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La représentation des cultures indigènes: les expositions d'art contemporain autochtone de l'Alaska à Anchorage

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Résumé de l'article

Dans cet article j'évalue comment l'art contemporain autochtone de l'Alaska est présenté au public en examinant les perspectives des artistes, des expositions sur l'art, et les réactions des spectateurs. Mon but est de justifier le besoin d'examiner la représentation des cultures autochtones de l'Alaska dans les musées et les lieux publics d'art à Anchorage en Alaska. En particulier, je veux souligner l'importance des présentations d'art autochtone de l'Alaska d'après leur contexte, en utilisant des perspectives multiples et des médias d'interprétation fondés sur la collaboration entre les lieux d'exposition, les artistes et les communautés autochtones. De bonnes présentations didactiques peuvent en effet répondre aux différentes exigences de divers publics. Elles peuvent en plus profiter de l'attention spéciale donnée à l'art autochtone américain et euro-américain ailleurs, et défier les idées préconçues qui diminuent les réalisations des artistes autotchones et limitent les perceptions des cultures autochtones de l'Alaska.

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Representing indigenous cultures: Alaska Native contemporary art exhibits in Anchorage

Dawn Biddison*

Résumé: La représentation des cultures indigènes: les expositions d'art contemporain autochtone de l'Alaska à Anchorage

Dans cet article j'évalue comment l'art contemporain autochtone de l'Alaska est présenté au public en examinant les perspectives des artistes, des expositions sur l'art, et les réactions des spectateurs. Mon but est de justifier le besoin d'examiner la représentation des cultures autochtones de l'Alaska dans les musées et les lieux publics d'art à Anchorage en Alaska. En particulier, je veux souligner l'importance des présentations d'art autochtone de l'Alaska d'après leur contexte, en utilisant des perspectives multiples et des médias d'interprétation fondés sur la collaboration entre les lieux d'exposition, les artistes et les communautés autochtones. De bonnes présentations didactiques peuvent en effet répondre aux différentes exigences de divers publics. Elles peuvent en plus profiter de l'attention spéciale donnée à l'art autochtone américain et euro-américain ailleurs, et défier les idées préconçues qui diminuent les réalisations des artistes autotchones et limitent les perceptions des cultures autochtones de l'Alaska.

Abstract: Representing indigenous cultures: Alaska Native contemporary art exhibits in Anchorage

In this article, I evaluate how Alaska Native contemporary art is presented to the public by examining artists' perspectives, artwork exhibits and viewer reception of the art. My goal is to substantiate the need to critically address how Alaska Native cultures are represented at museum and public art venues in Anchorage, Alaska. In particular, I seek to emphasize the importance of creating contextualized presentations of Alaska Native art using multiple perspectives and interpretative media based on collaboration between exhibitors and Native artists and communities. More inclusive informative presentations can begin to address the differing requirements of a variety of audiences, utilize the critical attention given to Native American and Euro-American art elsewhere, and provoke a re-thinking of stereotyped preconceptions that continue to diminish the accomplishments of Alaska Native artists and limit perceptions of Alaska Native cultures.

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Introduction

Alaska Native contemporary artists are creating significant works of art, yet, in the literature and exhibitions about Native North American contemporary art, their artwork receives little if any attention. In this paper, I investigate the representation of Alaska Native contemporary art through artist interviews, exhibit evaluations and viewer surveys on a sample of this artwork in museum and public art venues in Anchorage, Alaska. Taking a case-study approach, I examine how presentations of Native artwork are perceived by the artists and their audiences in order to evaluate representational practices.

Contemporary Native art and the question of marginalization

All artists adopt materials and ideas from a variety of sources and interpret cultural heritage to achieve their own style. As with any type of art, Native art can be a means of conveying information and communicating multiple levels of meaning, allowing Native artists to express individual and cultural elements in their work and to create works of fine artisanship (Greenhalgh and Megaw 1978: xiv; Layton 1978: 28). Yet Native artists find that their ability to reach wide-ranging audiences is limited. These artists feel "doubly-marginalized"—that their work is undervalued by non-Native audiences and by the mainstream art world (Leslie 1998: 123). As a result, many Native artists attempt to directly address their heritage and to challenge stereotypes of Native American culture. Some artists seek to inform non-Native audiences about past and present-day issues (Heap-of-Birds in Rushing 1994: 29). Others create a visual dialogue about what it means to be a Native American in today's world (Nahwooksy and Hill 2000: 81).

Art can provide an opportunity to strengthen intercultural relations through understanding and appreciation of cultural values (Hill 1991: 5). According to art historian W. Jackson Rushing (1995: 31), contemporary Native art can "empower its audience, both Native and non-Native alike, by rewriting art and cultural history in a plurality of languages." But the representation of Native cultures is a complex process that involves the artwork or object, its presentation and its audience (Baxandall 1991: 36). Given the colonial past of appropriation, commoditization and stereotyping that continues into the present, representations of Native culture are highly contestable and undergoing change (Hart 1995; West 2000). The issue of where and how to exhibit Native art has become an urgent question, calling for renewed discussion of representation (Phillips 1988: 64).

