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# Four Exhibits of Alaska Native Art Women Artists Breaking Boundaries

*Nadia Jackinsky*

If an event, or a group of events can symbolize the dynamic of a time, recent exhibits of Alaska Native<sup>1</sup> art arguably represent the changing position of Alaska Native women artists. Consider the following four recent exhibitions:

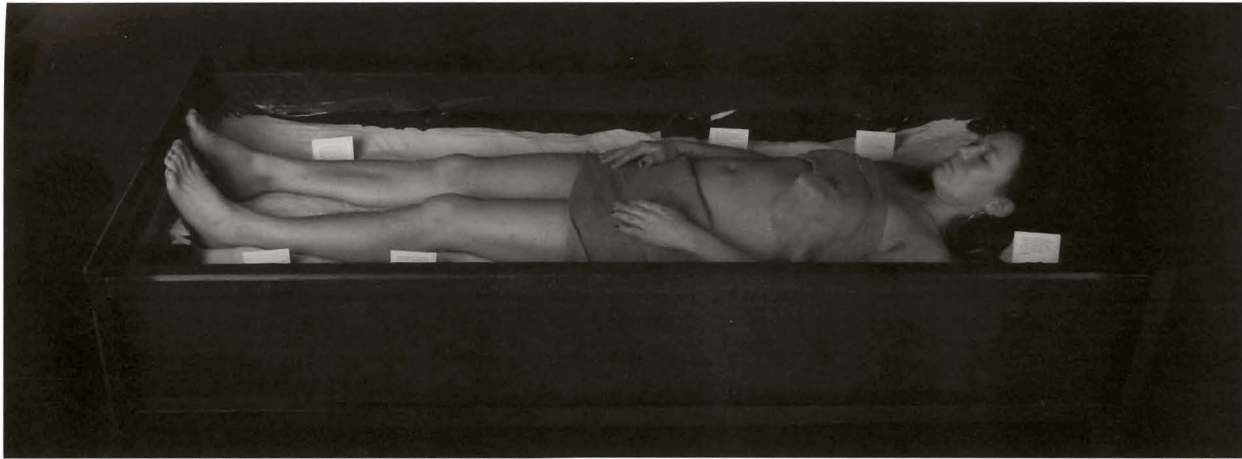
From November 2007 to February 2008 the exhibit *Contemporary Alaska Native Art from the Museum Collection* was on display at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art. Susie Silooks' sculpture *Old Bering Sea Woman* was included in this exhibit. Using inspiration from artifacts discovered in archaeological excavations from Silook's ancestral home on St. Lawrence Island in Alaska, this sculpture is covered in detailed shallow relief carving reminiscent of designs found on Old Bering Sea objects. Although Silook works in a medium traditionally reserved for men, today her sculptures are accepted without question both within her community and at museums and galleries.

In February 2008, the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository on Kodiak Island in Alaska opened *Making Faces*. This exhibition presented commissions of new masks following a specially arranged visit of ten contemporary Alutiiq artists from Kodiak to the

Chateau Musée du Boulogne sur Mer in France to study the largest collection of historical Alutiiq masks. This historical collection had been assembled between 1871-1872 by Alphonse Pinart. Although historically women from Kodiak Island never made masks, this exhibit included the work of two female carvers, Lena Amason and Coral Chernoff, a basket weaver, jeweller and carver.

On February 27, 2008 the Hilton Hotel in Anchorage, Alaska hosted KNBA radio station's annual Alaska Native art auction. The art presented for the auction included jewellery, paintings, wearable art, and other mixed media. Sonya Kelliher-Combs, an Inupiat, Athabascan artist originally from Nome, Alaska donated a mixed media piece titled *Her Favorite Color was Blue*, a *kuspuk*, the traditional everyday dress worn by Alaska Native women, decorated with seal-gut flower forms and encased in liquid polymer. This work took the top bid at the auction selling for \$15,500.

On April 3, 2008, Erica Lord, a mixed heritage artist with Athabascan, Inupiat, Japanese and Caucasian roots, walked into a gallery the George Gustav Heye Center at the Smithsonian Museum in New York and lay down in a case.<sup>2</sup>



Erica Lord *Artifact Piece, Revisited* (April 2008) Smithsonian Museum, New York. Courtesy of the Artist.

