of life for Alaska's Native people. Subsistence resources have great nutritional, economic, cultural, and spiritual importance in the lives of rural Alaskan Native people, many of whom gather up to 1/3 of their subsistence needs from wild animals, fish, marine life, and plants. A subsistence lifestyle is still practiced in many communities across Alaska. 60% of the Alaskan Native subsistence harvest is made up of fish, 20% land mammals, 14% marine mammals, and birds, shellfish, plants, and berries make up the remaining 6% of the rural harvest of wild food. A 1998 report by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game estimates that commercial fisheries take roughly 2 billion pounds, or nearly 97% of the total weight of fish and wildlife harvested in Alaska. Sport fishing and hunting account for 1% of the total harvest. Rural subsistence, including resources taken by non-natives who also live off the land, accounts for 45 million pounds, or just 2.2% of the total harvest of edible natural resources in Alaska each year.

De colo nizing Al aska

As the world's attention shifts to the shrinking polar ice cap and the future of our planet, Alaska's place in the world has moved from the fringe to the center. Concerns about climate change and cultural survival resulting from colonization have pushed Alaska to the forefront of global conversations. Decolonizing Alaska is a multi-media visual art exhibit that explores how 31 diverse contemporary Alaskan artists grapple with these issues and present new possibilities for cultural sustainability. Artists create and express resilience and adaptation through a confluence of indigenous, global, traditional and contemporary concepts, technologies and media.

STUDY GUIDE

