

## HYPERALLERGIC

### Nicholas Galanin Suggests We're Ready to Fight Back

Galanin, a Tlingit-Unanga artist, addresses climate change and its connection to white supremacy, as well as the commodification of indigenous cultures.

Sheila Regan | November 18, 2019



Nicholas Galanin, foreground: "We Dreamt Deaf," (2015), taxidermy polar bear; background: "Unceremonial Dance Mask," (2017), single channel video with sound (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Last July, Nicholas Galanin, a Tlingit-Unanga artist from Alaska, was one of eight artists who announced they were withdrawing their work from the Whitney Biennial in protest of museum board member Warren Kanders and his company, Safariland. Kanders resigned a week after the artists' announcement.

*Everything We've Ever Been, Everything We Are Right Now*, Galanin's solo exhibition at Macalester College's Law Warschaw Gallery, demonstrates that his participation in the "Whitney 8" protest wasn't just a one-off. Rather, his practice shows his investment in activism and social change, as it takes on cultural appropriation, fetishization of indigenous practices, cultural reclamation, and environmental issues.



Nicholas Galanin, "The American Dream is Alie and Well" (2012), US flag, felt, .50 cal ammunition, foam, gold leaf, plastic

Two polar bears, on opposite sides of a central wall, frame the exhibition. First, there's "We Dreamt Deaf" (2015), a taxidermic bear that was shot by a white hunter in Shishmaref, Alaska, before Galanin was born. Located on an island off the coast of Alaska, Shishmaref is sinking into the sea, making subsistence hunting and fishing dangerous and nearly impossible for the indigenous community based there. Part bear, part rug, Galanin tells Hyperallergic that the piece refers to the dangers of ignoring climate change, but it's also about amnesia. The polar bear's emaciated state illustrates the consequences of humans forgetting their place in the world, where energy extraction comes at the cost of animals, cultures, and entire ecosystems.

On the opposite side of the center wall lies another polar bear, this one a rug covered in an American flag. Its claws are made of bullets, its teeth painted with gold leaf. Titled "The American Dream is Alie and Well" (2012), the work speaks to the lies, genocide, theft, decimation of land and cultures, and enslavement of people that laid the foundation for the United States. The "alie" of the title is a play on alive, turning it into "a lie." The suffering of the polar bears, much like the annihilation of the homes and culture of the indigenous communities in Shishmaref, results from American greed. Galanin's "My Ears Are Numb" (2012), made of a drum wrapped in an American flag and a red cedar nightstick, continues that conversation.



Nicholas Galanin, "My Ears Are Numb" (2012), drum, US flag, red cedar nightstick

In addition to works that address climate change and its connection to white supremacy, Galanin investigates the commodification of indigenous culture in his work, particularly in "I Looooove Your Culture! Fine Wood Working" (2012). Modeled after a sex toy called a "pocket pussy," the phallic object with female genitalia carved into the end references the fetishization of indigenous art and culture by those who are not Native. In the work, Galanin compares white consumption of indigenous culture and objects to a dehumanizing masturbatory tool.

On opening night, a white performer sat in the corner of the exhibition space carving his own pocket pussy modeled after the one on display. "White Carver" (2012) encompasses both the white carver and photos of carvers from previous iterations of the piece. The performance raises awareness about the ways indigenous cultural practices have been and continue to be stolen in the United States.

The exhibition also includes video documentation of performances and a beautiful series of monotype prints that conjure the fish, berries, and animals that are central to Tlingit life. A formidable sculpture of an eerie figure in 18th-century fashion, with wild creatures poking out from the bottom, made with Galanin's partner Merritt Johnson, adds to the larger scope of the exhibition. The raw ferocity of the piece, titled "Creation and Her Children" (2017), speaks to

survival in spite of the devastation of the earth and indigenous cultures. With his work, Galanin suggests the strength to fight back is fierce and ready.



Nicholas Galanin and Merritt Johnson, "Creation and Her Children" (2017),  
plastic tarp, fabric, cord, wood, horse hair, mixed media

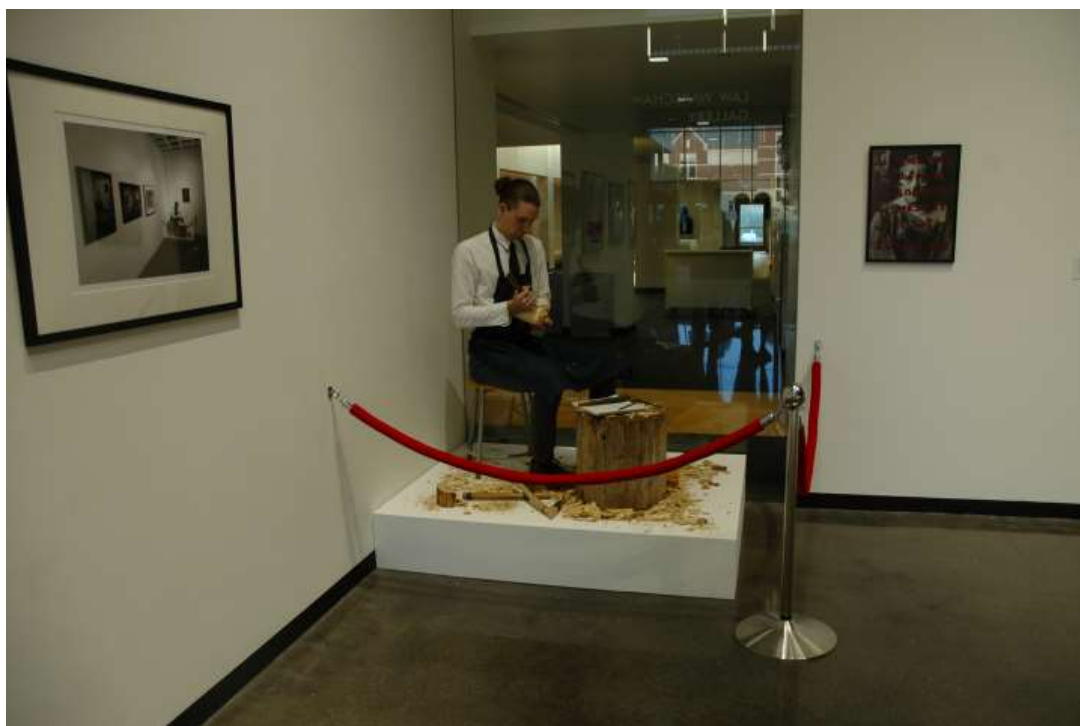


Nicholas Galanin, "Everything We've Ever Been, Everything We Are Right Now – South," "Everything We've Ever Been, Everything We Are Right Now – Above," "Everything We've Ever Been, Everything We Are Right Now – East" (2018), monotype prints

PETER BLUM GALLERY



Nicholas Galanin, "I Looooove your Culture! Fine Wood Working" (2012), carved yellow cedar wood



Nicholas Galanin, "White Carver," ( 2012), installation and performance with photos of previous carvers.

Everything We've Ever Been, Everything We Are Right Now *continues at Law Warschaw Gallery, Macalester College (1600 Grand Avenue, Saint Paul, Minnesota) through December 8.*