

# A GENERATION OF INNOVATORS IN SOUTHEAST ALASKA

Nicholas Galanin, Stephen Jackson,  
Da-ka-xeen Mehner and Donald Varnell

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1. Totem pole by Donald Varnell, Haida, 2004. Courtesy of the Ketchikan Indian Community Tribal Health Clinic, Ketchikan, Alaska.

2. *yada yada dada, reality pilot #2 "looks like a beaver"* by Donald Varnell, Haida, 2007. Red cedar, rubber, plastic hose, zip ties, paint, copper. 24" x 24" (61 cm x 61 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

**D**o the categories “traditional” and “contemporary” really mean anything when applied to Native American art being produced today? Clearly, distinctions exist between artists who draw heavily on past artistic forms to create art intended for use within the community, or to express cultural continuities, and artists working in innovative or experimental modes who make political or social statements, speculate on what it means to be a Native person in today’s world or struggle to maintain spiritual connections in this secular world. In 1990 Rick Hill suggested calling the second type of work “Neo-Native Expressionism,” referring to art that expresses the Native experience in all its varying dimensions, including ties to the past, membership in a tribe and position as an individual. “It is many views, many realities, many voices. It is enough just to understand the power of Indian contemporary art, and not to be concerned about its ‘authenticity’” (Hill 1990:3). The Eiteljorg Museum of Indians and Western Art, Indianapolis, Indiana takes a simpler approach, distinguishing in its biennial show Native-made “fine art” from more traditional creations like masks, regalia, baskets and pottery. The four innovative artists discussed in this article clearly fall into the contemporary, Neo-Native and/or fine art categories, although each one has been trained in traditional Northwest Coast art.

Ventures into innovative art are not as common on the Northwest Coast as elsewhere. Perhaps more than any other area of Native North America, this region identifies itself strongly with earlier artistic traditions: carvers make masks that have nineteenth-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 an active role in many communities, there is considerable motivation to make the regalia “correctly.” Buttrussing this is an art market developed after the 1960s that places a premium on creations that uncompromisingly draw from the past. That contemporary Northwest Coast art is largely ignored is evident in the most recent museum exhibition of that region, *Listening to Our Ancestors: The Art of Native Life Along the North Pacific Coast*, which opened in 2006 at the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. The objects for this exhibit were selected in collaboration with Native advisors from all the Northwest Coast groups; it is telling that no one appears to have argued for contemporary, much less innovative, creations. Even *Alaska Native Art: Tradition, Innovation, Continuity* (Fair 2006), which purportedly illustrates new art styles, includes only traditional carvers such as Nathan Jackson and Israel Shotridge from southeast Alaska.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The only exception is a set of strikingly abstract mixed-media pieces by Edna Davis Jackson (Fair 2006:Fig. 253). Unfortunately, Jackson has not produced any of her textile or paper artworks in recent years. Had she continued on that path, I certainly would have included her in this article.



3. *Logic Board* by Donald Varnell, Haida, 2007. Red cedar, acrylic pigments, chalk, colored pencil, graphite. 60" x 30" x 1 1/4" (152.4 cm x 76.2 cm x 4.4 cm). Museum purchase made possible through the support of the Rasmuson Foundation Art Acquisition Fund. Courtesy of the University of Alaska Museum of the North, Fairbanks. Cat. No. UA2007-015-001.



Perhaps because of its conservative nature, the art of Alaska's southeast has been largely missing for years from exhibitions of modern Native art. *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 has been honoring Native American artists since 1999, finally recognized a Tlingit artist, Tanis S'eiltin; and in 2007, Larry McNeil received an Eiteljorg Fellowship.<sup>2</sup> S'eiltin and McNeil have experimented with new forms, media and ideas, and thus stand alongside the British Columbia leaders in contemporary Northwest Coast art: Marianne Nicholson, Yuxwelupton, Mary Anne Barkhouse and Brian Jungen.<sup>3</sup> Alaska Native art finally received national exposure in 2006, when the Museum of Art and Design, New York presented the traveling exhibit *Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation 2*, which featured many innovative Alaska Native artists, including Nicholas Galanin, who is discussed here.

Although most Northwest Coast Native artists create what is labeled traditional art, rarely entering the realm of what we can call the truly innovative, a few artists have been somewhat experimental. Robert Davidson, for example, has created interesting two-dimensional variations on the formline, but by his own account remains firmly entrenched in artistic tradition. Other contemporary Tlingit who experiment with the traditional forms include Clarissa Hudson, who breaks up formline patterns in her paintings to create dreamlike images of intersecting Northwest Coast beings whose parts merge into one another; and weaver Terri Rofkar, who uses ancient motifs and techniques to create genuinely innovative ravenstail weavings. What distinguishes artists such as Davidson, Hudson and Rofkar from those discussed in this article is the latter group's level of intentional, self-conscious rebellion against traditional constraints.

One Tlingit artist who consciously experimented with his artistic tradition, trying to create new forms, was James Schoppert (b.1947, d.1992). In many of his carved wood panels, Schoppert's work breaks up formline elements, rearranging them on the surface, taking advantage of the power of the forms, not only as components of complete

<sup>2</sup> The Eiteljorg catalogs contain articles on S'eiltin's and McNeil's artistic development and connection to Tlingit traditions (Passalacqua 2005; Askren 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Brian Jungen (b.1970) is the one contemporary Northwest Coast artist who has achieved international recognition. He has exhibited in Canada, the United States, Europe and Asia. In 2005 he had a one-person exhibit at the New Museum for Contemporary Art in New York, the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia and Musée d'art contemporain du Montréal, Montreal, Quebec.

