

ARTFORUM



Nicholas Galanin and Merritt Johnson, *Creation and her children*, 2017, mixed media, 62 x 84 x 74".

Nicholas Galanin

LAW WARSCHAW GALLERY, MACALESTER COLLEGE

On-screen, a break-dancer's fluid movements rhythmically align with a Tlingit song. When voice and drumbeat end, club music takes over and accompanies a Tlingit dancer's slow, circling steps. This pair of videos, *Tsu Héidei Shugaxtutaan I and II*, both 2006—whose titles translate to “We Will Again Open This Container of Wisdom That Has Been Left in Our Care”—epitomized Nicholas Galanin's interest in remixing cultural references and bridging the past and present. The title of his recent exhibition, “Everything We've Ever Been, Everything We Are Right Now,” suggested an expansive view of ever-emergent identities and histories, of the not quite yet. Addressing the legacies of violence inflicted on Native peoples, Galanin insisted on nuance as a route to addressing trauma and allowing for transformation.

Creation and her children, 2017, showed a knife-wielding mother carving her own face. Her features, sketched in pencil, are still incomplete. This act of self-re-creation seemed to be a response to the violence of her past beheading: “Cut off or burned or stolen, it may have been left to rot,” the artist suggests. Her skeletal arms, covered in gold, contrast with her smooth torso, which is rendered like a classical sculpture. She shelters her children under a makeshift skirt of resilient tarp as they play with furry, disembodied muzzles full of sharp teeth. In creation and child rearing alike, a degree of danger can be productive, even generative—but here the depicted danger is acute, the re-creation a necessity.

PETER BLUM GALLERY

We Dreamt Deaf, 2015, presented a different scene of violence's aftermath. A taxidermied polar bear claws its way out of a fur rug—or is its torso about to be flattened into an expensive skin? The trophy kill, formerly majestic, has morphed into a reliquary for species threatened by global warming. The subduing of the bear also serves as an allegory of conquest. Its recognizable shape reappeared in *The American Dream is Alie and Well*, 2012, in which the Stars and Stripes takes the place of an actual hide. Outfitted with a plastic head and claws made from bullets, this ersatz skin doubles as a patriotic masquerade, suggesting pride in having brutally subjugated “the wilderness.”

Galanin took aim at cultural camouflage elsewhere in the show, pushing back against appropriation and erasure by foregrounding both product and producer: In *White Carver*, 2012—, Galanin invites non-Native carvers to produce phallic shapes outfitted with a “pocket pussy,” a masturbatory toy ready “to satisfy desire without intimacy,” as the artist writes. One such toy was displayed in a vitrine for the show. With its title, *I Looooove Your Culture! Fine Wood Working*, 2012, the work mocked appreciation-fueled cultural theft. The critique was subtler in *Unceremonial Dance Mask*, 2017, in which the artist splintered an Indonesian reproduction of a Tlingit mask before gluing together the fragments to form a new visage, itself exhibited alongside comparison photographs in *Kill the Indian, Save the Man*, 2016, whose title references Brigadier General Richard Henry Pratt's infamous words.

A similar mask appeared in *How Bout Those Mariners*, 2014, a single-channel video that revisits the 2010 fatal shooting of John T. Williams, a hearing-impaired Native artist, by a Seattle police officer. Galanin pairs audio from the police vehicle with choppy footage of a masked Tlingit warrior rushing toward the camera, carving knife in hand. As the leather-clad figure rapidly approached, one wondered: Does this warrior come to haunt or avenge? Or does he stand for the specter the officer thought he saw before killing a man who carried a carving knife?

Six monotypes struck a markedly different tone while still centering Galanin's concern for the intersections of cultures and temporalities. They integrated gold leaf, a staple of medieval European religious iconography, to pay tribute to “above,” “below,” and the four cardinal directions. In one of the works that gave the show its title, a thin shimmering line reached from golden sky to golden land, traversing a feathery blue expanse. In another, two profiles faced each other: One was deep underground, the other poised on the horizon. A kiss, or maybe a river of breath, connected them. By interlacing such moments of deep reverence with pointed critique, Galanin carved a space for complexity that unsettled rather than pacified.

— Christina Schmid