Tlingit-Unangax Interdisciplinary Artist Nicholas Galanin

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.
BORN IN SITKA, ALASKA, Nicholas Galanin locates new visual languages by drawing from historical Indigenous iconography. Galanin’s early experiences in the studio with his great-grandfather the Reverend George Benson, a wood sculptor, and his father Dave Galanin, who worked in precious metals, would influence his later work. He first trained at London Guildhall University, 2000–03, where he received a BFA with honors in jewelry design and silversmithing, and later earned an MFA in Indigenous visual arts at New Zealand’s Massey University.

Following his coursework, Galanin returned to Sitka to immerse himself in an art-making practice that straddles “customary” work, as he calls it, and contemporary art. In doing so, Galanin remains free to explore the object-making practices of his people and its history, while also participating in the frenetic macrocosm of the art world today. Few artists have been so successful in merging the historical with the now, and video works such as *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan* (2008) and *Who We Are* (2006) provide strong examples. Recently, Galanin has noticeably shifted focus back to sculptural works, having made *I Dreamt I Could Fly* (2013), an amalgam of 60 porcelain arrows in flight, and *Indian Children’s Bracelet* (2014), a pair of hard-engraved, hand-engraved iron, 3 × 8 × 0.5 in.\(^1\)

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The following interview with Galanin was completed in March 2015. Here he discusses his key influences, recent projects, and the uses of his Indigenous identity in contemporary art practice. This, in anticipation of solo exhibitions at Macaulay & Co. Fine Art in Vancouver in September and the Anchorage Art Museum in 2016, in addition to showing work in Japan, New York City, Boston, and Arizona.

To begin, I’d like to cite the Bernard Pivot’s questionnaire made famous by James Lipton: “What turns you on creatively, spiritually, or emotionally?”

My Indigenous land and the relationship we have maintained with it—the movement of its seasons, our subsistence and survival on this land. It is powerful and healing to be out on this land, out on the sea. Truth is a necessity and always motivating. When we reveal the lies that surround our nation’s history and expose the truths, we collectively progress. Sound—I am in love, even obsessed with sound; no other medium has ever provided me with this feeling of freedom to express. Light, I notice how deeply affected I am by light. The late afternoon light that washes through the trees while on a forest run will fill a heart with gratitude and presence.

Knowledge, the conversations and knowledge shared by our elders and creative artists fuels the spirit. When given the opportunity to gather with artists, I always leave inspired, moved, and grateful to see how many wonderful creatives are out continually contributing towards progress. My children, never have I felt love like I have for them.

In a previous issue of *First American Art Magazine*, I had the opportunity to write about your video work *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan*. In it, you combined a video of David Elsewhere popping and locking to this funky, pulsating electronic music. In the other video is of Dan Littlefield performing a traditional Tlingit dance in front of a massive screen. I never had the opportunity to ask you this until now, but I’ve always been curious: How did this work come about?

I was in New Zealand doing my master’s degree and went out to a club with some friends one evening. It was an underground spot with a DJ doing his thing—the dancers were in a trance, almost standing in rows moving to the sound but not with each other. The idea for the work hit me here. I was probably interested in our relationship to sound throughout time. All too often we create barriers for digestion, barriers that allow for easier consumption. Artists have the ability to move freely through these false walls, if we allow ourselves to.

Nah, my best response is to continue to create new works that push perception. I have no problem discussing my works—especially with my background in teaching customary forms. The understanding is grounded in my culture’s ancient, visual language. I would not leap from a platform if it were not truly a firm foundation to leap from. The conservative aspect of our culture is understandable. In very recent times, we had been torn from so many aspects of our being: language, ceremony, dance, land, family, song, visual language, etc., etc. This is genocide. This is still going on today. When

\(^1\) These are reminiscent of a historical pair of child’s handcuffs, used to restrain Native children being taken from their homes to boarding schools, in the collection of the Hinkell Cultural Center and Museum, Lawrence, Kansas.

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By Matthew Ryan Smith

Nicholas Galanin. All images courtesy of the artist.

Indian Children’s Bracelet, 2014, hand-engraved iron, 3 × 8 × 0.5 in.\(^1\)

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you steal these things, we will certainly hold tight to what we have now. Holding too tightly will also suffocate us. Balance, movement, and growth are all necessary.

Absolutely. Why is it important to draw from Indigenous traditions/customs to produce contemporary art?