She closed her eyes and over the next few hours museum visitors were welcome to examine her on display and to read the captions which identified everything from the scars on her legs, to her painted toenails. On either side of the box where Lord lay down were two other glass cases containing clothes and personal possessions: one was of Alaskan Native dress, the other modern clothes. The first performance was followed by lectures and discussion with the artist. The next day, Lord returned to the museum to perform this piece again (April 4th) and the following day (April 5th). This performance/installation titled *Artifact Piece, Revisited* was a re-enactment of James Luna's *Artifact Piece* which he first performed at the San Diego Museum of Man in 1987. In *Artifact Piece, Revisited*, Lord also uses her body as a conversation piece. As a person with Native heritage, Lord uses her physical appearance to mount a critique of the (nineteenth century) historical legacy of displaying Native peoples in museum exhibits by voluntarily displaying herself in a museum as an artifact. As a woman re-performing this piece, the impact of her performance expands the controversial debates around Luna's original work into a new consideration of the display of women's bodies as (problematic) objects to-be-looked-at but also to the conflict of women as subjects caught between definitions offered within traditional cultures and in modern urban life.

The display of art described in these four events suggests that these artists each use inspiration from their Alaska Native heritage while producing innovations which depart from that tradition and cross previous demarcations of gender. Although what is presented in each of these exhibits is rooted in Alaska Native culture, these artists' practices are intended to be seen by audiences beyond their indigenous community

and to communicate ideas about the particularity of their situation today. Alaska Native women artists are involved in the process of carving out new territory in art production as both indigenous peoples and women.

The choice to highlight these four exhibits, these women, or Alaska Native women in particular is because they are so frequently considered as incidental to the overall history of art or feminist art history. There are many other examples of indigenous people creating new audiences for their art and re-discovering art, just as there are many non-indigenous women artists who are breaking boundaries in contemporary art or redeploying traditional practices to do so. Calling attention to what these women artists are making, however, requires that we expand the field of feminist art history to include attention to the works of non-Western peoples. However in doing so, we must ask the question regarding contemporary art: are there different cultural criteria in these works which must be used to evaluate how gender has changed or challenged traditional art practices? Will attention to gender in their work provide different explanations of how culture operates?

In most accounts and understandings of what constitutes tradition in Alaska Native societies, gender operated as a powerful force that guided many aspects of daily life, including art production. Gender based conventions directed the type of objects an artist made and the materials an artist worked with. Gender even regulated artists' subject matter where some themes were considered taboo for women to explore through art. Many of the conventions based on gender have changed in Alaska following the successive waves of colonists, missionaries and other non-Native visitors who introduced new economies, religions and social systems.



Today's artists work in a multi-cultural environment where some of these traditions based in gender difference no longer have a place.

One way that we can account for this move away from tradition is by examining how Native artists identify their work. All four of these artists note that their work is not only about being a "*Native artist*". For Kelliher-Combs, 'My work is just as much about me as an individual, me as an Alaska Native, me as a woman, me as a human, you know, all of those things.'<sup>3</sup> Erica Lord describes her art as simultaneously addressing 'the merging of blood, culture, gender, memory and the idea of home'.<sup>4</sup>

Coral Chernoff also emphasized the contradictions of her position in a recent interview:

**'I'm not just a Native artist. I make things in all styles but the museums don't choose them if they are not "*Native enough*". I know people who will dress up in their *kuspuks* (the traditional everyday dress worn by Athabascan, Inupiat and Yup'ik women) to sell art because it creates a different sort of identity. I'm not going to do that. I try and stay away from that image. Most people in Kodiak don't even know that I make art.'**<sup>5</sup>

The works of these contemporary Alaska Native artists seek to navigate these cultural boundaries and collect different layers of meaning with their changing audiences inside and outside different communities.

With Kelliher-Combs's work *Her Favorite Color was Blue*, the importance of women as clothing makers was highlighted with the inclusion of a woman's *kuspuk*.<sup>6</sup> However, this dress is not to be worn but is encased in liquid polymer and has become an artefact. Kelliher-Combs said that she made this work (which is one in a series) 'in response to stories [she] heard about terrible experiences many people have had as children. They could be about physical or psychological abuse'.<sup>6</sup> Choosing to make issues like this public she explains is important. 'Problems although challenging, must be voiced in order to transform and promote healing. Through self-expression, empowerment, community and voices coming together we can heal from the past and move forward.'<sup>7</sup> With the artist's explanation of the work, this piece clearly has a strong political message.

