OPENINGS

In 2012, the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race (CSER) inaugurated the Gallery at the Center with the goal of creating openings for exciting ideas in as many forms as possible. Since then, the gallery has presented two outstanding photography shows. Superheroes, Dulce Pinzon’s four-fo-fo portrait series of Latinx undocumented immigrants that withstand difficult labor conditions to build their communities, survive and prosper; and The Raging 70s, a series of twenty stunning black-and-white images by İzmir Art证监会 of Latinx public figures, significant events, and everyday New York City life in the 1970s drawn from the Latinx Arts and Activism collection at Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

This academic year’s first new show, Messages Across Time and Space: Inuit Drawings from the 1890s at Columbia University, builds upon the gallery’s past work. Similar to prior exhibits, it includes visually striking images by artists of color that are not generally engaged with by art institutions or are widely accessible to the communities they originated in. As with The Raging 70s, the current exhibit also underscores the potential of curating from the rich archival holdings at Columbia’s libraries, including its three hundred indigenous objects. Furthermore, the show’s focus on Inuit artists continues CSER’s deep commitment to indigenous studies and the arts through all of our programs, notably the Indigenous studies track, the Indigenous Forum, the Summer Program in Indigenous Rights and Policy, Artists at the Center, and the Media and Ideas Lab.

Simultaneously, Messages Across Time and Space breaks new ground. For the first time, the gallery hosted a guest curator—with thrilling results. Led by art historian and Barnard professor Elizabeth Hutchinson, the show investigates the manifold layers of meaning present in Inuit art produced within the violent context of settler colonialism in late nineteenth-century Alaska. Moreover, in pursuing this inquiry, the show raises key questions of power in the production, preservation, and exhibition of indigenous art and archives, and the limits of official archival knowledge in relation to indigenous cultural practices. As Hutchinson noted in an interview, “We had questions that the archivist was not answering. We needed to consult native archivists in whatever form that they exist. Sometimes we had to go to YouTube to engage with Native thought and self-expression.”

Our exhibit is also organized through the increasingly important practice of collaborative curation as a mode of inquiry and form of engagement. Hutchinson co-curated the show with nine Columbia graduate students who participated in her Spring 2015 seminar, “Reimagining Indigenous Art in the Age of Globalization.” By way of observation and contextualization of objects and practices, the team aimed to return archival materials to produce new understandings and foster connections among curators, diverse publics, and indigenous communities. As Christopher Green, one of the student co-curators, observed, “Our work showed us that the array of viewpoints in these works is legitimate only when multiple voices, most importantly Inuit voices, are able to weigh in.”

The goal was then not only to enable more nuanced scholarship or develop curatorial skills, as is significant to both practices were to the project. More fundamentally, it was about bringing the work into native visible and contributing to the larger process of historical recovery and cultural renewal led by indigenous communities. The drawings, created by Inuit artists yet largely inaccessible to them, are not simply illustrations from the past. Not only are the portrayed dances and narratives still in use. These fine lines, at times jumping off the page, are also a clear link—of more openings to come.

Francisco Riquel Mirrante and Dawn Center
Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race
Gallery at the Center

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the gallery at the center for giving us the opportunity to bring these works out of storage to where current students and community members can see the care and creativity with which indigenous artists confronted their changing world during the 19th century. Working with the staff at CSER and Art Preservation has been a wonderful experience. Thank you Frances Negron-Muntaner, Jessica Agapito, Roberto C. Ferrani, Ulani Yargy, and Larry Soory. Working together as a class has helped us broaden our perspectives as scholars of art history, curatorial practice, and indigenous studies and we have benefited tremendously from our discussions with one another and with the curators and artists who visited our class.

CATALOGUE

Drawing A (Inventory of regalia used for the Eagle Dance) c. 1895
Pencil and watercolor on paper

DRAWING B (King Island Eagle-Wolf dance)

DRAWING C (King Island Eagle-Wolf dance with whale blubber and audience)

DRAWING D (Wolf Dance, the transformation of the eagle into wolves)

DRAWING E (Two men in different clothing with carved poles)

DRAWING F (Two men in similar dress dancing (seated))

DRAWING G (Line of men)

DRAWING H (Line of men)

DRAWING I (Ball game)

DRAWING K (Two women dancing in different clothing)

MESSAGES ACROSS TIME AND SPACE:

INUIT DRAWINGS FROM THE 1890S AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

GALLERY AT THE CENTER

Columbia University
September 22 – November 30, 2015

GALAXY 2000

1555 Broadway
New York, New York 10036
Tel: 212-390-6200, Monday - Friday
MESSAGES ACROSS TIME AND SPACE: INUIAT DRAWINGS FROM THE 1890S AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

The two extraordinary drawings in this exhibition represent aspects of the kigivik (Messinger Feast), a ceremonial complex performed in many Inuit communities in Alaska. They offer a detailed depiction of the regalia and dance stops used by the participants who gathered from diverse communities to participate in the event. These dances continue to be performed today by the leaders of Inuit villages in Western and Northern Alaska, in many cases resembling what is shown in these century-old drawings quite closely.