4. *Nearing Completion* by Stephen Jackson/Stron Softi, Tlingit, 2005. Pigmented epoxy resin, aluminum, acrylic and oil paint. 132" x 30" (335.3 cm x 76.2 cm). Courtesy of the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, University of Washington, Seattle. Cat. No. 2005-85/1.

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 his culture has persisted despite generations of discrimination, mistreatment and disease. Going beyond the formal, Schoppert also made strong social statements through his artworks (Nichols 1997).

In a profound way, Schoppert is the artistic father (or, in proper Tlingit and Haida lineage terminology, the artistic uncle) of the four young artists discussed in this article. The three Tlingit in the group are jewelry maker, conceptual and video artist Nicholas Galanin; carver, computer and installation artist Stephen Jackson; and photographer and sculptor Da-ka-xeen Mehner. Weaver and wood carver Donald Varnell is Haida.<sup>4</sup>

Donald Varnell (b.1973), grandson of celebrated weaver Dolores Churchill, modifies formlines in original ways. While his works may be shocking to traditionalists, his use of certain non-Northwest Coast images makes his carvings more accessible to the public. Coming from an artistic family, Varnell believes his career as an artist was predestined. He started drawing as a child, copying images from early-twentieth-century illustrated books he found at his grandmother's house. In addition to weaving baskets, he apprenticed with Reggie Davidson on Haida Gwaii and Nathan Jackson in Ketchikan.

Varnell later attended the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) Native Arts program, where he began working with Alutiiq artist Alvin Amason.<sup>5</sup> Varnell credits Amason, who urged him to think about Northwest Coast art in a different manner, with considerable influence on his artistic development. When Amason arrived at UAF in the early 1990s, he encountered Yup'ik and Athapaskan students making formline designs, as his predecessor had been an enthusiast of Northwest Coast art. Amason chided them, saying they should try to work in their own styles. He also encouraged artists from southeast Alaska to be more experimental. Varnell remarked: "Alvin gave me a real reality check when he said, 'be willing to think about your art in different ways — there are a lot of other ideas out there.'" This challenged Varnell's way of thinking about his traditions, and liberated him to explore new ideas. Varnell began trying to create a new visual vocabulary. While working with Reggie Davidson and Nathan Jackson, Varnell found the strict rules of the northern style stultifying. As a result, he proceeded to emancipate himself from constrictions on his creativity, and "withdrew from the dialogues on traditional versus contemporary art. I was rebellious." He was also influenced by the works of Haida artist Reg Davidson, Canadian cartoon-

ist Todd McFarlane, guitarist Tom Merello and sculptor Louise Bourgeois. The results of Varnell's experiments with form are works that at first might seem conventional, but then startle. For example, he used unusual, naturalistic eyes on a totem pole he made for the Ketchikan Indian Community Tribal Health Clinic (Fig. 1).

Trying to think differently about the formline tradition, Varnell had the liberating realization that a similarity existed between the way some formline designs and cartoons worked. He was inspired by the work of the Superflat group of Japanese artists, who moved away from classic Japanese-style work to create a striking style that embraces cartoons and other elements of popular culture. In 2005 Varnell received a Percent for Art commission to make two totem poles that would stand in front of an Anchorage school. He wanted to create artworks that could speak to elementary school students by including visual images with which they were familiar — namely, manga-style figures. This naturally caused some stir among those with more traditional artistic values, such as a Tlingit member of the school board, who stated that the drawings "caused the hairs on my neck to go up" (Porco 2005). The poles inspired an internet blog ([www.mangablog.net/?p=104](http://www.mangablog.net/?p=104)), with some contributors attacking what they felt was the cultural subversiveness of Varnell's creations, as well as his supposed cultural dishonesty; this red-headed man was "not a real Haida." Responses to these attacks were equally emotional, especially in the case of Varnell's ethnicity; he is indeed Haida, but, as one blogger asserts, "It doesn't matter one bit how much blood quantum of 'Native' that person has, no matter how many elitist, racist, and ignorant comments try to make that be" (Ishmael Hope, comment 7). Other comments unabashedly praised the subject matter, quality and originality of the poles: "I think it's wonderful to combine traditional Haida with modern images the children can appreciate. Donny's maternal relatives were there to do a Haida dance to bless the poles, and to show the children the pride in their culture. Hopefully this will connect the children to both worlds. Donny is of both worlds, it makes sense his art would reflect both as well" (Susan, comment 2). In his own defense, Varnell argues that "What I made here are not traditional stories; I just applied Northwest art to another art, that of pop culture."

Varnell challenges both the traditions and observers of Northwest Coast art. Some of his masks are painted with colors not often found on Northwest Coast art, such as orange. Others are made strangely humorous with intentional asymmetry or assembled from unusual materials. At a first, cursory glance, *yada yada dada*, *reality pilot #2 "looks like a beaver"* (Fig. 2) appears straightforward — the mask depicts a beaver surrounded with shredded cedar bark, thus the "looks like a beaver" title. But on closer inspection, the mask's strangeness becomes evident. One eye has the standard Northwest Coast pinched corners, but the inside corner has a sassy

<sup>4</sup> The direct and indirect quotes by the artists in this article were recorded in several conversations with the author in April 2007 and February 2008.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on the Native Arts program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, see [www.uaf.edu/art](http://www.uaf.edu/art).

upsweep. The right eye is completely different from the left, with a bright aqua formline encircling an ovoid eye. The vaguely walleyed glance gives the beaver an otherworldly, trancelike demeanor; as Varnell says, "maybe he has ADD." The left eyebrow in the shape of a U-form sweeps up at its outside end. The rest of the forehead, including underneath this brow, is covered with red and clear bubbles that Varnell says resemble soda pop. "The design was made for people looking for some deep Native Alaskan spiritual idea," a criticism many artists can make of consumers of their creations. Surrounding this surprisingly asymmetric face is red and blue plastic webbing. The perplexing title, as enigmatic as the mask itself, suggests a nod to surrealism and its dada predecessor.