The foundation of Indigenous culture is important and relevant. In our customary knowledge, there is much to gain and learn. The world will have nowhere to look but to our Indigenous leaders in restoring balance on this planet.

My contemporary work is not separated so cleanly from the “tradition” of my cultural work. Our artists in the past provided gateways and a lens to other perspectives or worlds. The new work does the same but in new context, often with new audiences.

As a sculptor, how would you say sculpture made by Indigenous peoples is changing?

Our audience is changing. We still have the cultural at.ow [revered clan possessions or treasures] used in our ceremonies and community, and even within the customary visual aesthetic or visual language it is allowed to change. Imagine how magnificent it is to think that something you’ve created has never ever been seen by eyes before? We also have voice and freedom. Sovereign cultural creativity is empowering. I would like to think that our sculpture will continually change; it is supposed to.

I’d like to talk about several recent works for a moment. What they have in common is they’re charged materials loaded with symbolism, and, in many respects, metaphors for suffering: *I Dreamt I Could Fly, Indian Children’s Bracelet,* and *Haa Aaní (Our Land),* a hand-engraved and carved AR-15 rifle with a hand-sewn, sea otter fur strap. Arguably, these works from 2013 mark a signal change in your practice in that they engage with Indigenous historical trauma. What is the impulse driving the creation of such works?

Works are created out of necessity. Too many simple conversations distract from actively overlooked historic realities. Romanticized, market-driven work is palatable and necessary for an artist to survive. Truth is too, especially if the white-privilege community decides to hit the active, cultural-amnesia switch. F--- you, if this work makes you uncomfortable. I’ve had non-Native peers feel a need to reach out and tell me how tired they were of seeing works that confronted this history. I have had non-Native peers remind me that I am “prospering from my Indigenous culture.” F--- you. I am prospering from hard work and contributing to this culture. Colonialism is consumption. The impulse is truth, and we need more of it.

Music is obviously a strong passion of yours. You’ve released several albums recognized for their close relationships to Indigenous life. Tell me about this music and how it figures into your art practice.

I am deeply inspired by music. It fuels my visual work. The creative birth that happens when a musician composes space is magic. It’s from another world.

What would you say is your greatest influence today—what books are you reading? Whose work are you looking at? What music are you listening to?

I have many influences. My children and the lens through which they see the world. My wish to leave a better community for them to grow in is real. Shouts to my creative crew in the Black Constellation—Nep Sidhu, Shabazz Palaces, Erik Blood, OCnotes and

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**Profile Nicholas Galanin**

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I Think It Goes Like This?, 2012, wood, paint, dimensions variable, collection of the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art.


THEEsatisfaction, Maikooyo Alley-Barnes—my father Dave Galanin, and his ability to show nothing but support for me as a young artist; also for introducing me to the wonderful world of the Delta blues. My brothers Brandon and Jerrod Galanin. Jerrod is also an artist and collaborator; together we create under the name “Leonard Getinthecar.”

I am a fan of Da-ka-xeen Mehner and his wonderful work. Allison Warden, Ronald Senungetuk, and Susie Silook are wonderful people and amazing artists. The list goes on, and I am grateful to be alive at the same time as you all and am sure I did not complete this list, but there are really too many to name. Gunalchéesh.

Finally, what projects do you have planned for the future?

I am creating daily. It really depends on how I feel. I am working on new work for new shows—working on making leather shoes for an upcoming exhibit on Native fashion at the Peabody [Essex Museum].

I have new music in the works. I have also been working on the live performance and translation of my new album, currently being pressed to vinyl. We are about to hit the road in June with some Indigenous musicians including Kristi Lane Sinclair, Cris Derksen, Raven Chacon, and Laura Ortman. The Red Ride Tour. Watch for dates in a city near you.

I am throwing my tenth and final music fest in Sitka, Alaska, called HomeSkilletFest. This year’s festival will take place outdoors July 31 and August 1. It has been a good run, but I am ready to put my energy into other community projects.

I would love to see a university degree program in Sitka for Indigenous art. While I was attending university in London, England, I was told I could not pull from my Indigenous art background, simply because it was “too literal” for the curriculum. We have to have a space in these institutions where we are not required to hang our culture up at the door in order to succeed in this world. I will be working towards making this happen.

galan.in
homeskilletfest.com
silverjackson.bandcamp.com

3. The exhibit is Native Re/View in the Special Exhibit Galleries at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, on view from November 21, 2015 through March 6, 2016.