All artists are subject to viewers' limitations, which stem from lack of understanding or appreciation of particular art forms and the effects of their subjective response (Geertz 1976: 1499; Hart 1995: 145). But contemporary Native artists face additional challenges. Native American fine art has received limited attention in scholarly literature and museum exhibitions (*e.g.,* Archuleta and Strickland 1991: 9-10). Many Native artists find that there is a lack of serious critical discussion of their work (Dubin 1998: 156; Smith 1994: 40; WalkingStick 1992: 15). Preconceived,

stereotyped notions about "traditional" Native art create expectations of Native art that often eclipse the impact of the work itself and contribute to its marginalization (Bernstein 1999: 68; Leslie 1998: 111; Mitchell 1993: 160). Although inspired by wide-ranging sources, contemporary Native artists are often subject to judgments based on restricted ideas about Native art, not just artistic merit.

As is often made available for contemporary art in general, interpretation is a useful addition to displays of contemporary Native art, particularly for curators to address audience preconceptions and unfamiliarity. Without information on meanings, context and aesthetics in Native artwork (and contemporary art), viewers may be limited to a superficial appreciation of its form, a by-product of emotional responses, or alternatively, they may resort to stereotypes and misconceptions as a means of understanding what they are seeing (Geertz 1976: 1499; Feddersen and Woody 1999: 174; Hart 1995: 145; Lidchi 1997: 166). Scholarly publications, interpretative exhibit materials and exhibition publications present opportunities to inform audiences and address misconceptions about Native art. Scholars and curators, by collaborating with artists and the represented communities, help convey the multiple meanings of artwork by explaining its aesthetic achievements and cultural values to audiences, as well as relating it to historical and contemporary contexts (Lacy 1995: 42).

The anthropological and art historical literature about Native American art documents a long history of marginalization within Western culture, one that results from collection practices, appropriation, commoditization, exhibition master narratives, ethnographic and modernist displays, and etic questions of authenticity, art vs. artifact and tourist art vs. fine art. The prevalence of these issues indicates the on-going challenge of representing Native culture. In addition to the efforts of Native activists and artists, criticisms of past practices within anthropology, art history and museums have focused attention on how past representations of Native culture limited perceptions of Native art and peoples (Jonaitis 1995: xi; Phillips 1989).

Contemporary Native art gives us an opportunity to critically examine current and future representations of Native culture and to address past practices. In anthropological and art historical literature, contemporary Native artwork receives much less attention than historic works, despite its potential to promote change in presentation practices and direct discussions about complex, present-day conditions. Museum exhibitions have recently begun to address the challenge of presenting contemporary Native art, perhaps because this is a space where Native peoples have begun to gain access to their own representations. Alaska Native contemporary art, however, receives little attention or is overlooked in Native American art exhibitions and literature, marginalized among the marginalized. This under-representation and limited discourse about Alaska Native contemporary artists denies them acknowledgement as fine artists, access to audiences outside Alaska, and the kind of critical, complex analysis devoted to other contemporary Native and non-Native artists.

Representing Native art

In order to investigate the marginalization of Alaska Native contemporary art, I interviewed artists, assessed exhibits and surveyed viewers, examining how current presentations are perceived by the artists and by viewers. The structure of my study was informed by the processes and agents that endow art objects with meaning in museum and public art settings. According to Bourdieu (1993: 261), the "meaning and value" of artworks are not created by the artists but by agents in the art world, including critics, curators and collectors, and these perceptions of artwork are bound by social and historical viewpoints of the users. Appadurai (1986: 5) also argues that objects do not have absolute value, that "transactions, attributions and motivations" of human actors encode meaning. In an analysis of Australian Aboriginal painting, Fred Meyers (1992: 321) found the "production, circulation, and consumption" of this artwork integral to both indigenous peoples' self-production and to the representation of their culture. Rather than seeing museum exhibitions of objects as static representations of culture, Baxandall (1991: 36) argues that there is interplay between the object makers, exhibitors and viewers, each having different purposes. All three meet at the intellectual space between the object and the information on its accompanying label, where the influence of each varies in the viewer's understanding of the object (*ibid*.: 36-38).

The question of the way in which Native art should be presented is a continual source of disagreement (Ames 1992: 70). Nicholas Thomas (1999: 225-226, 246-247), stressing the importance of how indigenous art is "framed" in public places, argues that the pertinent question is whether its presentation enables the artwork to speak to audiences or whether the art is appropriated for some other use. Charlotte Townsend-Gault emphasizes that First Nations artwork is "inseparable from strategies for its presentation" and its status is negotiated "over aesthetic strategies, the appropriation of idioms, the uses of history […] with the communities of reception." She sees this process of negotiation as transacted by "makers, audiences and the frame for the encounter" (*ibid*.: 100). Geertz (1976: 1499) indicated the importance of the presentation of Native art by arguing that regardless of whether there is a universal sense of beauty, without knowledge about an indigenous art form or understanding of its culture of origin, viewer responses are limited to "ethnocentric sentimentalism."