*Logic Board* represents an investigation into the meaning and creation of Northwest Coast art (Fig. 3). Drama and dynamism have replaced the calm symmetry of conventional works. The center eye is rendered with perspective. Conventional ovoid eyes swirl near cartoonish orbs. In shocking contrast to the highly controlled and elegantly executed relief carvings are occasional pencil scribbles of the crudest sort. Varnell's work encompasses the historic and the popular, the refinement of the past and the rush inattention to rules of the present, in a vivid statement of a young Haida's experience in the modern world. Although some people find the works of Varnell as well as Jackson profoundly disturbing in their confident challenges to conventions, these pieces certainly embody a logical progression of the formal experimentation and of Native responses to history begun by Schoppert.

Stephen Jackson (b.1976), a.k.a. Stron Softi, did not want to become an artist until his father Nathan Jackson gave him a choice — to work at McDonald's or make five dollars an hour working with him. As a result of apprenticing with his father, Jackson became a highly skilled northern-style artist, and began receiving commissions by the age of eighteen. In 1997 Goldbelt, Inc., the for-profit Native corporation in Juneau, commissioned a pole that would stand in a tourist attraction it was developing. As he worked on this pole, Jackson began to speculate on what he was actually doing, and why. Like his father, Jackson admired high-quality works, such as the carvings of the Klukwan Whale House, and strove for similar perfection. But he began thinking about the nature of clan images and how they were conceptualized by the public: "When people see a bear, they think, oh that's a bear, and don't have to think beyond that, about what that might mean." Jackson decided to begin a process of eliminating crests in his work to see what effect that had. He became increasingly inventive and experimental, and credits twentieth-century poets, visual artists and musicians, including but not limited to, Octavio Paz, Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Alberto Giacometti, Roberto Matta, Yves Tanguy, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenburg, John Cage, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane and hip-hop turntablists with influencing his development.

After he completed the Goldbelt pole, Jackson wanted to investigate new possibilities in his art, and began taking some elements that were not necessarily central to canonical pieces and exaggerating them. When he was approached by a collector who wanted to commission a work, Jackson proposed doing an original, asymmetric piece. The collector was nonplussed, and, as an example of the potency of the marketplace in maintaining art styles, insisted — per Jackson — that "this powerful design should be in a museum, not in my house." Nonetheless Jackson did make an inventive, eleven-foot-tall housepost, with a face that resembled his own and a forehead ovoid of broken mirrors.

A transitional point in Jackson's development occurred in 2001 when he received his first invitation to exhibit with the Indianermuseum in Zurich, Switzerland. Jackson decided to take some liberties, and inventively pursued some of the questions he had been asking about Northwest Coast art. Bentwood boxes posed several questions to him — why did people make these items, in the past and today? Why do people make "traditional" work? Why does the market so enthusiastically support the creation of items that no longer have the same cultural meaning they once did? He "deconstructed" a bentwood box in *Four Cornered Humours*, in which he cut off four corners and placed them upside down on a No Parking sign he had found in Zurich. Hanging from the four box corners were vials containing four types of bodily fluids; Jackson jokes that these vials are his personal version of the concept of a "private collection." The influence of Duchamp, one of Jackson's favorite artists, was becoming evident. This experience unleashed Jackson's creativity, and opened the way for his increasingly challenging creations.

Jackson had already decided he did not wish to create conventional Northwest Coast work — although he then and still greatly admires many works of its masters, such as Robert Davidson — but to use the basic elements to create entirely new visions. Jackson credits the book *The Transforming Image* (McLennan and Duffek 2000) with other epiphanies: that old works were intentionally not symmetrical, and that there was a great deal of potential in Northwest Coast art that had not yet been realized. Instead of tight constraints and adherence to rules, Jackson strove for the looseness and excitement of asymmetry and irregular line.

Jackson was bored with how slowly things develop in the conservative tradition of Northwest Coast art, and wanted to do something risky. He got the opportunity for risk taking in 2004 when the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, University of Washington, Seattle, commissioned him and his father to carve two poles to represent the Kaats story in which a man marries a bear and is ultimately killed by his children. These were replacements for two poles that had been repatriated to Cape Fox village. It took some time for Jackson to envision what he would create; the inspiration came to him

while he was walking around Manhattan, imagining movement. It took him a half-hour to draw the unique design that would become his housepost, *Nearing Completion* (Fig. 4).

