ON ART AND AESTHETICS

By Tulika Bahadur | February 7, 2020

A few days ago I encountered something that made quite an impact on me—*White Noise, American Prayer Rug*, made of wool and cotton (a version of which was exhibited at the 2019 Whitney Biennial in New York), is a woven image of static on a television set. It is something we are all familiar with—millions of black and white dots dancing rapidly on the screen, difficult to look at. This piece of art offers a critical analysis of contemporary American culture's relationship with white noise, an acoustic vibration used to drown out unwanted sounds and mask alternate voices. The prayer rug generally signals adherence, devotion, commitment. But here, satirically, it seems to indicate an arrogant, inflexible, adamant, myopic attitude.

White Noise, American Prayer Rug comes from Nicholas Galanin (born 1979), an artist of Tlingit–Unangax̂ background (Native American) based in Sitka, Alaska. He forcefully uses "whiteness as a construct has been used historically throughout the world to obliterate the voices and rights of generations of people and cultures regardless of complexion"—a position to which different people will react in different ways. Some might take it to be exaggeration—but, it must be kept in mind, the artist is expressing himself through his own lived experience and that of his immediate community.

White Noise, American Prayer Rug (2020). Wool and cotton, 60 x 96 inches (152.5 x 244 cm).

In his new exhibition titled "Carry a Song / Disrupt an Anthem" running from January 24 to March 28, 2020 at Peter Blum Gallery in New York, Galanin goes further in exploring the intersection of his Indigenous identity and contemporary culture. The exhibition's title implies that "to carry the songs of Indigenous people, to carry the songs of the land, is inherently disruptive of the national anthem." Galanin creates mixed media works (including photography, carvings, books, animal hides, ammunition, handcuffs) that show the violence behind the American Dream, how Western anthropology has coldly dissected and recycled Indigenous experience from a distance, how popular culture borrows elements from Indigenous aesthetics (as in *Star Wars*) even as it refuses to acknowledge the agency of Native Americans to define their own position.

The artist also refers to painful events of the past—the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families and the programmes of assimilation into Western culture they were subjected to against their will, the forced removal of Indigenous objects from their communities that their subsequent display in museums that are unable to take care of them and where they lose their ceremonial value. Moreover, the theft of land, hunting and fishing rights and the expulsion of Native Americans from areas such as present-day New York City.

The American Dream Is Alive and Well (2012). US flag, felt, .50 caliber ammunition, foam, gold leaf and plastic, 84 x 84 x 9 inches (213.4 x 213.4 x 22.9 cm).© Nicholas Galanin / Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery.

Galanin's overall themes are obscured collective memory, barriers to the acquisition of knowledge, the resilience and strength of Indigenous people and culture, the connection to and disconnection from land. Through his deep, serious, complex creations, he reminds us that the comforts of many developed societies have come at a cost—and the ones who have truly paid the price aren't always the ones who have got to enjoy the comforts.

What Have We Become? (2017). Carved book, 8 1/2 x 5 x 4 1/2 inches (21.6 x 12.7 x 11.4 cm). © Nicholas Galanin / Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery.

Galanin earned his BFA at London Guildhall University (2003), his MFA at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand (2007), and he has apprenticed with master carvers and jewellers. He has participated in the Venice Biennale (2017) in the Native American Pavilion, in the Whitney Biennial (2019), the Honolulu Biennial (2019) and been invited to participate in the Biennale of Sydney (2020). His work is in permanent collections such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, the Denver Art Museum, the Peabody Essex Museum in Massachusetts, the Princeton University Art Museum, the Portland Art Museum, the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Anchorage Museum, the Nevada Museum of Art and the Humboldt Forum in Berlin.

What Have We Become? (2017). Carved book, 11 3/4 x 19 x 2 1/2 inches (29.8 x 48.3 x 6.3 cm). © Nicholas Galanin / Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery.

Constructing enigmatic sculptures of masklike faces from the pages of a 19th century anthropological books, Galanin examines the politics of cultural representation and contemporary Indigenous identity. In this series, the materiality of the sculptures is significant pointing to a construct of Tlingit culture by Europeans. Commenting on the outsider's perspective of Tlingit culture, Galanin notes, "I have found myself reading Western literature, often written from a foreign perspective, in which my culture has been digested and recycled back to me." Galanin recognizes the importance of literature as documentation and is also overtly conscious of its biases in presenting "a dilemma in which old and new, customary and non-customary, overlap and collide. It is at this point of collision that a new dynamic and tension is being negotiated."

Kill the Indian, Save the Man (2016). Diptych, photographs, Edition of 10, 20 x 14 1/2 inches (50.8 x 36.8 cm) each. © Nicholas Galanin / Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery.