The findings of the case study[1] that I refer to in the present paper indicate that the presentations at surveyed sites convey limited, if any, information about the Alaska Native contemporary art displayed. These exhibit practices conflict with both artists' concerns and viewer preferences. I argue that such restricted representations contribute to the marginalization of Alaska Native contemporary art. My goal is to substantiate the need to address the question of how to present Alaska Native art by critically analyzing current exhibit practices. In particular, I seek to emphasize the importance of creating contextualized presentations of Alaska Native contemporary art using multiple perspectives and interpretative materials based on collaboration between exhibitors and

[1] For more detailed information from artist interviews, presentation evaluations, audience surveys and artwork images, see Biddison (2002). Due to space limitations, images of all eight piece of art discussed in this article and images showing artwork installation and exhibition contexts could not be presented.

Native artists and communities. By creating more inclusive, informative representations of Alaska Native culture, artwork presentations can begin to address the differing requirements of a variety of audiences, utilize the critical attention given to Native American and Euro-American art elsewhere, and provoke a re-thinking of preconceptions that continue to diminish the accomplishments of Alaska Native artists.

Challenges for Alaska Native artists

In order to better understand issues faced by Alaska Native contemporary artists, I interviewed Sylvester Ayek, Susie Bevins, Kathleen Carlo and John Hoover[2]. The discussions included: biographical information, development as an artist, influences, creative process, communication with viewers, presentations of their work and perspectives on the surveyed artwork. The artists described varying experiences in the art world and influences from their background that contributed to the development of their work. They received different amounts of formal art school and informal art training and have spent different amounts of time in their Native communities. All of the artists have works exhibited in museums, galleries and public art sites throughout Alaska and, to a lesser extent, in museums in the South.

The artists emphasized the importance of both Alaska Native and contemporary elements in their artwork and discussed how their artistic expression has been constricted by audience preconceptions about Native art and art market pressures for historically-made or "traditional" forms. Sylvester Ayek felt that Native artists are "all prisoners of […] what the system expects a Native artist to do." Susie Bevins thought that a difficulty faced by Alaska Native contemporary artists is, "the expectations of the general public, as tourist art, or the expectations that people have of the way that Indian art or Native American art or Eskimo art should be." Kathleen Carlo pointed out Native and non-Native aspects of her work, that her use of the mask form is traditional but at the same time contemporary through her use of abstract design. Carlo, like all four artists, identifies herself as both a "contemporary Native artist" and a "contemporary artist." John Hoover has long been aware of the market pressures for Native artists, particularly in the Seattle area where "Indian art is stereotyped," and artists "have to be traditional. They don't even recognize contemporary Indian art. 'What the hell is that,' you know."

Addressing viewers about particular issues, personal values or Native culture varied among the artists and over their careers. Ayek said that he does not specifically want to inform viewers about Alaska Native culture through his work but that knowledge of it might help them understand his work. Bevins makes communication with viewers integral to her work: "My artwork and the name recognition give me an opportunity to make statements, hopefully to educate people." Carlo wants "to show people Native culture" and hopes to "have some influence on the way people view Native people." For Carlo, there is an opportunity to "make very strong statements,

[2] Sylvester Ayek (Iñupiaq) was born on King Island in the Bering Strait region of Alaska's northwest coast. Susie Bevins (Iñupiaq) was born in Beechey Point on Alaska's north coast. Kathleen Carlo (Athabascan) was born in Tanana in central Alaska. John Hoover (Aleut), whose mother was from the Aleutian Island of Unalaska, was born in Cordova.

political statements, emotional statements, with artwork." Hoover said that only a few of his pieces have social commentary. Through influences from myths, legends and shamanism, he conveys a general spirituality through his artwork and tries "to make healing images for the soul."

All of the artists agreed that the way their artwork is presented influences viewers' appreciation of their work, and each criticized how their artwork was displayed at the museum and public art sites. Ayek and Hoover seemed resigned to giving up control over the presentation of their work once it was sold. Ayek said "I think it means a lot to have it displayed right but very seldom am I asked how it could be displayed." Hoover said "I just give them the work, and sometimes it's disappointing the way they show it." Bevins feels that where and how artwork is presented can make a "big difference in how it comes off" to different audiences and for different pieces. She sees interpretative text as an opportunity to allow viewers to understand her perspective and her contemporary forms: "I'm also educating people into appreciating contemporary work that might not have had that much meaning to them, especially fragmented pieces that are not as recognizable as […] what they're used to." Carlo found both exhibit practices and interpretative materials important: "I'd love to have material that explains what my piece is about." She thought viewers should have a choice: "if the information is there, it'd be nice, but you don't have to, have to read it or inform yourself, and just go by looking."