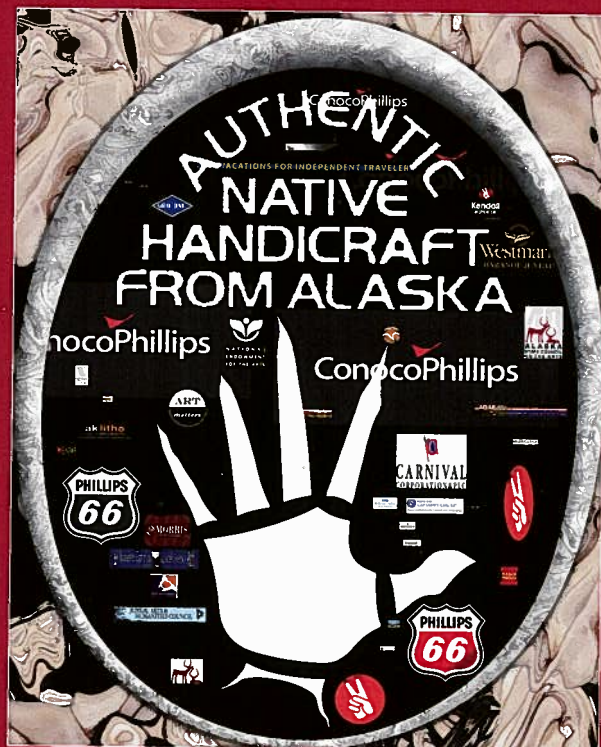
Jackson thought the subject of this story is in part death; how could he use elements of Northwest Coast design in new ways to depict the visceral impact of violent death, with allusions to decapitation and dismemberment in what he terms "multiple exposures." How to actually construct his vision presented a problem. Cedar was too fragile, even though he tried to carve it at the beginning. Should he use mixed media? Aluminum? Or, as he ultimately chose, epoxy resin. In this piece, he has pierced space; stretched forms seem to wrestle with each other, creating an image in which nothing is a complete whole. Little hands appear here and there, grasping abstract forms, referencing the tiny dismembered limbs on shaman charms. Teeth appear out of nowhere, and what seems to be a herniated intestine twists through the center. Here and there throughout the sculpture are uncompleted ovoids and U-forms that transform into strange, abstract creatures. Although this sculpture contains identifiable elements, as a whole it is highly abstracted. According to Jackson, the entire piece reflects the fact that pure abstraction is not new in Northwest Coast art; thus, this piece is a reflection on artistic tradition, among other things.

The theme of death and destruction transcends the mythic in this piece, for Jackson 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." Like Schoppert, Jackson modifies conventions as a statement about the colonial encounter.

Jackson began using the moniker Stron Softi as his "foreign brand name" and the identity of his domain placeholder ([www.stronsofti.com](http://www.stronsofti.com)). He explains that this name emerged from what he calls "slippages," a "g" slipping from "strong" and an "i" slipping into and replacing the "y" in "softy." These familiar words, meaningful together, have been made unfamiliar by means of those slippages. Stron Softi represents the "inverse" of the simplification of culture on the part of the tourist industry that tries to make the unfamiliar familiar. The assumption of a unique name invented by himself also reflects his "self-defeatist" assertion of his own artistic identity.<sup>6</sup>

Jackson/Softi feels the internal and external conflicts between the demands of the marketplace and his own creative energies. In his words, "I go from being repressed by my own tendency toward pure abstraction, where 'anything goes' becomes meaningless, to being repressed by conventional oppositions between tradition and the contemporary, to being revisionist, then back to repression. I

<sup>6</sup>One can also interpret the existence of different names for the same individual as a reference to the "white" names of tribes, like "Nootka," and the Native names, like "Nuu-chah-nulth."



5. *Not for Sale Poster 1: Sliver Hand, Silver Spooner Organ Grinder* by Stephen Jackson/Stron Softi, Tlingit, 2007. Computer graphic. 70" x 87½" (177.8 cm x 222.3 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

6. *"We Will" Cover* by Stephen Jackson/Stron Softi, Tlingit, 2008. Computer graphic. 8½" x 10⅞" (21.6 cm x 27.6 cm). Courtesy of the artist.





7. *Transformation* by Da-ka-xeen Mehner, Tlingit, 2007. Steel, concrete, bronze. 30" x 22" x 12" (76.2 cm x 55.9 cm x 30.5 cm). Courtesy of the Four Winds Foundation, Fairbanks, Alaska.

need to express all the ideas that I have, but I need to survive, make art that sells." One work, *Not for Sale Poster 1: Sliver Hand, Silver Spooner Organ Grinder* (Fig. 5), is a large-format poster that reflects on this commercialization of Native art.<sup>7</sup> In Alaska, only art verified by a "silver hand" tag can be sold as Alaska Native-made. In the center of Jackson's print is the image of such a hand. Surrounding the hand are logos of oil corporations, expressing a concern for how Alaska's natural resources are exploited; names of major tour companies, which bring visitors to Alaska who Jackson/Softi feels insist on being spoon-fed simplistic information about Native people; and names of arts-granting agencies, such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the Alaska State Council on the Arts, which have their own sets of rules that constrain artists. Nowhere on the print is there any reference to an actual Native artist, whose existence is ignored by these external forces.

Computers provide Jackson/Softi with new artistic potentials. Surrounding the central oval of *Not for Sale* are computer-generated wavy, undulating forms. When he began experimenting with these graphics, Jackson/Softi realized that quasi-ovals, U-forms and formline-like elements emerged from the process. Prints in which he puts together these disparate forms through random selection represent his critique of some artists who seem equally random in their application of design elements in "traditional" Northwest Coast art.

Jackson/Softi often focuses on the role of the market in the pursuit of artistic expression. He used a computer to create *"We Will" Cover* (Fig. 6), a hybrid of the covers of *Art Forum* and *American Indian Art Magazine*. The image of Damien Hirst's bejeweled platinum cast of a skull inlaid with more than 8,400 diamonds (which purportedly sold in 2007 for 100 million dollars) fills the center. This skull, interpreted as a statement about morality and money in the art world, is depicted ingesting two totem poles in an act darkly suggestive of cultural destruction. Jackson/Softi himself explains this striking image as a commentary on "the age-old issues of appropriation, imitation, collection, ownership, the spiritual and commerce."

