

## Five contemporary Tlingit artists

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Over the years, there have been two basic modes of analysis of NWC art – the formal and the iconographic. As the names indicate, one deals mainly with how an artwork looks, the other, with what it means. As I began to think about a talk that featured five innovative Tlingit artists, I realized that their works can be understood from one or the other perspective. In the following talk, I'll focus on the form of one artist, and the meaning of the other four. I will argue that despite appearances, these artists are not so distant from their Tlingit artistic routes.

It is noteworthy that each artist to be discussed here belongs to an artistic lineage. Carver, assemblage and computer artist Stephen Jackson is Nathan Jackson's son. Tanis S'eiltin, who creates both small scale assemblage-sculptures and large installation pieces, learned much from her mother Maria Miller, a skin sewer, a beader, and a Chilkat weaver. Larry McNeil, Nathan Jackson's cousin, is a photographer, some of whose works appear in web-based exhibits. Jewelry maker, a sculptor in paper, and a video artist Nick Galanin is Dave Galanin's son and Will Burkhardt's nephew. Da-ka-xeen Mehner, photographer and sculptor, is Larry McNeil's nephew, and is related to the Beasleys, the Jacksons and Anna Ehlers Brown. He is the one artist of the group who received his MFA in the state, in the Native arts program at UAF.

Northwest Coast art, perhaps more than any other area of Native north America, identifies itself strongly with earlier artistic traditions – carvers make masks that have 19<sup>th</sup> century prototypes; weavers create robes equal in quality and design to classic Chilkat blankets. Totem poles stand proudly in Native villages as well as around the world, their imagery clearly based on the beings that populated monumental carvings of earlier times. Since Northwest Coast ceremonialism continues to play active roles in many communities, there exists a considerable motivation to make the regalia “correctly.” In addition, the market that developed after the 1960's for contemporary Northwest Coast art places a high premium on creations that uncompromisingly draw from the past.

Perhaps because of its conservative nature, Northwest Coast art has been largely missing from exhibitions of modern Native art Outside. For example, most recently, *Native Views: Influences of Modern Culture*, an exhibit produced by Artrain in 2004, displayed no Northwest Coast or even Alaskan works. But the situation is changing. In 2005, the prestigious Eiteljorg fellowship, which had been honoring Native American artists since 1999, finally recognized a Tlingit artist, Tanis S'eiltin. And this year, Larry McNeil has been awarded that same fellowship. And, opening soon in Anchorage is the traveling exhibit assembled by the New York City Museum of Art and Design, that features a good many innovative Alaskan Native artists, including several I will discuss today

Nevertheless, many Northwest Coast Native artists create what is labeled “traditional” art, rarely entering the realm of what we can call the truly “innovative.” Some artists have experimented with formline style; Robert Davidson, for example. One Tlingit artist who experimented so was Tlingit James Schoppert (1947-1992). In many of his carved wood panels, Schoppert breaks up formline elements, rearranging them on the surface, taking advantage of the power of the forms, not only as components of complete images, but as dynamic visuals in their own right. Schoppert explained the meaning behind these works: the broken-up pieces signify the destruction of the culture during colonization; their organization into a cohesive whole unified by color declares how successfully that culture has persisted despite generations of discrimination, mistreatment and disease. Other contemporary Tlingit who experiment with the traditional forms include Clarissa Hudson who breaks up formline patterns in her paintings to create dream-like images of intersecting Northwest Coast beings whose parts merge into one another. Terri Rofkar, weaver, uses ancient motifs and techniques to create genuinely innovative ravens tail weavings.

I mentioned at the beginning that I was going to discuss one artist whose formal innovations have created quite a stir. Stephen Jackson has produced relatively conventional large scale cedar carving including totem poles as well as highly inventive two and three dimensional works. Stephen Jackson did not at first want to become an artist. But when his father, the great master Nathan Jackson, gave him the choice to work at McDonalds or get \$5 an hour to work with him, he started his art training. He ended up being trained in the traditional manner, by apprenticing to his father.

Stephen was not content with the art. He says, “Things develop slowly in NWC art – it’s a conservative tradition. You need to learn forms, but to not be original is boring. I’m bored with the status quo, and want to do something risky.” At one point, Stephen began designing an asymmetrical commission. When the commissioner saw it, he told Stephen “that powerful design should be in a museum, not in my house.” So Stephen made a conventional work. But he continued questioning more and more seriously what he was doing and why he was doing it. He asked questions like, “why make clan images?” The unsatisfactory answer was that he was getting paid to make some, and people wanted them. He became increasingly inventive, experimental. Like Schoppert, whom he acknowledges, he began to put things in different places, simplify forms, break up the whole.