Art for the pubic at museums and public art sites

Museums have shifted from focusing on collection, research and conservation to a role that also emphasizes communication with their audiences through exhibition and education (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 21). Exhibition and object interpretation make statements that engage museum visitors in the process of making what they see meaningful. Viewers bring their own skills, knowledge, agendas and varied levels of attention into this process, but museums create an influential historical and cultural context in which interpretation occurs (Handler 1993: 34; Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 4). Through object selections, display aesthetics, interpretative materials, gallery tours and other activities, museums contextualize objects and influence their impact on viewers (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 24, 1994: 52-3; Lidchi 1997: 204). As museums seek larger and more varied audiences, they will have to successfully address their viewers, including the diverse communities that museums represent in their exhibits.

A defining goal of public art programs has been to involve a wider audience through fostering greater access to art than has been available. A recent focus in public art is ensuring its relevance to the public by addressing community identity and sense of place in order to meeting its audiences' needs (Deutsche 1990: 115; Doss 1992: 64). By making community connections more apparent, contextualized public art can meet its goal of making art widely accessible and relevant (Blum 1989). The way Native public artwork is presented can also determine whether or not it receives more than superficial recognition (Thomas 1999: 247). But the question of how to communicate effectively with a diverse public is an ongoing challenge for public art. One solution is

for artists and exhibitors to educate audiences about public art (Deutsche 1990: 115; Senie and Webster 1992: 245). As is the case for art in a museum setting, the way public art is presented, particularly the use of interpretative information, affects it reception by viewers.

In the following section, I evaluate eight presentations of Alaska Native contemporary art in museum and public art venues in Anchorage, Alaska—the Anchorage Museum of History and Art and the Percent-for-Art program[3]—about which I interviewed artists and surveyed viewers. The results include finding that little, if any, interpretative materials about the artwork and the significance of the exhibit were available. Viewer responses in the next section demonstrate that interpretative information had a significant effect on their experience of art at both Percent-for-Art sites and the Anchorage Museum.

Presentations of Alaska Native contemporary art

At the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Alaska Native contemporary art is located in temporary and permanent exhibitions as well as the lobby, café and gift shop. In the *Contemporary Alaska Native Art from the Museum Collection* exhibition (2001), I surveyed viewers on *Break of Day* by Kathleen Carlo and *People in Peril—Bound by Alcohol* by Susie Bevins (Figure 1). The exhibition had a title label at one of the two entrances, but no other information was available for visitors in the gallery or museum brochures. There was a label with each piece that listed basic information such as the artist's name, title, materials, etc. No interpretative materials were present, although available in other galleries and on the museum website for this exhibition and eight of its artworks. Bevins wrote an explanatory text to be presented with her piece, but this was not displayed. The Carlo piece was located in a poorly-lit entrance hallway and, according to my recorded observations done *in situ*, was overlooked by most visitors.

In the *Arctic Eyes: Contemporary Work from the Permanent Collection* exhibition (2001), I questioned viewers about *Cormorant Spirit Helper* by John Hoover. The contemporary artwork in this exhibition was made by Alaska Native and non-Native artists. It was grouped into the three themes explained by the curator at length in a brochure and by a single phrase on secondary labels in the exhibit. The impact of the curator's synopsis of Alaska contemporary art and explanation of his ethnically-inclusive thematic categories, found only in the brochure, may have been greater if more of this additional information was made immediately available to viewers through exhibition labels. In addition, installation of the artwork and labels could have been designed for easier viewing. Hoover's piece was located high up on a wall above a vertical display case containing other artwork where most viewers surveyed said they didn't notice it.

[3] The Percent-for-Art Program, also called the 1% for Art Program, is a public art program in Alaska developed in the late 1970s based on state and Anchorage municipality ordinances requiring that 1% of construction costs for capital projects (such as new buildings, transportation facilities, parks and renovations over $250,000) be used for purchasing artwork for permanent display in its public spaces, referred to in this paper as Percent-for-Art sites.

I surveyed viewers in *The Alaska Gallery* on an untitled mask by Sylvester Ayek (Figure 2) in "The Eskimo" section of a case entitled "The Continuation of Culture" near the end of the gallery. It is displayed with historic and contemporary objects from Iñupiaq culture, including dance fans, ivory carvings and other masks. The label for the mask has a short curatorial statement that briefly describes the piece as inspired by one collected before 1900. The cases in this last section display recently-made objects relating to traditional practices and historically-used materials and forms. Although a few contemporary masks are presented, other Alaska Native artwork with more innovative or abstract forms and more recently available materials are not included.

In addition to the museum setting, I also conducted surveys on four public artworks, part of the Percent-for-Art program, at three locations in downtown Anchorage—the Nesbett Courthouse, the Alaska Center for Performing Arts and the Egan Convention Center. At the Nesbett Courthouse, I questioned people about a large-scale work by Susie Bevins, *In Search of Truth*, in the lobby. Its large-scale, colorful pieces prominently extend across the high ceiling and walls, but the small panel with the title and explanatory text for the piece—easily overlooked in a corner by a stairwell—was not noticed by any of the respondents. With few if any interpretative statements overall about the Alaska Native artworks and with architectural designs not attributed to their Alaska Native sources, a viewer's impression of the building's Native art elements may be restricted to superficial appreciation if recognized at all.