The connection to the powerful formline tradition is less evident in the works of Da-ka-xeen Mehner and Nicholas Galanin than in Jackson/Softi's and Varnell's work. Both are trained in that style, but create art with little reference to it; their artistic references are more to cultural than formal concepts. Both artists studied art formally and received master's degrees, and both use unusual materials to present forceful statements of their identities, their histories and their political stances.

Da-ka-xeen Mehner (b.1970) grew up in Fairbanks, where he lived in a cabin with his mother, and Anchorage, where he lived with his father. He comes from an extended artistic family that includes Nathan Jackson, Michael and Richard Beasley, and Anna Ehlers Brown, and he was especially influenced by his uncle, photographer Larry McNeil.

<sup>7</sup> This piece won the Best of Show in the 2008 *All Alaska Juried Exhibition* at the Anchorage Museum.

Mehner differs from the other artists discussed here in that he did not initially study formline design but instead began his training outside the state. He left Alaska in the early 1990s, traveled to the Southwest and attended the Institute of American Indian Art (IAIA) in Santa Fe, New Mexico. His early works included photographs of landscapes and portraits, sculptures of concrete "books" and mounds of handguns, and installations that brought his two- and three-dimensional artworks together. Mehner addressed different themes in his sometimes surrealistic works, such as the environment, destruction and death.

Mehner opened an art gallery in New Mexico; unfortunately, it was not successful, and he got into serious debt. Knowing he could work in construction in Alaska, he returned north to regain financial stability. Then, like Varnell, he took a course in the Native Arts program at UAF. It was this program that rekindled his commitment to art, and inspired him to look more carefully at his Northwest Coast artistic roots. For the first time, he carved wooden pieces in Tlingit style, and ultimately made masks for his family. He viewed this as giving back objects that had been removed from them years before.

Before Mehner traveled back to Alaska, he thought of himself as a contemporary artist who was Native. Then he attended UAF, and decided to pursue graduate studies and work towards a Master of Fine Arts degree in Alaska Native art, which he received in 2007. He began to consider Native artists James Luna and Bob Hazous more critically, as artists whose singular visions and unique modes of expression impressed him greatly.

While at IAIA, he met very few Alaska Native students, whereas in Fairbanks he was surrounded by them. The program gave him more freedom to explore art, his cultural heritage and himself. Gradually, he realized that he was an Alaska Native and a contemporary artist who embraced Tlingit culture and art as integral facets of his being. Previously, he had embraced the Western canon in his art, but now for the first time allowed himself to incorporate the visual culture of his ancestors into his art. Today, Mehner's photography and sculpture involve an investigation of both his identity as a Native person who also has non-Native blood and of his responses to the current world situation.

During his immersion in Tlingit culture, Mehner examined various archives in Alaska and came across a late-nineteenth-century photograph, *Da-ka-xeen, the Tlingit [sic] Artist*, a studio shot of a man in full regalia holding a staff in one hand and a raven rattle in the other, sitting in front of a Chilkat robe and between two totem poles. Through modern technology, Mehner created a photograph that included this artist whose name he shared on one side and on the other, himself as a mirror image of that person, wearing the same regalia, but holding a 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."

Many Native Americans struggle with the issue of Native identity. Who decides who is Indian? Is it the government, the tribe, the indi-

8. *Double-headed Dagger* by Da-ka-xeen Mehner, Tlingit, 2007. Steel I-beam, steel cable, cast concrete. 66½" x 9½" x 15" (168.9 cm x 24.1 cm x 38.1 cm). Museum purchase made possible through the support of the Rasmuson Foundation Art Acquisition Fund. Courtesy of the University of Alaska Museum of the North, Fairbanks. Cat. No. UA2007-001-001.





vidual, the academy or popular culture?<sup>8</sup> Mehner is seven-sixteenths Native and married to a non-Native, so his children will be less than one-fourth Indian. Mehner's photograph *7/16th* (Fig. 9) addresses this issue; a striking image of the lower half of Mehner's face is superimposed over his Native identity card. Mehner sports an unusual beard — it is part dark and part light — that one can interpret, in this context, as referring to the division of his identity into part Indian, part white.<sup>9</sup>

During his exploration of Tlingit material culture, Mehner became fascinated with masks, and with the notion that when one dons a mask, one becomes a different being. This is not a process of hiding, but of revelation. More recent investigations of Mehner's identity take the form of concrete casts of his face. *Transformation* is a concrete torso with a face of unidentifiable ethnicity that opens up to reveal a smaller, staring face with a dynamic beard (Fig. 7). Mehner identifies the inner face of this sculpture as himself, having a cultural awakening to "everything that's going on, the person I think I am, aware of culture and the world. I am always striving to recreate myself as the good person I hope to be."

Another item of Tlingit art that intrigues Mehner is the dagger. In his Master of Fine Arts exhibit in the Native Arts program at UAF, Mehner exhibited a number of daggers. "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." One version is a stand that holds a sheet of plexiglass upon which is a knife form that is filled with oil, 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."

Another dagger, made of concrete, steel cabling and a steel I-beam (Fig. 8), is double headed, surmounted by two faces similar to those of the closed *Transformation*. Mehner renders the relatively small Native dagger huge, for this sculpture is over five feet tall. In this work, made from materials not usually associated with fine art, Mehner reveals his debt to Duchamp, whom he describes as "my hero in the Western art world. He had the ability to empower an object to become art." Mehner explains that this piece, "in addition to alluding to the historical and personal struggles that I address in my daggers, presents a large double-headed handle that refers to my multicultural heritage." Its materials also contribute to the autobiographical nature of this sculpture, for they allude to the artist's life as a construction worker. *Double-headed Dagger* has transformed an item of Native manufacture into a massive appropriation of contemporary manufacturing materials

that now signify the strength not of corporations and their edifices, but of an enduring Native people.