In *Kill the Indian, Save the Man,* Galanin splinters a mask in what appears to be a destructive gesture. However, this act is not directed at the cultural production of Tlingit people, the materials are masks made by Indonesians for predominantly non-Indigenous markets. The exclusion of Tlingit people as participants in either the creation or collection of these objects is terminated. As Galanin intercedes, he dismantles the masks and forms a new mask from the resulting wood chips, thereby taking back agency through this new creation. This narrative is further segmented by the title that references the traumatic imprisonment of Indigenous children. In 1879, the United States opened the Carlisle Indian Industrial School under Pratt's coined slogan, "Kill the Indian, Save the Man." Indigenous children were taken from their families and subjected to forced assimilation program that included corporal punishment for speaking Indigenous language or practicing cultural rites.

Things Are Looking Native, Natives Are Looking Whiter (2012).
Giclée print, 40 x 28 1/2 inches (101.6 x 72.4 cm), Edition of 5.
© Nicholas Galanin / Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery.

In *Things Are Looking Native, Natives Are Looking Whiter*, Galanin juxtaposes two iconic images. One image is of a Hopi woman wearing her hair in the squash blossom, or butterfly whorl style worn by unmarried Hopi women. The Edward Curtis photo is a part of the documentation of Indigenous people throughout the West in the early 1900s that supported the false notion that Indigenous people and ways of life were disappearing. The second image is taken from a promotional photo for Star Wars, depicting a white female, fantasy character wearing her hair in a style mimicking the squash blossom or butterfly whorl. As Galanin asserts, "In borrowing from an Indigenous aesthetic, the image projects settler claims to Indigenous culture into the future. The title speaks to consumer culture's desire to claim 'Native inspired' looks, while simultaneously refusing Indigenous people the agency to define Indigenous culture in an increasingly hybrid world."

The Imaginary Indian (Totem Pole) (2016). Wood, acrylic, and floral wallpaper,
Totem: 80 1/2 x 51 1/2 x 11 inches (204.5 x 130.8 x 27.9 cm); wallpaper: dimensions variable.
© Nicholas Galanin / Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery.

In *The Imaginary Indian (Totem Pole)*, Galanin juxtaposes the form of a carved totem overlaid with Victorian Era floral designs. He both confronts viewers with their own assumptions about Indigenous art and reflects on the attempted assimilation of Indigenous culture by Europeans, thereby asserting contemporary Tlingit art as continually evolving. As he says, "This is despite the resistance of individuals and institutions that would limit Indigenous culture based on assumptions about Indigenous peoples prior to interaction with Europeans. The fetishization of early contact and pre-contact Tlingit art has resulted in skeletal, ghost-like objects in gallery and museum collections. The Imaginary Indian series points to the romanticization of these works as a form of colonization of culture, dependent on devaluing current cultural artistic production. The

works reflect the attempt to disappear the Indigenous into the European through hand painting the surface of the pole to match the Victorian era floral wallpaper."

Indian Children's Bracelet (2014-18). Hand-engraved iron, 3 x 8 x 1/2 inches (7.6 x 20.3 x 1.3 cm).© Nicholas Galanin / Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery.