At the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts, I conducted surveys for two of 18 masks located in the Atwood Concert Hall and Discovery Theater lobbies—an untitled mask by Kathleen Carlo (Figure 3) located next to exit doors and a sign for the bathrooms and an untitled mask by Sylvester Ayek installed high on a wall behind a bench. The labels for the masks gave basic information such as name, ethnicity, date, etc. A brochure, not available near the installations, describes these masks as "representing the diversity of cultures and variety of art styles found throughout Alaska's Native communities" and "installed in special niches throughout the public lobbies." But masks are the only Native art form on display, which seems to fall short of the claim to represent Alaska Native cultural and artistic diversity. The installations do not appear "special" but instead appear to fill and decorate empty spaces. None of the respondents had noticed Sylvester Ayek's mask. Furthermore, unlike the other artists, the Alaska Native artists did not have the opportunity to design a piece for the location. Instead, the art selection committee chose finished masks, not meeting the brochure's claim to have given the artists "no limitations" for proposing artwork.

At the Egan Convention Center, I questioned people about a John Hoover piece, *Volcano Woman* (Figure 4). In front of this work is a large-format, explanatory panel that includes a description of the Aleut creation myth that was the basis for the work, an explanation of the figures and a quote from the artist describing broader influences on his sculpture. This explanatory panel, along with a semicircular seating area, makes the presentation of the artwork more accessible to viewers than the exhibits at the other

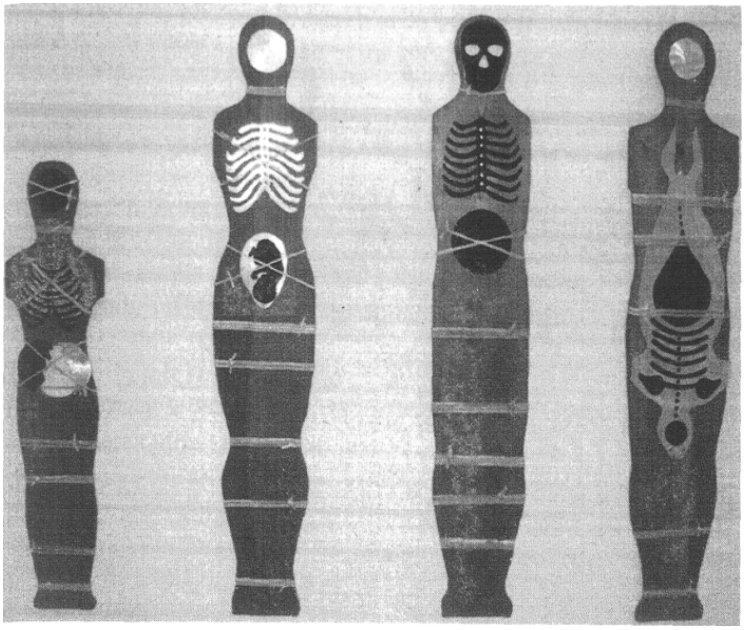

Figure 1. Susie Bevins, *People in Peril—Bound by Alcohol*, Anchorage Museum of History and Art (photo by D. Biddison; use courtesy of the Anchorage Museum of History and Art).

Figure 2. Sylvester Ayek, untitled mask, Anchorage Museum of History and Art (photo by D. Biddison; use courtesy of the Anchorage Museum of History and Art).

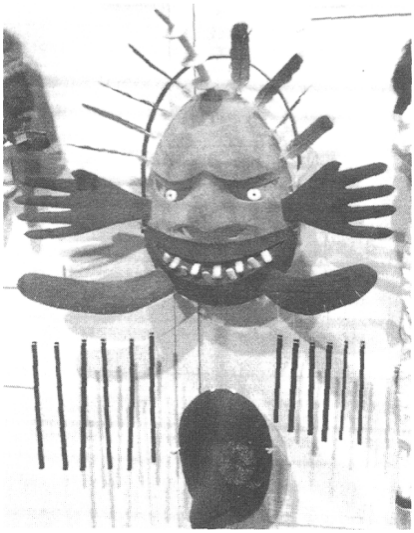

Figure 3. Kathleen Carlo, untitled mask, Atwood Concert Hall (photo by D. Biddison; use courtesy of the Anchorage Municipality 1% for Art Program).