Nicholas Galanin (b.1979), who creates jewelry in classic formline style (which pays the rent), speculates on the fallacious formation of Native identity in books and museum exhibits that address Tlingit culture. Like the other artists described in this article, Galanin comes from an artistic family, and worked with his father Dave Galanin and uncle Will Burkhardt, both traditional artists. Later, he apprenticed with Tlingit carver Wayne Price, and became highly competent in the formline style. He explains that his cultural history has always been a foundation, the driving force in his work. But he did not wish to be limited by conventions, and was pulled in many directions. "Different teachers wanted me to do different things. I resisted. People get tracked in one area, and it's hard to connect to them." For him, artistic excitement means pushing boundaries.

Galanin's pursuit of new artistic concepts led him first to London, where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in jewelry making and silversmithing at London Guildhall University. He did well, graduating with honors, but became frustrated that it was not possible to incorporate traditional elements into his work. Then he traveled to New Zealand, where he learned about the Indigenous Visual Arts program at Massey University. He was thrilled to be able to work alongside like-minded individuals, and received his Master's degree in Visual Arts in 2007. He returned to southeast Alaska, confident in his creative potential and ready, as he puts it, "to see the world through my art — it's a creative tool to investigate my cultural heritage and politics. Art is such a broad endeavor, it encompasses everything and anything."

Galanin recognizes the influence of both Native and non-Native artists. In addition to his solid foundation in formline design, he pursues conceptual art as a means of challenging the conventions with which he was brought up, finding them suffocating. "Recently I've become frustrated with the Native art world. Native art forms have been in a reactionary state in terms of trends and technology. It's great to see artists doing things well, but why stop there? Creative risks fuel cultural growth."

Galanin's 2006 Master of Visual Arts show at Massey University, titled *What Have We Become?*, presented a series of what at first appear to be Tlingit-style masks, which on closer inspection turn out to be made from pages of books. One self-portrait is made from the pages of Frederica de Laguna's *Under Mt. St. Elias*, one of the major ethnologies of the Tlingit, critiquing the construction of identity by anthropological texts. Another mask, *The Good Book, Vol. 15*, depicts a bird much like any number of nineteenth-century shamans' masks. Like the self-portrait, this is made from sheets of a book, in this case, the bible, critiquing the role of missionaries in the eradication of traditional spiritual beliefs (Fig. 10).

Galanin also makes good use of videos. One video fast-forwards through images of an immense number of

<sup>8</sup> This is such an important question that the National Museum of the American Indian has a large section addressing Native identity.

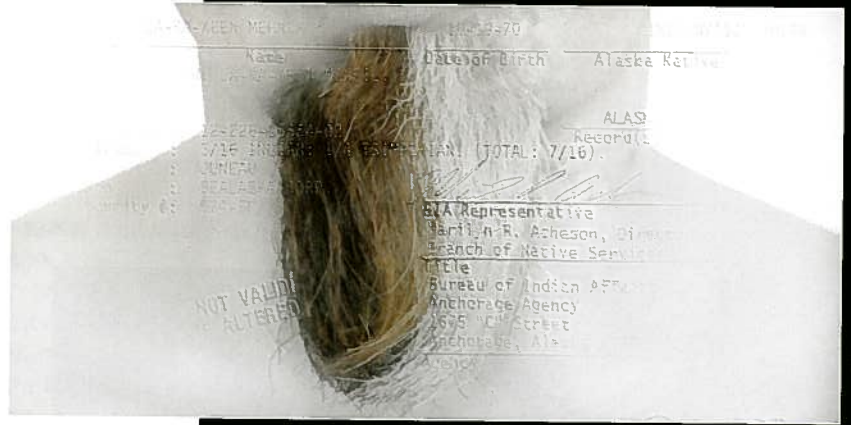
<sup>9</sup> This photograph won the Juror's Choice Award at the biennial juried photographic exhibition, *Alaska Positive 2006*, at the Alaska State Museum, Juneau.

artworks, many shown for only a second. As individual works flash by, it is impossible for anyone to grasp their meaning, or even to see the artworks properly; Native art becomes fragmented into bits and pieces. In contrast, the ethnography that forms Galanin's self-portrait is permanent, readable and understandable. Images of culturally significant objects that actually do embody the history and culture of the group are unavailable to the non-Native, who resorts to packaged cultural representations in books.

Galanin becomes even more critical of outside representations in another video that accompanied the show, this one called *Talking Totem Poles*. The narrator, Galanin himself, dryly reads in a monotone from a 1970s book that presents information about totem poles but offers no genuine cultural understanding of them. This dull narrative effectively kills the living quality of the poles, destroying their context. Galanin objects strongly to how books dictate what the culture should be like today. The construction of identity from such books affects not only those who know little of Native culture, but also other artists, Native elders, gallery owners and museums.

