



The Portland Art Museum Podcast - Episode 5

SPEAKERS

Grace Kook-Anderson, Jenny Irene Miller



Grace Kook-Anderson 00:05

You're listening to the Portland Art Museum podcast. On the previous episode we heard from robbery, a self described collector of accidents and rubberneckerers, whose work is featured in our current exhibition. The map is not the territory. On this episode anchorage photographer Jenny Irene Miller gives us a closer look at her stunning series continuous. Jenny was interviewed outside so you'll hear the sound of the Alaskan coast behind her. relevant links will be in this episode's description, and a full transcript is available at Portland Art Museum dot o RG slash podcast. You will hear my voice from time to time, but only when there is a shift and topics. Until then. This is Jenny IV Miller.



Jenny Irene Miller 00:56

Hi, my name is Jenny Irene Miller. My Inupiaq name is Wiagañmiu. I'm originally from Nome and I currently live in Anchorage, Alaska. I think I've always been interested in individuals who incorporate their identity, or identities into their art, and also the power of the camera to capture certain moments of my life. And mostly I've been interested in the camera as a tool to capture moments in my life personally. And since I was younger, I've always had a camera with me from a plastic toy camera to a Polaroid camera that I inherited from my great grandma, to a 35 millimeter camera, disposable cameras I've always had so much fun getting the film back and reviewing the images. And I think I really got to, I became more serious about photography in high school and I started

analog photography, and then I began to look at it as a fine art project. This and became more involved and began shooting more and more, I would say so it was analog photography and I worked a lot in the darkroom mostly shot 35 millimeter film. And back then I was also really interested in portraiture, which I still am. But I was also interested in just documenting the landscapes around me and whatever I interacted with it was really, sometimes it was really just a documentation of my day, which is sometimes wasn't that interesting at all, but it was fun to just shoot and once I began to process my own film and make my own images, I became incredibly interested in the process.

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Grace Kook-Anderson 02:43

If you've listened to the previous episodes in this podcast, you know that we like to hear about mentors and major influences. It should be noted that Jenny Irene isn't the only artist in her family. Jenny Irene's great uncle is Ronson Senungetuk, an Established sculptor and silversmith. He also started the University of Alaska Fairbanks metalsmithing program and served as director of its Native Arts Center.

J

Jenny Irene Miller 03:11

So my great uncle mostly work works in wood carvings panels, and also his work tells stories and integrates a lot of our Inupiaq identity and histories. So I have always been very intrigued by his work and he's definitely a influencer. And he's promoted to bring Native Art from just viewing it as a craft to be to a fine art and I highly respect all the work that he's done. And I'm always really inspired by him. So So one of my mentors within photography has been Kate Wool, she's an Alaskan based photographer and Kate has always pushed me and challenge me and asked me certain questions that made me rethink my process. And also I'm a huge fan of her portraiture work and she's always been very motivating. And I would say my other mentors have been university professors. So Eric Johnson, Ellen Garvins, Rebecca Cummings, and most significantly within my work that I'm doing right now within exploring indigenous gender concepts and identities was Dr. Dian Million. I took a course from her. And she's been unofficially a mentor.

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Grace Kook-Anderson 04:38

Jenny Irene mentioned creating art that explores indigenous gender concepts and identities. This is the series that you see in the map is not the territory. These white framed photographs extend across a 39 foot saffron-colored gallery wall.

J

Jenny Irene Miller 04:57



So I've been working on this project called Continuous and I first conceptualized this project in 2012. And I really began doing research and thinking about the project and mostly researching pre colonial gender identities and concepts within the indigenous framework. And I'd be I took my first portrait for this series in 2015. And it took a while for me to actually began producing work because I myself identify within the LGBTQ community and I had to, for me, I had to be fully out and be part of the series. So it took a while for me to go through that and so I first began shooting continuous in 2015. And continuous is a portrait series which features indigenous, LGBTQ and two-spirit peoples, and it recognizes their individual stories and their unique tribal backgrounds and Essentially what it means to be indigenous and part of the LGBTQ community, some communities that have gone to or no, Juneau and Palmer and coming up, I'll be going to Portland with continuous I'm hoping to represent different cultures and really educate people on the diversity of indigenous peoples that we don't look a certain way we don't all think the same way. And we have unique worldviews. Yeah, so continuous focuses on community and how we can celebrate and uplift the indigenous LGBTQ and two-spirit community and really amplify these voices and build a community in Alaska throughout the lower 48 and hopefully Canada as well. And my past work, I've been working on projects that focus on space, like the landscapes that I'm in so one of my previous projects was the Duwamish River project and that was i shot that in seattle and that was focusing on a river but also the history of the river and the people who use the river prior to it being a superfund site now i would say my present work still is along the same themes i'm always finding ways to integrate myself into my work to learn more about myself and it's it is new in a way because it's simply focusing on individuals rather than a place i would say i'm always mixing between urban rural and because that's who i am i you know was born and raised and know also raised in Fairbanks and lived in Seattle for a significant point and now i live in Anchorage which is Alaska's largest city so i'd say my work mixes between urban and rural and it's really what influences my work most are my identities as being indigenous queer individual and woman and also the relationships in my life and so i would say those mostly influence and you'll see parts of the environment in my work because it is an important part of who i am being out and being by the water and also it's a great opportunity within portraiture to show certain parts of Alaska within my work so Nome is a rural community in northwest Alaska there's about 3800 people there i consider Nome home even though i haven't lived there in a good chunk of time my family roots are from there although my family roots originate from Wales, Alaska also known as Kinjigin in Inupiaq my family moved from Wales to know in the early 50s and so Nome has kind of been our our home away from wales so Whenever I think about what is home to me, visuals of Nome always come back and whenever I'm back and know my feel very at ease and it feels really good to be back in Nome.