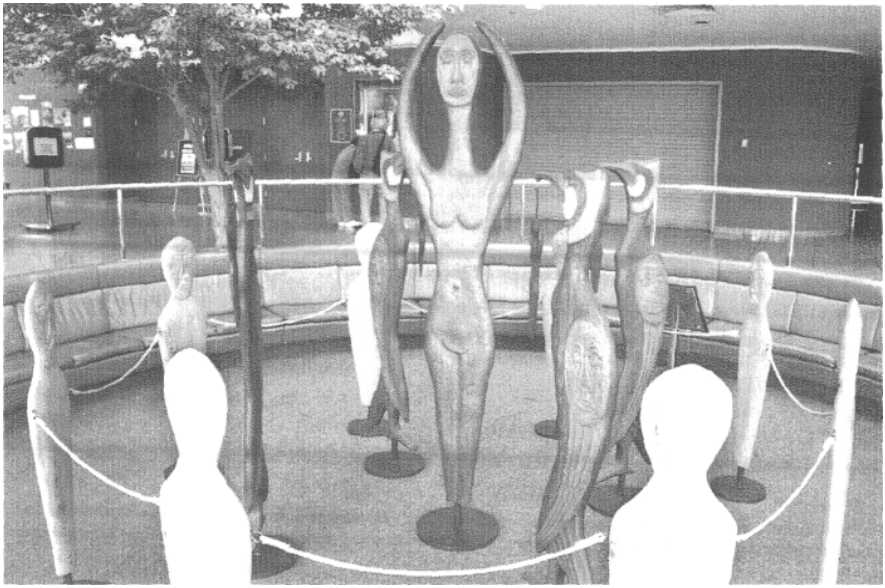

Figure 4. John Hoover, *Volcano Woman*, Egan Convention Center (photo by D. Biddison; use courtesy of the Anchorage Municipality 1% for Art Program).

sites, allowing viewers to appreciate it at length and to inform themselves about the piece if they chose.

Audience reception of Alaska Native art

A work of art does not have a single or fixed meaning, and its meaning varies for each viewer (Handler 1993: 34; Redfield 1971[1959]: 46; Traugott 1992: 39). Affected by artists' intents and their own preconceptions, viewers' perceptions of art are also significantly influenced by its presentation, particularly if they are unfamiliar with the form or content of the artwork (Graburn 1978: 52; Redfield 1971[1959]: 48-9; Vogel 1988: 10-11). It is my contention that viewers make their experiences of Alaska Native contemporary artwork meaningful based on their prior knowledge of contemporary art and preconceptions of Native art and culture; the communicativeness of the artwork—including its form, style and content—at an individual level; and how the artwork is presented, including the location and style of the display and the presence or absence of contextual information, particularly interpretative materials.

In order to assess viewers' reception of Alaska Native contemporary art, I conducted audience surveys for eight artworks at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, and Percent-for-Art public art sites discussed in the prior section. I asked 80 randomly-selected viewers (10 for each artwork) 17 questions about the artwork in addition to demographic questions. After a brief description of the respondents, I limit my discussion of the findings to one example from three categories of viewer responses: their preconceptions of Alaska Native art, the impact of the artwork, and their perspectives on the presentation of the artwork, including the effect of interpretative text if present.

In the following findings, "Museum" refers to the Anchorage Museum of History, and "Percent-for-Art sites" refers to the Nesbett Courthouse, Egan Convention Center, Atwood Concert Hall and Discovery Theater. The use of "with interpretation" and "no interpretation" refers specifically to the presence or absence of explanatory text on primary or secondary labels for the artwork. As a reminder, four pieces of art were presented with varied amounts of interpretative text. At the Museum, the Ayek mask has an object label with a one-sentence curator statement, and there was an exhibition brochure and a brief category label near the Hoover piece but no interpretation of the piece itself. At the Percent-for-Art sites, the Bevins piece has a two-sentence artist statement panel, and the Hoover sculpture has a panel with three paragraphs of interpretative information from both the artist and a curator.

Of the 80 viewers who answered survey questions, the majority were non-residents. At the Museum, 72% of the 40 respondents were non-residents and 28% were residents. At the Percent-for-Art sites, 52% of the 40 respondents were non-residents and 48% residents. There were no Alaska Native responses to this survey, due partly to the random nature of the sampling technique, but also partly due to the fact that the venues appeared to be less frequented by Alaska Natives. This in itself is an issue that calls for further study. Overall, the non-residents were somewhat older than

the residents. The majority of both resident and non-resident respondents were college and graduate school educated.

I asked survey participants "What do you expect to see in Alaska Native art?" as one of the questions to assess whether viewers had preconceptions about Alaska Native art. Most residents (87%) and non-residents (82%) described expectations about Alaska Native art. At the Museum, all residents and 90% of non-residents stated expectations. Slightly more non-residents (95%) than residents (84%) stated expectations at the Percent-for-Art sites. As for specific expectations about Alaska Native art, the top five categories of responses (78%) were: (21%) historic or traditional form (*e.g.*, carvings, beadwork, totem poles); (20%) local or traditional materials (*e.g.*, fur, hide, whale bone); (18%) expression of traditions, culture or heritage; (12%) animal forms (*e.g.*, animals, bear, whale); and (7%) relationship to nature or the land.

