
From the Selected Works of Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

Summer 2020

Alutiiq Carver Lena Snow Amason

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/matthewryansmith/166/>

ALUTIIQ CARVER LENA SNOW AMASON

By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD

LENA SNOW AMASON was born in the fly-in fishing village of Port Lions, Alaska, to a family of visual artists. Her father is the well-known painter and sculptor Alvin Amason (Alutiiq) and her mother, Kathy Nelson, is an accomplished painter who specialized in drawing with children. Lena Amason credits her mother for encouraging her to paint, draw, and sculpt from an early age, adding that her mother stressed the importance of making art part of her daily life.

Amason also acknowledges the marine life surrounding Kodiak Island, her home, as a driving influence. In particular, the forms, textures, and patterns inherent to the island, its people, and its deep waters are crucial to understanding her work. In recent years she has been recognized for producing a series of remarkable wooden mask carvings inspired by the Alutiiq carving legacy of her ancestors. The intense color palette and rough patina of these carvings speak to how fishing (and the commercial fishing industry) have transformed her everyday experience of living in Port Lions.

An element of her work is also motivated by the prevention of mask carving (and ritual dancing) by missionaries and government agents only a few generations earlier. Her carved masks imagine how the mask and dancing practices might have evolved if unburdened by the history of European colonialism in the Northwest. Ultimately her work represents an entirely new approach to mask carving that wholly embraces vivid color palettes and dynamic shapes to honour and innovate the history of Kodiak Island carving.

Amason's work is included in several public and private collections throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe, including the Château-musée de Boulogne-sur-Mer in Boulogne-sur-Mer, France; the Alaska Native



Heritage Center; the University of Alaska Museum of the North in Fairbanks; and the Anchorage Museum. Her work has also been included in several solo and group exhibitions, notably at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City, the Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak, and the Pratt Museum in Homer. I connected with Amason after her recent move back to Port Lions through a series of phone conversations and email exchanges during the COVID-19 pandemic in April and May of 2020.

MRS: Thank you for speaking with me, Lena. It seems that Port Lions has been very formative to your life and work. Shall we begin there? I understand you were born into a family of artists, and you have said your mother has encouraged your creative output since you were a child. Can you tell me how this has shaped your life as an artist?

LSA: My earliest memories are of living with my mom and dad in a house that was mostly an art studio. It was this huge studio space and it had a little living area located right down the boardwalk from my great-Gramma Lena's house. So I watched my dad, for the couple years that we lived there, create these huge paintings of everyday Kodiak life and the wildlife around the island. We came up with titles together, and I learned the visual language of the island early from him. I had my own spot in the studio that my mom and dad set up for me from the time that I could hold a paintbrush. Making art was something that I always did.

MRS: How has your family shown the importance of art in children's lives?

LSA: My mom would always make sure there were art supplies available. She encouraged us to draw, spent time