The drawings are now part of the collection of Columbia University Art Properties; they came to the university as part of the Bush portrait collection, an assembly of works by non-European artists collected by Professor William Janevich in the early twentieth century for their religious significance and donated to the university in 1935. The collection was described by Professor Bush simply as “ Eskimo drawings,” and none are signed. This exhibition suggests that they were likely made by Steward Peninsula Inuit people working closely with missionary leaders Thomas and Ellen Loppo in the village of Kingian in Alaska, in 1905.

In 2015, members of a graduate seminar were tasked with finding out more about these unknown artworks. Looking closely at the objects and developing research questions about their history, they were able to retrieve rich information about the drawing, including its provenance, and learning about the culture and people that created it.

PUTTING THE DRAWINGS IN CONTEXT

For centuries, Inuit peoples have lived in dispersed communities in the Western Arctic and in interior parts of North West Alaska, with a strong tradition of trading with local resources. Local Inuit communities interacted with others in the region, in the late eighteenth century, with a view to developing a greater sense of community and identity, and to strengthen their relationships with outsiders. The northern European contact in this region was initially established in whaling activities by the British, with the purchase of Alaska in 1867. The imposition of European trade, the United Kingdom's policy towards Alaska, and the introduction of locally supplied goods to Inuit communities in the 1880s under the leadership of Presbyterian missionary Sheldon Jackson.

THE KIGIVIK

The kigivik is a mid-water festival performed by members of Inuit and Yup'ik communities in western Alaska. It is traditionally held after a strong wind harvest, in a parade (often community-wide), and involves drumming, dancing, performing, storytelling, and songs among the people. The ceremony is believed to bring about success in the following year, and is a time for gathering and feasting.

Teachers hired by Jackson introduced literacy. Cronkite reports that the traditional labor in the form of a mask-building enterprise, not to mention education, was a significant role played by the Tlingit and Tsimshian communities in the region. A few years later, the Klawock Gold Rush brought unprecedented numbers of Americans onto Alaska Native territory, and the Klondike Gold_origins represented a profound and beautiful expression of survival and the perseverance -in particular in the annual Kingikmit Dance Festival, a ceremonial event that celebrates the profound and beautiful expressions of community and their traditions. A CLOSER LOOK

On the companion website, Emily Chenoune notes that contemporary Inuit artist Larry Ahvakana perpetuates historic Inuit aesthetic practices as a means of pointing to the past and maintaining an education in Inuit cultural values in the present. Like Ahvakana, the artists whose work is on display here perform ceremonies that we used to call “ritual,” and they present them to their Inuit community of the past and those yet to come.

Despite changes in media over time, Inuit artists have repeatedly returned to the same themes—especially the nuclear family, the home, hunting, and ceremony. In doing so, they have repeatedly recontextualized traditional and modern objects and materials, and told stories—such as the graphic representation of natural and man-made phenomena and transhistorical Inuit aesthetic. The care with which this group of artists undertakes the task of documenting the kigivik, an essential event in Inuit ceremonial life, resulted in clear records of significant components of that ritual, the details of the material objects involved, and the identities of the participants. Moreover, the artists in this exhibition have taken it as a given that they can and must use their style to tell these stories and convey these experiences to the wider world, bringing them to the attention of the artist's mastery of the ideas and values that underlie the Messinger Feast.

For example, in Drawing C, the artist has indicated the relative importance of the human figure depicted by highlighting the area of detail with which they are rendered—the carvers are carefully depicted in miniature, and the view musicians are sketched in with simple outlines.

dances and guests from different Inuit villages, a tradition of gathering and exchanging that is perpetuated today in the annual Kingikmit Dance Festival, a ceremonial event that celebrates a profound and beautiful expression of survival and the perpetuation of this community and its traditions.

At the same time, the artist shows the significance of witnessing the ceremonial by emphasizing the visual aspect, which is shown as simple dots, seen on the river. Finally, the awkward poses of the dancers—elevated straight arms and a backward-leaning pose that seems difficult to balance—catch our attention to the strength and discipline demonstrated by dancers who are executing their movements and maintaining their sense of motion over the details of the ceremonial might be found in simpler forms in Drawing B (305r), in which this artist has carefully conveyed the identity of each figure by carefully delineating facial features, stature, and details of clothing.

It is important to emphasize that these artists did not create the drawings out of a sense of nostalgia for a lost past, but instead were engaged in documenting cultural activities in a time of great change using the tools at their disposal. This is apparent in the fact that the drawings were made with school supplies—colored pencils and paper, and ink—adding a level of gravitas to this work. On the back of Drawing C, the artist has inscribed a self-portrait into a tableaux depicting a group of “great artists,” indicating an understanding of the significance of their art to both native American and Inuit cultures.