Among the questions addressing the impact of the artwork, I asked viewers whether the artwork was "easy to understand" in order to assess their access to its possible content. The majority of both residents (64%) and non-residents (68%) at the Museum and Percent-for-Art sites replied that it was not easy to understand. With interpretation present at the Museum, all residents replied "no," that the art was not easy to understand and, without interpretation, 50% replied "no." When interpretative text was present, 53% of non-residents replied "no," that the art was not easy to understand, and, without interpretation, 92% replied "no." The residents visiting the Museum, already familiar with Alaska Native cultures, may have found the art more complicated to understand given the small amount and limited quality of interpretative information presented. Visitors to Alaska may have found that any additional information helped them understand the artwork. For two artworks presented with interpretation at the Percent-for-Art sites—which gave more specific information than that available for the two pieces at the Museum—only 40% of residents said "no," that it was not easy to understand while 50% of non-residents replied "no." Without interpretation present, 89% of residents and 82% of the non-residents found the artwork difficult to understand. At the Percent-for-Art sites—where there is in general much less information on and examples of Alaska Native art compared to the Museum—the presence of interpretative text may have helped both residents and non-residents understand the artwork.

Anticipating that display style and presence of interpretative materials would affect viewers' responses to artwork, I assessed their opinions about how the artwork was presented. One question was whether any changes could be made to the presentation of the art that would make it more meaningful to them and, if so, what changes. The general response was "yes" for residents (60%) and non-residents (66%). At the Museum, all residents and 71% of non-residents replied that changes to the presentation could make the artwork more meaningful when interpretative material was present. When interpretation was absent, 75% of the residents and 67% of the non-residents said "yes" to changes. When interpretative text was present at the Percent-for-Art sites, 40% of residents and 30% of non-residents responded "yes." When interpretation was not available, 56% of residents and 91% of non-residents said "yes" to changes. Respondents at the Museum may have been more able to suggest changes

since that location offered other examples of artwork presentations. Some public art viewers may have been uncertain of what changes could be made without comparisons to other presentations available, but, without explanatory text, more residents and most non-residents wanted to change the presentation.

I also asked viewers what changes they would like to see. Statements such as "more about what the artist is trying to convey," "an explanation of the pieces" and "more details on the label" were categorized as more interpretative information. Statements such as "more prominent place," "move to eye level" and "make the label more visible" were categorized as change how displayed. Viewers also stated a preference for both. Overall, most residents (77%) and non-residents (84%) wanted more interpretative information. When interpretative material was present at the Museum, 67% of residents wanted more and when not present 83% wanted more. All non-residents at the Museum wanted more interpretative information when it was absent and 92% when present. These responses clearly indicate that most Museum visitors wanted more interpretative information even when some was already available. At the public art program sites, 78% of residents thought there should be more interpretative information when some was present. With no interpretation, 100% of residents wanted more information. When interpretation was present, 33% of non-residents wanted more and 78% wanted more interpretative materials when none was available. The non-residents may have found the available interpretative text sufficient, but with no interpretation available, the majority wanted more information about the artwork. These responses show that at public art sites, the majority of all viewers wanted interpretative information when none was available.

Discussion

This examination of artists' perspectives, artwork exhibits and viewers' perceptions of public Alaska Native contemporary art indicates that presentations at the sites surveyed do not adequately address the concerns of artists, the needs of viewers or Anchorage museum and public art program goals. Such representations, particularly their lack of interpretative information, restrict viewers' access to Alaska Native contemporary art. Without contextual information on heritage and aesthetics in Native artwork and contemporary art, viewers may be limited to a superficial appreciation of its form, or they may resort to stereotypes as a means of understanding what they are seeing.

The artists I interviewed combined personal, innovative interpretations of their Native heritage with contemporary artistic expression. That their work is perceived as both fine art and Native art, reflecting the dynamic nature of their cultural heritage, is important to them. But each artist has felt constrained by stereotypes of what Alaska Native art should look like from the art market and viewers. Artists felt that expectations of "traditional" forms and content have impeded their freedom of expression, impacted their access to commissions and galleries, and affected their ability to make a living as artists. They have found limited acceptance for artwork with more abstract forms, new materials and techniques, and controversial subject matter.

These artists depict aspects of their Native background in their art, but they do not want to be limited to that in order for their work to reach the public.

Most of the resident and non-resident viewers surveyed expected that Alaska Native art would consist of specific materials and forms that were historically used. Although these preconceptions of "traditional" elements did not seem to keep viewers from liking the contemporary artwork, most found the artwork challenging to understand.

This may have been due to difficultly with contemporary forms as much as their ability to interpret Native elements. The differences in most audience responses between pieces with and without interpretative text, particularly for non-residents, indicate the utility of interpretative text for all viewers. Most viewers recommended that more interpretative information be made available even when some was already present. The artwork with the most extensive interpretation, Hoover's *Volcano Woman*, viewers found easiest to reflect upon, while viewers had the most trouble with a more abstract piece, Carlo's *Break of Day*, which had no explanatory text.

Artwork presentation was also important to the artists interviewed. All felt that the way art is displayed affects its aesthetic impact and influences viewers' appreciation. Each artist criticized how his or her work was presented. Initially, this criticism focused on the aesthetics of the particular installations, but their concerns also included the absence of interpretative materials. Hoover downplayed his interest in the presentation of his artwork but in a tone of frustrated resignation. Ayek and Carlo thought that interpretative information could be useful but also expressed concern that it did not detract from the beauty of their work. Interpretation is greatly valued by Bevins who routinely incorporates this element in her work. She recognizes that viewers want more information about art and that interpretation helps them overcome limits in their understanding of both the Alaska Native and contemporary elements in her work.