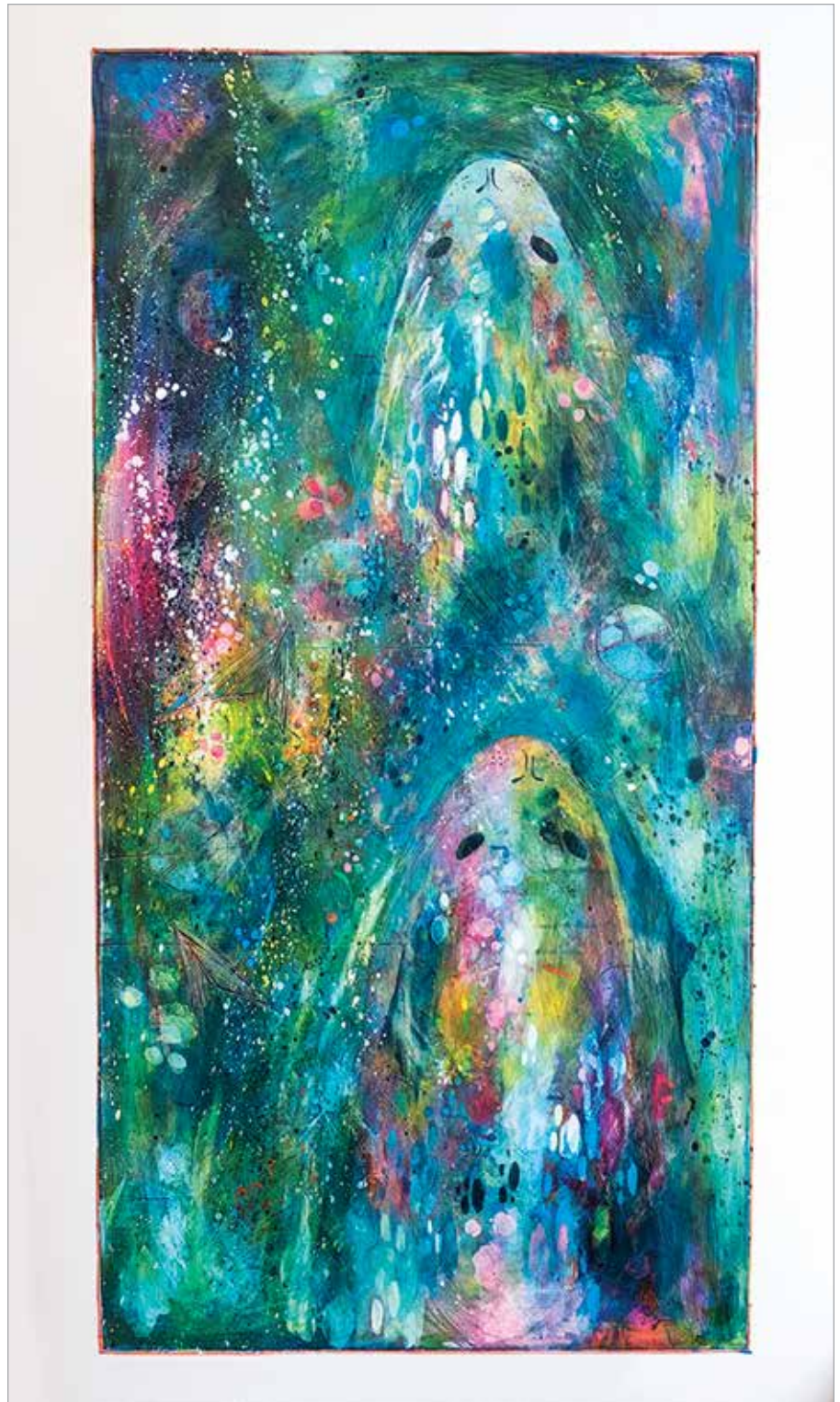
teaching drawing lessons, and volunteered to do art classes as we grew up here in Port Lions. And I'm really thankful that I get to spend time with my mom now with my own kids. She spends time teaching them how to draw and paint and help to make art a part of their lives, too.

MRS: How would you describe Port Lions for those who haven't visited there? Perhaps you can extend that to Kodiak Island, as well?

LSA: I was raised and spent my formative years here in Port Lions. As we speak, I'm currently waiting on the airstrip for groceries. The village is small and only accessible by plane. This village was formed after the 1964 earthquake [known as the Great Alaskan Earthquake] and the tidal wave that wiped out the Afognak village. Many of the people moved from there and relocated to Port Lions. I lived here by the time I was in second grade. My mom married a fisherman, and I spent a lot of my childhood in this village. A lot of my memories of fishing and hunting and village life, as well as many of the ideas that surface in my work, come from living in this village of Port Lions.

MRS: Your aesthetic interests aren't only based on life in the village, I believe. You are a painter with a pointed focus on the wildlife of Kodiak Island, but your carved, wooden masks have garnered a lot of critical attention. I appreciate their color. What was it about carving that stuck with you?

LSA: I didn't get into carving until high school. My dad would ask me if I wanted to make something almost every time I visited his different studios and the different places he lived on Kodiak. He took me once to visit the *Crossroads of Continents* exhibition that came to Alaska in 1991. There was this cool plank mask, and I wanted to make something like that, so I did. I brought the piece back to Port Lions, and Jim Dillard, the carving teacher that got the kids in the village first carving masks here, saw that piece and invited me to come carve with him and showed me how to sharpen tools. I really enjoyed the physicality and the rhythm of carving and being able to create a form that you can paint on.



