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. To date, the gallery has presented two outstanding photography shows. Superheroes, Dulce Pinzón’s tour de force portraying Latinx undocumented immigrants that withstand difficult labor conditions and their communities survive and prosper, and The Ragging 70s, a series of twenty stunning black-and-white images by Bobbi Anton of Latino public figures, significant events, and everyday New York City life in the 1970s drawn from the Latino Arts and Activism collection at Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

This academic year’s first new show, Messages Across Time and Space: Inuitat 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 nor are widely accessible to the communities that they originated in. As with The Ragging 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 Inuitat 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 Idea Lab.

Simultaneously, Messages Across Time and Space breaks new ground. For the first time, the gallery created 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 indigenous art produced within the violent context of settler colonization 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, “Re-presenting Indigenous Art in the Age of Globalization.” By way of observation and contextualization of objects and practices, the students aimed to reframe archival materials to produce new understandings and foster cooperation among curators, diverse publics, and indigenous communities. As Christopher Green, one of the student co-curators, observed, “Our work showed us that the various facets of these works are inseparable. And when various 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 significant as both practices were to the project. More fundamentally, it was about bringing the work into native visibility and contributing to the larger process of historical recovery and cultural rebirth led by indigenous communities. The drawings, created by Inuitat artists yet largely inaccessible to them, are not simply illustrations from the past. Not only are the portrayed dances and regalia still in use. These fine lines, at times jumping off the page, are also a foretelling—of more openings to come.

Francis Ngugi Murtianer
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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 a century ago. Working with the leaf at CSER and Art Prospects, has been a wonderful experience. Thank you Frances Ngugi Murtianer, Michelle Asai, Roberta C. Ferrara, Ulana Ugars, and Larry Story. 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 each other and with the curators and artists who visited our class and blessed Jennifer Kramer, G. Peter Kornickson, Sonya Kellher-Combs, and Deborah Cullen. Finally, we are grateful to Professor Rod for including these beautiful and complex works in his collection and for donating them to Columbia so that future generations of Inuitat and non-Inuitat viewers can see them.

CATALOGUE

Drawing A (Inuktitut incised on polar bear skin). 19th c. 45 x 35 cm. Polar skin mounted on paper

Drawing B (King Island Eagles-Wolf dances). (1483.301)

Drawing C (King Island Eagles-Wolf dances with musicians and auks). (1483.301)

Drawing D (Wolf Dance: the transformation of the eagles into wolves). (1483.301)

Drawing E (Two men in different clothing with carved pipes). (1483.303)

Drawing F (Two men in similar dress sharing smiles). (1483.304)

Drawing G (Lines of men). (1483.305)

Drawing H (Lines of men). (1483.306)

Drawing I (Ball game). (1483.307)

Drawing J (Two women dancers in different clothing). (1483.308)

MESSAGES ACROSS TIME AND SPACE: INUITAT DRAWINGS FROM THE 1890S AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
INTRODUCTION

The few remaining drawings in this exhibit represent aspects of the kivig (Messenger Feast), a ceremonial complex performed in many Inupiat communities in Alaska. They offer a detailed depiction of the regalia and dance steps 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 Inupiat 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 and Yuan collections, assembled with the help of non-European artists collected by Professor William P. Forster from Bush 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 “Exotic drawings,” and none are signed. This exhibition suggests that they were likely made by famed Inupiat artist People working closely with missionary teachers Tom and Ellen Loo in the village of Kingin in Wales, Alaska.

In spring 2015, members of a graduate seminar were tasked with finding out more about these understudied artworks. Looking closely at the objects and developing research questions that might allow us to ask the library, to museum collections, and to the

PUTTING THE DRAWINGS IN CONTEXT

For centuries Inupiat people have lived in autonomous villages on the Seward Peninsula and in interior parts of Northwest Alaska, following a subsistence lifestyle and trading local resources with outsiders, including both Native Alaskan neighbors and, beginning in the late eighteenth century, Europeans. The United States’ colonization of this region was a major factor in the purchase of Alaska in 1867, the poisoning of international trade. U.S. Federal Indian Policy played a small role in Alaska until the introduction of federated supported schools in Native communities in the 1880s under the leadership of Presbyterian missionary Sheldon Jackson.

As we argue, the drawings were created during a time of extreme hardship caused by the United States colonization of Alaska Native territory. The artists used materials and worked with forms that were introduced by outsiders whose goal was to eradicate any remnants of traditional life. The drawings, in effect, were an incompatably and modern, civilized society.

Nevertheless, the drawings, as we now see them, are an important record of cultural history for Inupiat in Alaska and beyond. Some of the drawings, as we now see them, are an important record of cultural history for Inupiat in Alaska and beyond.

THE KIVIGK

The kivig is a winter festival performed by members of Inupiat and Yupik, communities in northeastern Alaska as a traditional held after a strong harvest. In a single ceremony, the weather is celebrated, exchanging gifts, storytelling, and with an emphasis on the Native peoples, it is a ritual event.

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These drawings may have been made for missionary teachers to send to their students, as well as to teachers who were in charge of the students, for the benefit of the children. These drawings were created in a time of extreme hardship caused by the United States’ colonization of Alaska Native territory. The artists used materials and worked with forms that were introduced by outsiders whose goal was to eradicate any remnants of traditional life. The drawings, as we now see them, are an important record of cultural history for Inupiat in Alaska and beyond. Some of the drawings, as we now see them, are an important record of cultural history for Inupiat in Alaska and beyond.

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At the same time, the artist shows the significance of witnessing the ceremonial by emphasizing the use of white, black, and red colors, as shown as simple dots, seen repeated on the perimeter. Finally, the awkward poses of the dancers—including, elevated, straight arms and a backward-leaning pose that seems difficult to balance—call our attention to the strength and discipline demonstrated by the artist who are executing their rights with grace. The use of dot and sense of mastery over the details of the ceremonial might be found in smaller form in Drawings (350r), in which the 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 drawings 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 then sharpening, however, adds a level of gravitas to this work. On the back of Drawing K, the artist has inscribed a self-portrait into a textbook: decorated with “great artists,” indicating an understanding of the significance of art in both American and Inupiat cultures.