



NATIVE
AMERICAN
ART COUNCIL

The High Status of
Salamander, 2014,
Greg Robinson

FOCUS

Native American Art Council
June 2016

Nicholas Galanin

Multi-disciplinary Artist and Musician

by Stephanie Feeney

Biography

Nicholas Galanin was born in 1979 in Sitka, Alaska. Of Tlingit and Aleut heritage, he comes from a long line of Northwest Coast artists. His great-grandfather was a wood carver and his father worked in precious metals and stone. Though his parents separated when he was a child, Galanin kept a link to his heritage by continuing to work with his father in his studio. He became interested in art and music as a teenager, and when he was eighteen decided to devote himself to being an artist. He entered the London Guildhall University in England in 2000 and received a Bachelor's of Fine Arts with specializations in jewelry design and silversmithing in 2003. Faculty at Guildhall did not approve of his Native American aesthetic, and urged him to acquire a more

contemporary approach to art. From 2004 until 2007 he attended the Master's program in Indigenous Visual Arts at Massey University in New Zealand that combined his interest in traditional and contemporary art forms. This experience led him to an appreciation of Maori culture



Portrait, In Brice, KCAW,
attributed to Dr. Jessica R.
Metcalf/USE Fello

initiatives and broadened his experience of indigenous cultures and art. Since he returned from New Zealand, Nicholas Galanin has been a vital part of the indigenous art world. He has lectured widely and his art can be found in museums in the United States, Canada, Europe and other countries.

About the work

Galanin was trained in the traditional techniques and imagery of Tlingit and Northwest Coast art as well as Western contemporary art and aesthetics. While his Northwest Coast origins form the foundation for his art, his body of work simultaneously honors his culture and explores new territory. In it, he has addressed ideas related to identity, cultural change, the relationship between Native and non-Native cultures, and ideas of authentic versus the inauthentic.

In interviews (Burr, 2012; Joyce, 2013) Galanin explains that his goal is to contribute to cultural development through creations that inspire dialogue with the viewer about socio-historical, cultural and political topics. He states that he typically begins with a concept and the choice of medium follows. These concepts are explored through a plethora of creative expressions, including site-specific installation, video, sculpture, jewelry, live performance and fashion design.

Galanin's work was first exhibited in the 2004 **Totems to Turquoise** exhibit at the Museum of Natural History in New York. The interaction he had with an interviewer about his copper mask that was displayed in the show led him to question mainstream expectations of Native American Art and to begin to explore how indigenous art was interpreted by non-Native viewers. The interviewer, pursuing a widely held romantic notion of Native culture, pressed Galanin to discuss spirituality, which was not something that had informed the

creation of the mask. Galanin felt that the interviewer had no interest in his real motivation or his experience, and he started to think about ways to create that would explore and expand understanding of indigenous artists and that would get closer to their motivation, interests and true feelings.

Since that epiphany Galanin has gone on to produce a fascinating, diverse, and provocative body of creative work. His visual art explores ideas about culture and how it is represented. He is interested in where information about indigenous peoples comes from, the legitimacy of their portrayal in scholarly literature, and the validity of interpretations from people who are not from the culture.

Galanin's visual art work includes:

* "Who We Are"--a collection of ceremonial masks blurring into one in a fast montage.



From *Hyperallergic*

* "Things Are Looking Native, Native's Looking Whiter"--a photographic image combining Princess Leia (from the Star Wars movie) and a woman in tribal garb.

* "What Have We Become?"--a series of culturally significant books sculpted into masks.

* "The Curtis Legacy"--images of naked women wearing Indian masks exploring the idea of romanticism and the image of the perfect Indian.



From *Race & Revolution*

* "The Imaginary Indian"--an appropriation of French culture in which manufactured Northwest Coast masks are decorated with French toile.



* "I Looooove Your Culture: Hipsters in Headdresses"--Indian head patterned bowtie that put his cultural message on a commercial item.



From Burr in *Decoy*

* "Inert"--a taxidermy wolf skin rug that appears to be part rug and part living animal. This work is not directly connected to Native cultural iconography, but is intended to generate a mental dialogue between the artist and the viewer.

Galanin's interests are not limited to visual art. He produced "Héidei Shugaxtutaan" (We Will Again Open This Container of Wisdom), a video that explores the intersection of traditional music and dance forms with contemporary aesthetics. In Part 1, a young dancer performs a modern version of a Raven dance to traditional Tlingit music. In Part 2, modern and traditional elements are reversed. A dancer dressed in a Tlingit regalia dances to modern electronic music with a traditional carved wall screen in the background.



Nov. 20, 2006 YouTube, Part II,
Dan Littlefield, performer. 5 minutes.

Galanin is also an accomplished musician known for his performances as Indian Nick and Silver Jackson. Galanin enjoys performing, and thinks that he has more freedom to be himself in musical expression because he is not confined to narrow conceptions of his ethnicity.

Currently he is finding new expression in fashion design. His work is featured in the exhibition **Native Fashion Now** opening June 4, 2016 at Portland Art Museum with a pair of hand-sewn shoes of leather and engraved copper armor-like detailing.

Exhibitions and Awards

Galanin's work has been exhibited in museums and galleries around the world, including the American Museum of Natural History; The Anchorage Museum; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Alaska State Museum in Juneau; the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth; the National Gallery of Canada; the Portland Art Museum; the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles; the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass; the Burke Museum in Seattle; Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University; the Kurumaya Museum in Japan; and many others. He was a 2014 Rasmuson Foundation award winner in the Crafts in Traditional Arts category. He also received a Contemporary Art Fellowship from the Eiteljorg Museum in Indianapolis.

Reflection

Until quite recently, indigenous art consisted of anthropological artifacts organized for display by age, geographic location, and the tribe or culture that created them. Exhibits were curated by non-Native "experts" who decided how to organize the material and how it would be described. These curators' definitions were often more about themselves and their personally held views than those of the Native artist. Art produced by indigenous peoples tended to be viewed as part of a history that was rigid and unchanging. Individual artists were rarely recognized and their voices were not heard or solicited. Today the Portland Art Museum is making a concerted effort to present art and artists who

bring new insight and challenge previous views of Native American art.

A younger generation of Native American artists who have experienced diverse cultural influences has moved beyond traditional aesthetics to create work that addresses contemporary issues and challenges preconceptions about the nature of their art. Nicholas Galanin is one of this new generation of artists who have been trained in traditional cultural forms and motifs, and are able to move beyond them in new and often provocative ways. "With a fiercely independent spirit, Galanin has found the best of both worlds and has given them back to his audience in stunning form" (Broken Boxes). Nicholas Galanin is a modern day Renaissance man who embraces his identity while at the same time refusing to be shaped or limited by it. He explores the interface between culture and identity in diverse and endlessly creative ways. In his own words, "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 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."

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[nicholas-galanin/](#)

About the Author

Stephanie Feeney is a Portland Art Museum Native American Art Council member and a recently retired Professor of Education, University of Hawaii.

Nicholas Galanin's at Portland Art Museum

Nicholas Galanin's latest appearance and lecture was May 11, 2016 at a joint reception and meeting of the Native American Art Council (NAAC) and the Contemporary Art Council (CAC).

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