Stephen wanted to do something risky; he got this opportunity with a commission at the Burke to carve a pole; his father also carved one; both were replacements for two posts that had been repatriated to Cape Fox. Stephen describes how he spent hours ridding himself of old habits, trying to see things with new eyes. Then drew for ½ hour, and came up with this idea. How to make it presented a problem. Wood didn’t work, even though he tried to carve it at the beginning. Should it be mixed media? Aluminum? Or as it ultimately was, epoxy resin. He has pierced space, stretched forms that seem to wrestle with each other, created an image in which nothing is a complete whole. He has added great drama to a tradition often associated with quiet elegance. The subject of his pole is death; he asked, what would that be like? He wanted to depict a visceral impact, violent death, with allusions to decapitation, dismemberment in what he terms a “multiple exposure.” Stephen indicates that while most Tlingit poles are static and not narrative, at least the Strong Man pole depicts a dramatic moment in story. He also wanted the pole to convey the larger historical context of the appropriation and repatriation of the original pole: “I wanted to communicate that these pieces had been taken away and given back. I wanted to reflect that situation, wanted to give the cultural disruption back to the museum. I guess this is an exaggerated representation of taking and giving back.” Although some find this pole profoundly disturbing in its almost confident challenge to conventions, Stephen Jackson’s work is certainly a logical progression of formal experimentation begun by Jim Schoppert.

The other artists I discuss this morning – Larry McNeil, Tanis S’eiltin, Da-ka-xeen Mehner, and Nick Galanin – create works even more remote from formline conventions than Stephen’s; this might in part be due to the fact that they all traveled away from home to pursue

masters of fine arts degrees in a university setting, where they were introduced to Native and non-Native artists who influenced their development, while encouraging innovation and creativity.

The strength of Tlingit artistic traditions can hamper creativity, for when something diverges from those traditions, some viewers become uncomfortable simply cannot relate. Tlingit-Nisga'a photographer Larry McNeil responds by pointing to Raven, arguing that "Our Tlingit culture embraces the idea of tradition and change, which is ironic by definition. Raven the trickster is a changeling, yet he is at the core of one of our key mythological stories. The concept of tradition and change are constantly at odds with each other, which is at the core of what my art is all about. My own art is about what happens at the intersection of the Western and Tlingit cultures, which can also be very ironic, humorous and tragic all at once."

Nick Galanin describes how he has over the years gotten pulled in many directions. When young, Nick worked with his father, both of whom were artists, and later apprenticed with Wayne Price. He studied jewelry making in London, then did his master's in New Zealand. "Different teachers wanted me to do different things, like my uncle Will. We clashed sometimes." His inspirations come from both Native and non-Native artists, and he sometime becomes frustrated by conservative trends and technology. He expresses concern that sometimes elders cannot see their culture in his works. "When you jump too far, the culture doesn't always follow. I try to use visual clues that the elders can understand, like Tlingit masks."

Tanis S'eiltin has also been criticized for not making "authentic" works of art: "some critics, knowing that I am a Tlingit artist, have trouble accepting these pieces as "authentic" works of art because they are not "refined." They are created with found materials, and are not recognizable as a traditional form; they are not a mask, headdress, or basket. (Some people's concept of traditional art is limiting, as they expect Native art to remain the same, to stay constant, otherwise it cannot be considered art!) This is where traditional art can become restrictive: and here I am referring to the *concept* of traditional art – not the art itself." She is something of a rebel as well. In her small sculptural collages of Savage apparel - 2004 - she intentionally breaks rules with materials that she was taught by mother and in printmaking school. "Creating savage apparel was an intuitive and playful response to regimented creative activities that were encouraged by my mother and academia."

When one first looks at S'eiltin's small scale assemblages, little appears to connect to her Tlingit background. But as she described the other day, she worked with her mother with materials such as fur, and creates works that refer to aspects of her heritage. Some object to these pieces because they are not refined, as is so much historic Tlingit art; this makes them "inauthentic." And, created as they are with found materials, and, obviously, not masks, headdresses, or baskets, they could not be traditional. As Tanis states, "Some people's concept of traditional art is limiting, as they expect Native art to remain the same, to stay constant, otherwise it cannot be considered art! This is where traditional art can become restrictive: and here I am referring to the *concept* of traditional art – not the art itself." Tanis also challenges both Native and non-Native artistic traditions with these pieces, for she intentionally breaks rules that she was taught by mother and in printmaking school. "Creating savage apparel was an intuitive and playful response to regimented creative activities that were encouraged by my mother and academia."