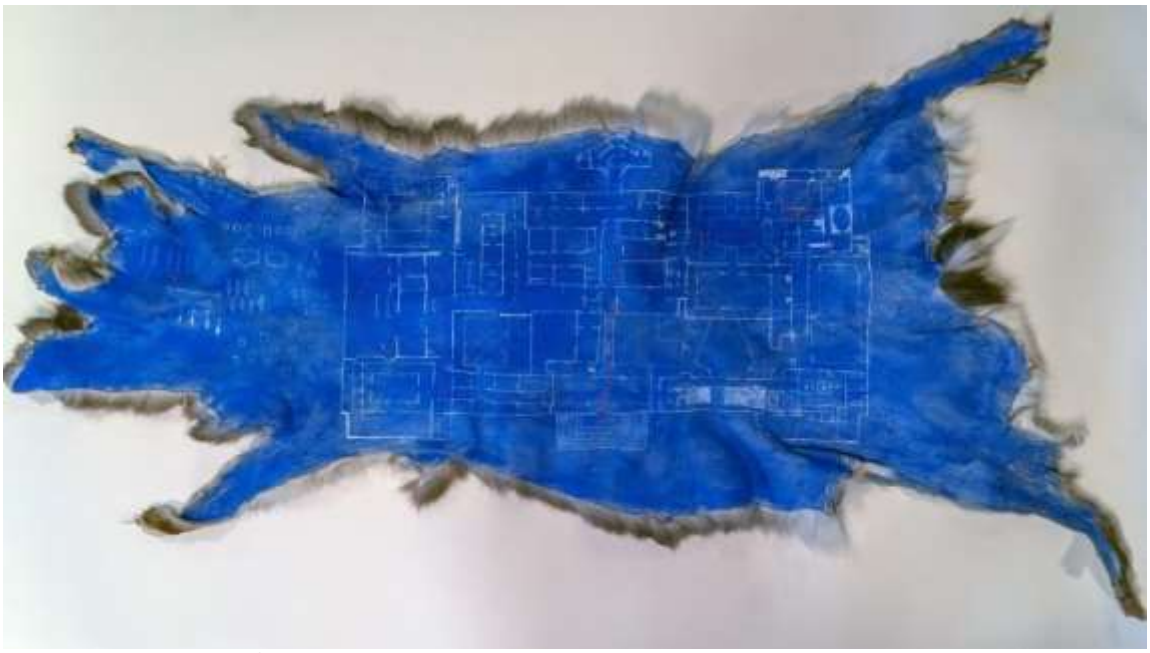
In *Indian Children's Bracelet*, hand engravings adorn small handcuffs, like those used to remove Indigenous children from their families during the Resdential Scool Period in the United States and Canada. Tlingit carvers began engraving copper bracelets to replace clan tattoos when the practice of tattoo was forcibly removed from communities by the church and settler state. The practice of jewelry making by Indigenous people of the Northwest Coast is one of cultural preservation, adaptation, and survival. As Galanin states, "These 'bracelets' embody the shared history of European colonization and settlement of the Americas as experienced by Indigenous communities, despite the amnesia of settler states in recognizing history. The work suggests the complexities of the desire for Tlingit art and simultaneous rejection of Tlingit people's realities and experiences by non-native consumers." In engraving these bracelets Galanin claims them as part of his history, acknowledging and honoring the resilience and survival of the generations affected by the weight of wearing these "bracelets".

With Galanin's unique monotypes, it is the artist's hand as much as Tlingit culture's history that shapes the representation. Each monotype bears this imprint and tells the story of its creation, not as myth, but as lived experience—the marks showing the spontaneity of a drawing with the enduring qualities of a print. The imagery is central to Tlingit life and references and mimics visual movements of a customary aesthetic. However, Galanin's contemporary interpretation forms a creative continuum that combines past with present, demonstrating Tlingit artwork as a continually evolving practice.

Everything We've Ever Been, Everything We Are Right Now – Below (2019). Monotype and gold leaf on paper, 22 x 30 inches (55.9 x 76.2 cm). © Nicholas Galanin / Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery.

Land Swipe (2019). Acrylic on deer hide, 60 x 36 inches (152.4 x 91.4 cm).

In *Land Swipe*, a deer hide is painted with lines based on the New York City Transit Authority's subway map. It represents the limited green spaces and subway routes on Lenapehoking, Lenape land, the area that New York City currently occupies. This was a location for overlap and trade among thriving Indigenous communities, while hide paintings have been used in many Indigenous communities to record and remember events of significance. The word "swipe" in the work's title refers to the theft of land, hunting, and fishing rights from Indigenous people, while also referencing the "swipe" needed by low income residents and commuters of color in the city to move across the area. The process of pushing Indigenous people off the land is repeated through the gentrification of the land the city occupies, pushing people of color further from access to employment and educational opportunities, as the cost of living, rent, and commuting increases. The guns painted on the hide point out to the defense of the commuters at the wealthiest stations, while they point in at the commuters in the lowest income station, to make clear that whether NYPD presence is threatening or comforting is based on income, appearance, and location. This work was created in solidarity with protesters and communities of color in New York City for holding the NYPD and MTA accountable for violence and demanding an end to discriminatory legislation and practices.



Architecture of return, escape (2020). Deer hide, pigment and acrylic, 31 x 61 inches (78.7 x 154.9 cm).

This is the first in a series of hide paintings for guiding the escape of Indigenous remains and objects in non-Indigenous institutions to their home communities. Entitled, *Architecture of return, escape*, the series of hide paintings depict a floor plan referencing a visitor's guide as well as blue architectural blueprints. This particular work references the Metropolitan Museum of Art and is a mapped escape plan for objects held in the New York City institution. Of the few objects held in display cases, many more (including human remains and ceremonial objects not intended for public view) are held in museum archives. The cost and processes required for Indigenous communities to travel and visit these archives limits access to cultural knowledge and inheritance, and continues the removal of the objects from their land and people. While institutions control the environmental conditions, they are unable to adequately care for these objects in cultural or spiritual ways. The objects themselves are unwilling visitors to the museum, and the painting builds a route for escape and a vision for reunification of cultural inheritance with community. The work serves as a reminder of the past, and as a plan for a good way forward. Stolen objects, human remains, and works sold under duress can now return home for their own health, for the health of the communities that created them, and for the health of the communities that took them.