Grace Kook-Anderson 09:13

Jenny Irene clearly has a strong connection to her family's Alaskan heritage. And in her practice as an artist, indigenous values are very much the foundation.



Jenny Irene Miller 09:24

The biggest indigenous value for me that finds its way into my work is respect. And that's every time I work with someone, I take someone's portrait, I highly respect the time that they give to me, the stories that they share with me the stories that the viewers will be able to connect with and read. So I highly respect everyone that I work with. And I really look at it as a collaboration. And they're sharing with me, I'm sharing with them and it's a relationship that will hopefully span over time. So respect is a huge element in my work, and also When I work within a community, I have to make sure that I'm representing the community in a way that celebrates them and isn't just taking to highlight my craft or anything like that. So I'm really making sure that I'm respecting all elements and listening to people. So continuous is my small answer to the large question. How do we as indigenous people to colonize our genders, our sexualities, and the way we view people who identify outside the baton area of male or female? So it's really looking to decolonize the way we look at the LGBTQ community. Continuous is my small answer to the large question how do we as indigenous people, the colonize our sexualities, or genders, and the way we view those who identify outside of the binaries male or female and it's really too Look at these, these concepts through an indigenous lens and worldview and to think about how we worked with our community in the past and undoing certain elements of homophobia, transphobia, and different elements that we've learned through colonization. with continuous, I really hope that the viewers will feel and connect with heartfelt stories that the subject share and to find some type of connection and to continue the dialogue and to find ways to become better allies to support our LGBTQ community and to be there for our youth especially, I believe with continuous being part of it and creating this portrait series. I believe it's a really important body of work because we don't see that much media. Maybe By this community for this community, and I really hope that being part of continuous reminds them that they are very important and their stories are valid and they are special. And they're part of a community. I would say as an artist, the role I provide is I'm highlighting different topics, different subjects, and different community members who we need to recognize who we need to support and highlighting our community from an authentic lens being from a certain community, you know, I want to represent it as best way possible. And I also want to share the real stories. So my processes I typically think about a topic or some type of new project, and I think about it for weeks and then that it becomes more months. And sometimes it becomes years, where I'm just doing research and gathering information and learning more about the subject, the community. And then I ultimately began creating. And for example, right now, I

probably have about three projects that are in the works where I'm just in the research stage, but I haven't had the time to work on. So I'm constantly challenging myself to have more projects coming up and thinking about them. So I'd really say that I'm constantly challenging myself to continue to think of new projects into actually go out and start creating work. I think that one of my mentors, as I mentioned earlier, Kate Wool really challenged me to continue to create my own projects. And this was when I was in my 20s, early 20s. And ever since then, I've always had different projects on my list ideas that I'm going to eventually make into a body of work. So some past projects it there's been time restrictions and certain political, political things going on where I feel like I have to make a body of work and I have to get it out a certain time. So there's been those certain situations, but typically, it's really how I feel. And I could spend a great amount of time working on a project and never release it, or I can just continue working on it and eventually have a ballpark date in my mind. So I would say there is no set schedule. It just varies with each individual project.

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Grace Kook-Anderson 14:43

Jenny Irene is an extremely thoughtful artist. It's one of the things that draws me to her work. It's also one of the reasons why I wanted the artists in this exhibition to consider the meaning behind the map is not the territory and find their own interpretation. as they prepare, for me personally, the map is not the territory. I'm thinking about different systems, different maps different, I guess restrictions and guidelines that were put on indigenous peoples. And so I'm really thinking about the map is not the territory as thinking about the individual communities within certain places and the people and their stories, and how our can serve to amplify those voices and recognize the different the diversity, the new, unique people and its really thinking about communities and cultures beyond the borders beyond the state lines beyond the city lines, the boroughs and thinking about the stories that are there and what these lands mean to certain people with this lens mean to me how I operate in a space and how it informs me as an artist. I'm incredibly honored to be part of this exhibition. I'm also really grateful that indigenous queer art is being recognized by a museum. I really want the viewers to see the diversity within indigenous cultures, one from the way we look, also the way we present ourselves, their stories, and I really hope they find some connections within those heartfelt stories because they're incredibly meaningful. And I would like them to be motivated to do something to become better allies to the indigenous LGBTQ and two-spirit communities, and to also find ways to uplift our youth. Thank you for listening to the Portland Art Museum Podcast. On the next episode, you'll hear from Portland artists Fernanda D'Agostino, entering the exhibition Fernanda's immersive and interactive video installation, Borderline, is the very first piece you encounter. Fernanda's full interview audio simply cannot be missed. If you haven't already, please be sure to subscribe to this

podcast so you are notified when Fernanda's episode is released. I'd like to thank Jenny Irene Miller for sharing her background and stories with us. I'd also like to thank Jon Richardson, this Podcast's Producer, and most importantly, thank you for listening.