These artists often address issues of identity. Da-ka-xeen for example, a man of mixed German-Tlingit heritage, uses photographs to analyze his place in the world. Several years ago, he was looking at southeast photo archive when he saw photos of a man with his name. Through the feats of modern photo technology, he includes himself in mirror images holding camera. "I'm reflecting on the past, trying to find what is truth in the images and what is artificially constructed history.. I think these images bring up more questions than answers." Da-ka has an unusual beard – it's ½ dark and ½ light; he features that beard in his self-portrait "7/16th" a photo of the lower part of his face, superimposed over by is his Native identity card. This image, incidently, won the Alaska Positive 2006 exhibition jurors choice award.

Early in grad school, Da-ka began making traditional copper daggers; as his art matured, these daggers evolved into artistic statements of culture and identity. In his MFA exhibit in the Native arts program at UAF, Da-ka exhibited a number of daggers, such as this double headed one.

These are daggers like those the Tlingit used in war. We were a culture of warriors, and we're still fighting now to survive. Daggers to me also mean other conflicts – the war that this country is in right now, the personal battles within families. In addition to those allusions to struggles, the large double headed dagger refers to my multicultural heritage."

Another dagger is a knife-form that is filled with oil, which expresses a statement about life in the present: “I was thinking about war, and our place in the war. Then I thought about why we were at war – it was the oil. So I made a dagger from oil.”

Nick Galanin focuses his analysis of identity formation onto the books – and museum exhibits – that address Tlingit culture, which he feels show it as dead. “People write about culture and then go into wormholes of history, and don’t really look at what’s happening now.” This self-portrait is made from the pages of Frederica de Laguna’s *Under Mt. St. Elias*. Here a real person is composed of a representation of that person’s culture by an outsider. In the original installation of this work for his MFA thesis, near the masks was a video of an immense number of artworks shown in quick succession, many to the second. As they flash by, the non-Native visitor cannot grasp the meaning of any individual work; the book, a representation by an outsider, is permanent, readable, and understandable. The culturally significant objects that actually do embody the history and culture of the group are alien to the non-Native, who can’t see them anyway. “It is the idea of how a culture is portrayed, and packaged for educational purposes, to be viewed one bit at a time.”

Galanin becomes even more critical of outside representations in another video that accompanied the show, this one called ‘talking totem poles.’ The narrative stands, reading from a 1970s book on totem poles, in a most dull fashion.

The narrative is a dry reading about poles from an anthropological text. It kills every aspect of the living quality of the pole, rips it out of place. Totem poles are talked about, but not understood. Books also dictate what the culture should be like today. That effects all kinds of people - artists, elders, gallery owners, museums.”

Also in the exhibit is a photograph of Nick in three modes, carrying three different items related to different historic periods.

As is clear from the discussions of Da-ka and Nick’s works, photography is a natural medium for sharing views on identity. Photographer Larry McNeil For him explains that “Art is the physical manifestation of what’s happening with my identity. It’s a reflection of my interpretation of things that are happening in the world. A lot has to do with attitude, laughing in the face of adversity. Humor and tragedy are so intertwined. The elders would use humor at critical moments.” In some of his works, portraits of his ancestors of the Killer Whale Clan in Klukwan and other important individuals from his history are juxtaposed with others references

to Tlingit culture. “These people had so many difficulties to overcome in order to be successful – but they did end up well. I acknowledge their strength through these images.” This dream-like photograph shows a turn of the century formal portrait of his ancestors before a large abstract image that one realizes is a killer whale fin.

Many of McNeil’s works have text, for most often he writes something in a journal and makes images. He explains how he became an artist out of writing because for him, the transition from an artist of writing to an artist of the visual in the form of photography was easy. McNeil also does self portraits such as this work entitled “In the true spirit of the white man”:

In the true spirit of the white man I stole this car in my search for America. Just call it manifested destiny. I asked the owner to take my picture in front of his car before I took it and assured him that it was gods will that I take his car. God meant for this fine machine to be flying down the freeway, I told him. Are you a real Indian he asked. I thought you were all vanished. As soon as you give me the keys I’ll be another vanished Indian, I told him. Can you look more noble? I told him sorry, this is me as stoic as I can manage for now. He asked if I had any regalia to put on to look, to make it look more authentic. He said his grandfather was Edward Curtis. Thanks for the car I told him, but I’ve got some serious vanishing to catch up on.