I didn't get deeply into the mask form until college, I believe. That's when my dad handed me this dissertation by scholar Dominique Desson about the masks of Kodiak. I read through that book and realized what a strong dancing tradition there was on this island and explored the meaning of that for a while. I also got to experience being part of a

ABOVE, TOP *Sisters*, 2019, oils, acrylic, buoy plastic on birch plywood panel, 48¼ × 24 ⅓ × 3in., private collection.

OPPOSITE Lena Snow Amason. All images courtesy of the artist and Stonington Gallery, Seattle, Washington..



dance group for the village of Old Harbor, where I lived for 20 years. We wrote songs and choreographed dances. I even made masks for some of those performances, which was an amazing experience.

Right now I'm mostly doing paintings ... until I can get set up to carve here in Port Lions.

MRS: I hope that will be soon. You've mentioned your dedication to making art, for living creatively. Can you expand on this? Where does this come from?

LSA: I have kept the discipline of making things—drawing, painting, and carving—keeping art a part of my daily life because it's something consistent, something that's always there for me and doesn't let me down. I can always turn to it as a way to express feelings or tell stories. So I am dedicated to it and I consider art my work. I can show up to the studio every day, just like my dad said I need to. He said, "If

this is going to be your job, you need to show up to it every day and treat it like a real job. Even if you just stare at stuff and sweep the floor, you stay connected with it, you'll know what to do the next time you come in."

MRS: That's good advice. It sounds like he's saying that making art is not solely about creating objects but also about maintaining a state of mind. Can you dive into how you select the colors for your paintings and carvings?

LSA: In my early 20s, I took a painting class. I studied with an icon painter and learned how to use egg tempera.

MRS: I hear that's a tricky one.

LSA: It is. The teacher's approach to painting Orthodox icons was to first paint yellow, gold, or some other bright, warm color underneath, as an underpainting, and then complete the rest of the painting

on top of that. This will kind of help the painting glow from within. So I kind of kept that idea. I tend to start my work with warm colors—yellows and oranges and even hot pink—which are colors that I grew up around through fishing and that. A lot of times I'll sand back what I painted to build up a bunch of layers and let some of the brighter colors shine through, to kind of sparkle. I work on these paintings for a long time.

MRS: I think it shows.

LSA: Some of my recent paintings play with color and texture. I was thinking about when I'm out on the water and looking into the net full of fish or riding the skiff and watching how the light plays on the water at different times of day. The light play on water and the feelings of the day—every day I would go in and lay colors down and whatever I was feeling that day without really thinking, I would play around, and just be myself.

MRS: I notice, too, that the surfaces of your carvings are purposely scraped or meticulously sanded away. My mum lives in a small village on Prince Edward Island, on the Eastern Shores of Canada. The scuffed and scraped and worn surfaces of your masks remind me of the old lobster boats there, especially as the fishing season draws to a close. I'd like to know about your approach to texture. What is the deeper meaning on the surface of these works?

LSA: All of my years spent commercial fishing and being on the water, I paid attention to the way that the wood surfaces of boats and equipment were always scraped or the paint was worn away. I think I try to bring that effect into my paintings. Also, when I look at artifacts and different objects that are painted and worn and used by the Alutiit people hundreds of years ago, the wear marks and scuff marks, that's where the experiences and stories are.

MRS: Texture as a story is poetic. I like that. With this in mind, I'd like to discuss one of your more popular works, *Pray for Blue Sky* (2018). It is a work that, I think, best synthesizes your approach to color and texture. Can you talk about how this work came into being?

LSA: *Pray for Blue Sky* was made in honor of a family member, and I was working on it during a time when we knew that she wouldn't be around much longer. I was thinking about a happy memory of sitting with her in our yard in Old Harbor when the sunshine was coming through the leaves in the trees and the green grass was all around, just telling stories and laughing with her. It was a happy moment in the summer, and I chose my color palette because of that memory. I chose the face on that piece as kind of a mix between the weasel and the fox, not necessarily any one kind of animal but an animal that had a feisty, kind of a stinker spirit that this person did, but in a playful way. I was finishing up this piece around the time when this person was only going to be around for a little bit longer, and there were family members who needed to make it in to spend their last moments with her.