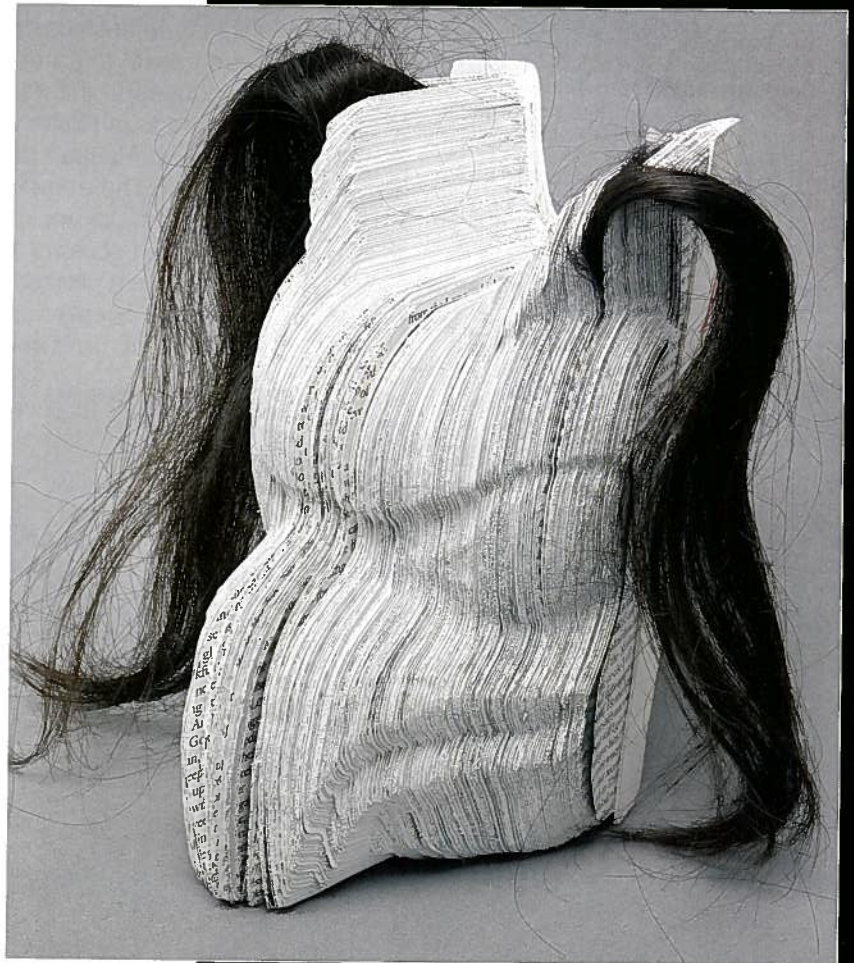
Galanin juxtaposes easily identifiable elements from the traditional and dominant cultures as well in two other videos made for the same exhibit. One shows a classically garbed Tlingit dancer performing before a painted screen, which would be traditional if the music were not electronic. The other shows David Elsewhere, an innovative and well-known contemporary dancer, in T-shirt and tights in a contemporary dance studio, moving to a traditional Tlingit song. Galanin investigates how the dominant culture has interfered with Tlingit culture and how both have intermingled and formed striking new forms of artistry. The name of one piece, *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan: We Will Again Open This Container of Wisdom That Has Been Left in Our Care*, represents the philosophy that informs Galanin's work (Fig. 11).

Galanin's conceptual works have not been greeted with universal enthusiasm. He is outspoken about the role of galleries in perpetuating a conservative artistic style. Dealers know exactly what they want and purchase artworks that are marketable. Galanin's inspiration comes from both Native and non-Native artists, and he sometimes becomes frustrated by conservative trends and technology. Galanin is concerned that sometimes elders find his works inaccessible and not Tlingit enough. He understands that more traditional members of his community cannot see their culture in his works, so he tries to use visual "clues" that the elders can understand, like Tlingit masks. This is another example of how the strength of artistic traditions can hamper



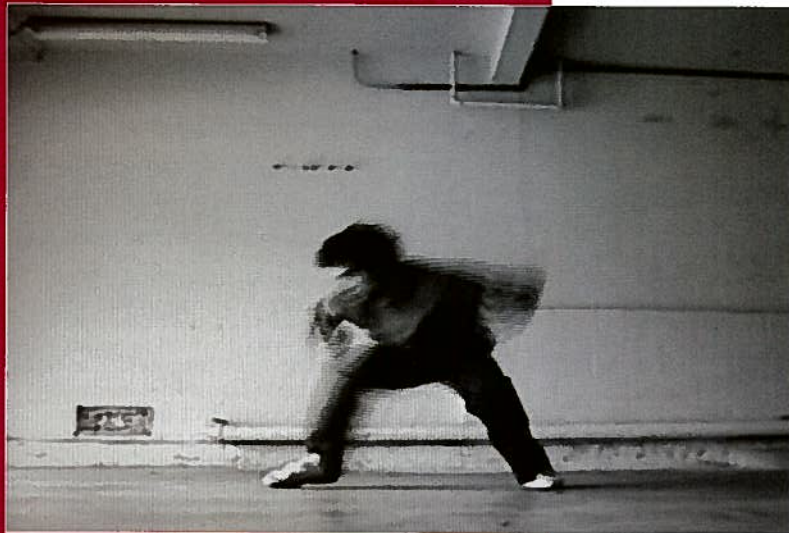
9. *7/16th* by Da-ka-ween Mehner, Tlingit, 2006. Ink-jet print. 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 19 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (69.5 cm x 49.1 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

10. *The Good Book, Vol. 15* by Nicholas Galanin, Tlingit, 2006. Paper, human hair, mixed media. 6" x 9" x 4" (15.2 cm x 22.9 cm x 10.2 cm). Museum purchase made possible through the support of the Rasmuson Foundation Art Acquisition Fund. Courtesy of the University of Alaska Museum of the North, Fairbanks. Cat. No. UA2006-018-001.



creativity, for when Galanin is fully original, some people — both in the marketplace and the Native world — cannot relate. He argues, however, that artists in the past created their works with freedom, saying “there is no reason why we cannot do the same today.”