At first glance the untitled mask Coral Chernoff created for *Making Faces* might not seem to contain a political message. The form of the mask is traditional and there are no stylistic clues to indicate that a woman created it. In order to uncover the significance of this work, viewers must



Coral Chernoff *Untitled Mask* (2008), made of alder, spruce, baleen, ivory, moose sinew and glass beads. Collection of the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository. Photo: Coral Chernoff. Courtesy of artist.

recognize that Chernoff also has a clear idea of the context for this work. 'It is not just the mask making, it's the context that takes place around it. The stories, having the people get together and share food and knowledge. I think we should do this every evening. It should be grandmothers, babies, all ages-so that people can connect to each other and find mentors.' She is also reacting against the historically male practice of mask carving. 'It took me five weeks to make that mask. It was hard for me. I felt like a very man thing. I guess I always looked at the masks, at how they were carved and I kind of had to get around that feeling that it was a man thing. I thought more about ornamentation. I rubbed ocher over it, I carved a ridge down the front of it. I inlaid beads, and I added handles. I thought about how I would wear the mask if I were to try and dance it. I made it so that it is something that I could hold on to. I knew that in the past the masks were made to be held with the wearer's teeth and I couldn't picture doing that. It was really heavy. I tried to consider what the mask would mean to me and where I would wear it. It is hard to



Susie Silook *Old Bering Sea Woman* (2004) whale bone. Anchorage Museum of History and Art collection. Photo: N.Jackinsky

make my mask relevant to me, my life, the things I see.' Looking at her work from a feminist perspective, the mask is a tool that directs a wearer's gaze while at the same time disguising the wearer. By sculpting this mask, Chernoff puts the woman in charge of the gaze. She explained that she feels comfortable carving masks today because 'right now we are rediscovering lost art where there are no rules.' And she adds:

**'People forget that there is cultural knowledge going on right now that is passed down all the time. They are sucking up anything anyone tells them about their culture. They are looking so far back to find their culture although the culture is still right here. We have to always question what someone says about our culture. Subsistence has been passed on and people don't even realize it....A lot has changed since I grew up. Being Native was a dirty thing. My mother lived during a time when right there on the store it said, "No Indians allowed."'**

Susie Silook also notes that her work goes beyond the boundaries of the 'tiny box we [Native artists] are supposed to stay in, in the minds of some people, in order to maintain their version of our cultural purity and

identity.'<sup>8</sup> Searching for meaning in Silook's *Old Bering Sea Woman*, it is tempting to think of the sculpture as a tribute to the importance of women in Siberian Yupik culture in religious ceremonies and rituals. As an activist for Native women, however, Silook's work might also be looked at as a statement about women in society in general. Silook notes that she is outraged by the 'continued, unsolved high murder and rape rate of native women.' While her anger shows up in some of her work, it is absent from the *Old Bering Sea Woman*. This serene faced sculpture instead it is an image of a peaceful almost angelic woman. Silook noted, 'A lot of the messages I received in my childhood about being Yup'ik were negative.' Showing positive images of Alaska Native women to the public perhaps can reverse some of that.

What is the contribution of these women artists in feminist terms? They are redefining Alaska Native art by creating work that is relevant to them as Native women and as contemporary women who are living in a changing world. Evaluating what affect the impact of this work by woman artists will have to feminist scholarship about contemporary art remains an open question.

Nadia Jackinsky is a PhD student at University of Washington, Seattle.

#### Notes

1. Although other indigenous groups use the term 'First Nations' or 'aboriginal' to refer to themselves, indigenous people in Alaska identify themselves as 'Native'.
2. For images of this event and to hear the lectures which followed the event on 3 April: see [www.nmai.si.edu/artifactrevisited/index.html](http://www.nmai.si.edu/artifactrevisited/index.html)
3. Sonya Kelliher-Combs *When the Season is Good: Artists of Arctic Alaska* (Andrew Okpeaha Maclean, Director) (Alaska Native Art Foundation, 2006)
4. Erica Lord 'Artist's Statement' September 2005 [www.thenaica.org/edition\\_two/images2/artist/erica.htm](http://www.thenaica.org/edition_two/images2/artist/erica.htm)
5. All quotes from Coral Chernoff from an interview with the author in Summer 2005 and updated by phone in May 2008
6. Sonya Kelliher-Combs 'Curators Statement' in *Points of View VII: Con-Census*, Anchorage, Alaska: Anchorage Museum of History and Art, 2007
7. *ibid*
8. Quotes in this paragraph are all from an interview with Julie Decker, 'Wingfeather: An Interview with Susie Silook' *American Indian Art* 27(4) 2002: 78-85. Another work by Silook is also discussed in Veronica Wiman 'Personal Mapping' *n.paradoxa* vol. 19 (Jan 2007) p.18