At the sites surveyed, presentations of Alaska Native contemporary art included little if any information about the perspectives of the artists or the context of their work. At the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, an artistic or curatorial voice was entirely absent from the Alaska Native contemporary art exhibition, which limited the significance of the artwork for the viewers. Where the Museum had made attempts to contextualize it, information was minimal and its historical and socio-political implications overlooked. At the Percent-for-Art sites, the overall impact of Native artwork was limited to furnishing the buildings with an "Alaskan" look. At the Atwood Concert Hall and Discovery Theater, the uninformative presentation and poor installation locations for the Alaska Native masks have the effect of reducing their role to merely decorative. The pieces at the Nesbett Courthouse and Egan Convention Center are prominently presented and include interpretative information, but the significance of representing an Aleut creation myth and Iñupiaq philosophies of justice are restricted to illustrated stories whose implications about ongoing conflicts over issues such as subsistence rights and self-determination are not explored at these non-Native institutions for commerce and law. With further assessment, the use of Alaska Native art in these public places seems to fall in line with the wider critique of

continued appropriation of Native culture, which continues the marginalization of Alaska Native contemporary art.

Implications

The findings of this study indicate that the presentations of Alaska Native contemporary art at the assessed sites limit the intents stated by the artists, do not offer viewers information on the aesthetic or cultural implications of the artwork, nor challenge viewer preconceptions, which may confine their appreciation of contemporary Native art and limit their perceptions of Alaska Native cultures. My focus on Alaska Native contemporary art is not to remove discussion of this artwork from fine art in general or advocate separate exhibits and restrictive interpretative text. Rather my intent is to draw attention to ongoing problems in the presentation of Alaska Native contemporary art in Anchorage, Alaska's largest city, that have been addressed within and outside of Alaska through critical evaluation of and changes in exhibition practices. Given the colonial past of appropriation, commoditization and stereotyping that continues into the present, representations of Alaska Native culture require continual critical discussion.

Two recent Alaska exhibition publications are powerful exceptions to this marginalizing of Alaska Native art. University of Alaska Museum's *Looking North* (Jonaitis 1998) emphasizes an equal status for Native and non-Native artwork and presents a dialogue among Native and non-Native experts that addresses complex art issues and provokes the questioning of assumptions. *Looking Both Ways* (Crowell *et al.* 2001) is also based on multiple, Native and non-Native perspectives and addresses complex historical and contemporary socio-political issues. These projects set precedents for multi-vocal, reflexive presentations of Alaska Native culture based on Native participation and self-representation.

If Anchorage museums and public art programs are to achieve their goal of serving the public, their presentations of Alaska Native art need to address the differing perspectives and needs of its multiple audiences, including Natives and non-Natives, residents and non-residents. The answer is not to offer decontextualized, simplistic, apolitical displays. Exhibitions of Native art merit the same complex, critical attention and use of interpretative materials given to other arts, which make its significance accessible to diverse audiences. Such presentations, used extensively in exhibits of Euro-American fine art, can confer equal status, whereas decontextualized exhibits contribute to its marginalization.

Accessible exhibits can be achieved through the use of collaborative, contextualized presentations of Alaska Native art. In order to impart complex, reflexive meanings, exhibitions of Native art require collaboration with Native artists and community members in developing structure and content. For presentations to be accessible to multiple audiences, they need to foster viewer comprehension of the form, content and context of Native artwork. For presentations to be effective, they need to provoke a re-thinking of stereotypes and assumptions that continue to diminish the

accomplishments of Alaska Native artists. Interpretative materials can address the contemporary forms and Native elements of the artwork as well as its historical and current context.

My intention in emphasizing the role of interpretative text is to show that its greater use can serve artists and audiences. Viewers want more interpretative information about artwork, and artists want their work to have an impact on viewers. Interpretative materials may also be able to address stereotypes affecting perceptions of Alaska Native art that contribute to its marginalization, particularly given the nostalgic images of Native life promoted by the Alaskan tourist industry. Better understanding of Alaska Native contemporary art has the potential to increase its acceptance in the art market and promote the support of a wider range of artistic expression.

Museum and public art venues can provide an empowering opportunity for contemporary Native artists, as well as curators, to communicate with Native and non-Native viewers. An effective exhibition of contemporary Native art can improve its status, dispel stereotypes, and facilitate greater understanding of Native culture, including its dynamic nature and current issues. Presentations developed in collaboration with Native artists and communities that utilize interpretative materials can increase the significance and accessibility of contemporary Native art exhibits. There are no simple solutions to the question of how to best present Native art. What is clear is that this question must be continually asked, answers must be sought from multiple viewpoints and approaches, and practices must be critically examined in order to assess their effects and possible improvements.

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