MRS: The title of the work, *Pray for Blue Sky*, is inscribed on the lower righthand corner of the work. How did you come to choose this title?

LSA: I remember that I called my dad and explained to him what was going on with

ABOVE *Nuniak Arlluk*, 2018, acrylic, oils, buoy plastic, glass beads, baleen, monofilament, Plexiglas, found wood, yellow cedar, 54 × 30 × 17 in., private collection.

OPPOSITE *Truth*, 2019, acrylic, buoy plastic on wood, 16¾ × 22 × 2¼ in., private collection.



ABOVE *Kasa'inaq—Seal Hemlet*, 2018, acrylic, oils, Plexiglas, glitter on red cedar, 9 × 16 $\frac{7}{8}$ in., private collection.

OPPOSITE *Pray for Blue Sky*, 2018, acrylic, oils, on red cedar.

this person. And we weren't sure what was happening, and if planes were even going to be able to make it in so that the family would be able to see her. He said, "You had better pray for blue sky," so it was he that gave me that title, *Pray for Blue Sky*.

MRS: Your work utilizes various iconography such as Alutiiq cultural symbols, images from commercial fishing, and Kodiak's wildlife, mostly from the surrounding waters. Can you talk about how they make their way into your work?

LSA: A lot of times I feel confined by labels like "Alutiiq artist Lena Amason" or "traditional work by," these labels that make you feel like you need to make things based on a certain genre or time period. On the underside of the kayak, you'll see symbols. I drew some that are borrowed from a Kodiak dance mask. It looks like it may be made out of some kind of leather, but it doesn't cover the whole face. Anyway, it kind of reminds me of fish tails, so I was thinking of the idea of being prepared to go out fishing and how it is mental—what kind of state of mind do you need to go out on the boat? You're

going to be dealing with all kinds of weather and all kinds of situations. You need to have a clear mind, and your spirit needs to be right with itself. I recently borrowed symbols from the designs on top of spruce root hats that were from Kodiak. I'm not sure, but there's a lot of them from Kodiak that have symbols on top. Maybe it was an identifying marker from a family? Like a signature. I'm not sure. The boat names come from the families, from important people in the family, grammas, daughters, and others.

MRS: Can we follow this further? I'm curious to know why and for whom your work is for.

LSA: I make pieces for many reasons. Many times it's to honor a memory or something that happened. It could be a piece that was made for someone who I would like to apologize to or someone that I need to forgive. I've been looking recently at the work of Joan Mitchell, Willem de Kooning, and different Abstract Expressionist painters. Even paintings by children—give them some paint and they will do amazing things. The total freedom and confidence without worrying about making a certain thing, just expressing your feelings, and what is happening in the moment, and play, and enjoy making.

MRS: As you've said, Port Lions is a remote fishing village on Kodiak, so I'm wondering how you've managed to connect to other artists and create a sense of community?

LSA: A lot of our communication and sharing of ideas and exchange of images are done using cell phones. They are tools, like any other, especially when I was working on the show I had in Homer and making the piece for the show that Donald Varnell had recently. We shared a lot of screenshots of work and sort of talked in images. We're pretty far away but we're still able to communicate on that level. It doesn't feel like you're working alone anymore when you're able to share like that, having ongoing conversations with other people who speak the same language.

MRS: What have you been working on most recently?

LSA: My friend Donald Varnell invited me to make a piece for his state museum show called *The Crybabies*, and there was a show alongside it that was called *The Inspirations*, which included the works and objects that inspired his work and people he kept in contact with while he was making his work for the show. He asked me to make something—to do whatever I want, something that I've always wanted to do, not connected with any theme or a certain subject matter, which is really nice to have that freedom and be encouraged to just play and experiment and do something that isn't in a category.

Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD, is the Curator at Glenhyrst Art Gallery in Brantford, Ontario, and the Canadian Section Editor of the Art Market Dictionary. Matthew works in London, Ontario.