This photograph expresses many things: Curtis as the greatest promoter of the vanishing Indian myth, the history of appropriation and colonization, the resistance of today’s Native people to stereotyping; their aggressive assertion of strength and autonomy; the stars and stripes so beloved by patriots transformed into a gasoline-guzzling commodity, which of course brings us back to the wars we are currently enduring. Is that a skull emerging from the haphazardly painted background? If so, it lends a highly sober note to this humorous representation.

McNeil also refers in his works to myth, particularly of Raven. This is one way he expands his art beyond a strictly Tlingit reference, as he asserts that as every culture has its myths, which as a result are one connecting foundation of humanity. Why do humans make myths, he asks? “I like the explanation that myths satisfy a yearning to compensate for their history that is deficient in some manner. Humans have a yearning for a history that is more heroic than the ones they actually have.” Recently McNeil has begun investigating white man’s myths, such as cowboys and Indians, film stars.

For S'eiltin, identity is intimately interconnected with contemporary political issues. Her impressive installation, *Resisting acts of distillation* (2002) challenges ANSCA, land allocation, corporate establishment, land stewardship in 1000 square feet. Reflecting upon the history of Native Americans, Seiltin asks, "does ANSCA represent termination in disguise? Is it part of the assimilationist cycle?" ANCSA can be understood as the dismemberment of the tribal organization, analogous to the Dawes Act of the 1880s which intended to destroy the power of tribal organization. With expressive artistic imagery, she despairs how tribal identity is now linked to corporate shares and commercial profits from the selling of natural resources. "Former standards of tribal identity now translate to new standards of corporate wealth or poverty."<sup>1</sup> Tubes of red wine corked with beeswax hang like curtains from the ceiling; along the wall vases of water hold vials of petroleum oil; the oil refers to the reason for ANSCA in the first place – oil, and the hands to corporate ownership of the land. This installation is critical of the present social-political-economic situation of Alaska Natives, the imposition of blood quantum percentages to determine membership in the group, the inequity inherent in the system. There is the risk that Tanis's works could be so despairing that they drain viewer and artist alike. But, as she states, "When I deal with difficult issues like discrimination, it's hard to pull back from the research and depiction of this in art and end with a positive note. I like to represent positive aspects in my art as well, like the strength of present day Native people, and our ability to maintain language, dance, art. The Neon tinnah reflects endurance, and the helmet signifies our ability to resist entities that threaten self-awareness and cultural identity. If ANCSA represents the social and legal dilution of a tribe, it does not represent the loss of power to fight for our rights."

I would like to stress that S'eiltin's installations are much more than political statements – they are artistic experiences. That differentiates the strident voice of rebellion from the convincing persuasion of poetic expression. One encounters differing shades of glowing red as one explores the room, the space of which is accented by the hanging vials. You see the art through those curtains, which are certainly transparent but still present, interacting with the shelves on the wall, the mask prints, and the glowing tinneh. There are many ideas conveyed here, but just as many non-verbal sensory expressions that touch one's soul as well as one's mind.



There is much more to say about these five artists I've discussed today – indeed books should be written about the kinds of innovations their art represents. They certainly are original, sometimes dazzlingly so. Some might say that diverge so from Tlingit visual traditions that they shouldn't be even identified as Tlingit artists. But what is Tlingit art? It is, of course, the elegant formline style so appreciated by all. But form is not all, for in Tlingit culture, art has great meaning, and is the ultimate expression of identity – it conveys one's lineage and history. As Clarissa Hudson declared yesterday, "we wear our history." Today people don't live only in their village, even if they reside there all the time. They, like everyone else, are affected by larger world, with its politics, economic influences, wars, governmental policies, discrimination, stereotyping – I could go on and on. As Larry McNeil asserts, "An artist fills the void of the lack of interpretation of what's going on in the world. Our culture is being censored by way of not receiving all of the news; the media is not doing their job. Artists help break down that barrier." For someone living in today's world, identity emerges within the commercialized, globalized world in which Native people are a minority. Often using humor, but sometimes deadly serious, these Tlingit artists make important, and timely statements about that world and its representation and treatment of Native people. They address the identity of the contemporary Tlingit individual, supplementing and enhancing and bringing up to date their identity as members in lineage and house. Just as Stephen Jackson represents a logical development of the formline style, Tanis S'itlin, Larry McNeil, Da-ka-xeen Mehner and Nick Galanin represent a logical development of the meaning of Tlingit art as expression of identity.

Ps. After I gave this talk at the conference, a man approached me, saying the "western Tlingit" works would fade away, because Tlingit art traditions are strong. I answered, "there's room for both types of art." He responded – "No there isn't. I'm traditional."