Galanin’s newest work is a series of photographs, *Where Will We Go?*, in which a neon sign that states “No Indians or dogs allowed” appears in various southeast Alaska settings (Fig. 12). As soon as settlers began moving into Alaska at the end of the nineteenth century, wooden signs with these words appeared in shop windows, and there were separate seats in movie theaters and different outdoor benches for Natives and whites. After two Alaska Natives were elected to the Territorial Legislature in 1944, serious efforts began to outlaw this segregation. The next year the legislature passed a law banning such signs. Galanin’s neon refers to that painful aspect of Alaska Native history; its vivid red, white and blue colors suggest the endorsement of such practices by the United States government (which of course did not ban African American segregation until 1964). The sign’s appearance in contemporary settings is intended to evoke strong emotional responses from viewers. Galanin believes that “these images offer a setting



of absurdity and contrast with both the meaning of the sign and use of neon in such environments (primarily my culture’s indigenous land).”

Much more can be said about these four artists. They are certainly original, sometimes dazzlingly so. One might think it elementary, maybe even passé, to frame any article on Native American art today using the concepts of tradition and innovation. Perhaps that is the case in other parts of Native America, but these modes lie at the heart of the southeast Alaskan art world, and are of deep concern to these communities. The anger that some of these creations has generated is telling. I already mentioned responses to Varnell’s school poles. When I presented some of Jackson/Softi’s works in a seminar on Northwest Coast art to a group of Tlingit in a small town, they were genuinely horrified, and deeply concerned about how badly Nathan Jackson must feel. (In fact, he is very proud of his son.) And after I discussed some

of these artists at a conference in Sitka, a man approached me, saying the “Western Tlingit” works would fade away, because Tlingit art traditions are strong. When I answered, “There’s room for both types of art,” he responded, “No there isn’t. I’m traditional,” and then stormed away.

It would appear to be time for Northwest Coast art appreciators to recognize the vitality of inventive artists such as these four and allow them to work without criticism in the mode that Lucy Lippard terms “Esthetic Sovereignty” (2003:1). Taking her lead from Tuscarora artist Jolene Rickard, Lippard explains that such sovereignty resides alongside identity politics, so that artists can maintain their cultural connections while forging new artistic paths. They themselves make artistic decisions right for them, rather than being subjected to the artistic rules and principles of others. This is the kind of

11. Scene from the video *Tsu Heidei Shugaxtutaan: We Will Again Open This Container of Wisdom That Has Been Left in Our Care* by Nicholas Galanin, Tlingit, 2006. Courtesy of the artist.

12. A photograph from the series *Where Will We Go?* by Nicholas Galanin, Tlingit, 2008. Photograph of a neon sign. Courtesy of the artist.



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artistic freedom that is still grounded solidly in a connection to tradition and place for which these four rebellious young artists strive.

These four artists have similarities other than their rebellious stance. They all appreciate the surrealists and Duchamp, and have all been influenced by Native and non-Native artists. Each belongs to an artistic lineage, as was the case in the past, when artists belonged to artistic families. They also share an interest in popular culture: Jackson/Softi with his computer graphics, Varnell with cartoons, Galanin with video and neon, and Mehner with videos on his Web site. These artists appropriate elements from popular culture to make statements that may be political, humorous or challenging. As Rayna Green states, Native artists address issues of their history of oppression, racism, appropriation and "reflect on, riff on, riff off, resist, subvert and counter all the expressive modes of American vernacular culture" that oppressed them (2004:12). They both subvert and embrace elements of popular culture to regain control of their identities and define their membership in the contemporary global world that resists the imposition of false, ghettoized authenticity. Probably the most striking use of elements of popular culture is the art of Brian Jungen who, with cut-up Nike athletic shoes and plastic chairs, interrogates the stereotypes imposed on Native people by colonialism (Medina 2005:29). The works of the artists discussed here can be seen as contributing to these messages.

Some people might say that the works of Galanin, Jackson/Softi, Mehner and Varnell diverge so dramatically from Tlingit and Haida visual traditions that they should not be even identified as Northwest Coast Native art. But what is Northwest Coast Native art? It is associated with, but not defined by, the elegant formline style. But form is not all, for in southeast Alaska culture, art represents the ultimate expression of identity, and conveys one's lineage and history. Strong forces support the maintenance of conservative artistic traditions in southeast Alaska. But today people do not live only in their village, even if they reside there all the time. Like everyone else, they are affected by a larger world, with its politics, economic influences, wars, governmental policies, discrimination and stereotyping. 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 artists make important and timely statements about that world and its representation and treatment of Native people. They address the identity of contemporary southeast Alaska Native individuals, supplementing, enhancing and bringing up to date their identity as members in lineage and house. Artists such as these four young men, who embrace their past and their present, represent the future of northern Northwest Coast art. As Galanin states, "think about where the art world is today — imagine where it will be tomorrow."

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I presented an earlier version of this paper at the Sitka conference, Sharing Our Knowledge: A Conference of Tsimshian, Haida and Tlingit Tribes and Clans, March 2007 and the symposium at the Eiteljorg Museum, November 2007. I thank the organizers of those conferences for inviting me to speak, which inspired me to think about contemporary southeast Alaska art. I would like to thank my friend Janet Berlo for reading this article. Special thanks go to these four artists, who were very patient with my questions, requests for images and information, and who read the section of the article that pertained to their works. I of course take full responsibility for whatever mistakes may be in this article.

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