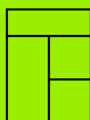
Among All These Tundras

Heather Igloliorte, Amy Prouty
and Charissa von Harringa



This text accompanies
the exhibition

Among All These Tundras

Curators
Heather Igloliorte, Amy Prouty
and Charissa von Harringa

September 4 –
October 27, 2018

Asinnajaq
Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory
Jade Nasogaluak Carpenter
Carola Grahn
Marja Helander
Sonya Kelliher-Combs
Joar Nango
Taqralik Partridge
Barry Pottle
Inuuteq Storch
Couzyn van Heuvelen
Allison Akootchook Warden

Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery

“At Home We Belong”: Decolonial Engagements in the Circumpolar Arctic

Heather Igloliorte, Amy Prouty
and Charissa von Harringa

Throughout his illustrated poem “My Home Is in My Heart”[1] famed Sámi poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää—Áillohaš, in Sámi—ardently upholds the integrity of Indigenous life, arguing for both Sámi rights and Sámi personal and collective responsibility to the land and water. In so doing, Áillohaš, like countless Indigenous literary figures around the world, underscores the pivotal role of words, language, writing, and poetry as sovereign resources of decolonization—acts of resistance and reclamation against colonially inherited forms of domination, be they cultural, political, psychological, economic, legal, or ideological.

The exhibition *Among All These Tundras*, its title drawn from this same poem by Áillohaš, features contemporary art by twelve Indigenous artists from around the circumpolar world. The regions from which they hail—throughout Inuit Nunaat and Sápmi—share histories of colonialism and experience its ongoing legacies today. These lands are also connected by rapid movements of cultural resurgence and self-determination, which, expressed via language, art, and even the land itself, reverberate throughout the Arctic.

Many of the artists featured in *Among All These Tundras* find themselves moving frequently between their homelands, urban centres, other circumpolar communities, or travelling for international exhibitions and residencies. They include,

1. Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, “My Home is in My Heart” (1985), in *Ruoktu Váimmus* [Trekways of the Wind] (Norway: DAT, Kautokeino, 1994).

from Canada: Asinnajaq (Inukjuak | Montreal), Jade Nasogaluak Carpenter (Yellowknife | Edmonton), Couzyn van Heuvelen (Iqaluit | Toronto), Taqralik Partridge (Kuujjuaq | Kautokeino, Norway), Barry Pottle (Rigolet | Ottawa), and Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory (Maniitsoq | Iqaluit); from Greenland: Inuuteq Storch (Sisimiut | Copenhagen); from the Sápmi regions: Carola Grahn (Kittelfjäll | Malmö, Sweden), Marja Helander (Utsjok | Helsinki, Finland), and Joar Nango (Alta | Tromso, Norway); and from northern Alaska: Allison Akootchook Warden (Kaktovik | Fairbanks) and Sonya-Kelliher Combs (Nome). This mobility often reflects the demands and opportunities of the art world, despite the acknowledgement that for many, the heart remains always in the home(land).

Drawing together a diverse range of artistic practices including film, video, photography, sculpture, text installation, performance, and mixed media, the works presented in *Among All These Tundras* invite viewers to contemplate relationships between textual and embodied Indigenous knowledge, humour and resilience, sovereignty and self-determination, and the collective responsibility to Arctic life and land.

Language

> "I don't think literature is confined to whatever is put down with a pen."
> —Taqralik Partridge[2]

The period of rapid colonization from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries brought missionaries (as well as scientists, explorers, anthropologists, whalers, military personnel, etc.) to regions throughout the circumpolar North. All these newcomers introduced texts and written language, under the guise of "education," to cultures whose histories, identities, and knowledge domains were transmitted primarily through oral storytelling and material and embodied practices.

Processes of geographic displacement, together with attempts to suppress and altogether eliminate Indigenous northern languages, oral histories, and customary practices and ways of living—practices and ways viewed as "heathen," a threat to Western European notions of "progress"—supported broader efforts by colonial nations to legitimize territorial and ideological control of the North through conversion to various forms of Christianity and assimilation within Western European socio-cultural norms.

Language, as Clifford Geertz so aptly puts it, is not merely a tool of communication, but a complete "cultural system"[3]; its irreplaceable words, vocabularies, and grammatical structures both embody and transmit knowledge of the environment,

2. Keavy Martin and Taqralik Partridge, "What Inuit Will Think: Keavy Martin and Taqralik Partridge Talk Inuit Literature," in Cynthia Sugars, ed., *Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 196.

3. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

living traditions, stories, and relations. The *care* inherent in the current revival of the Indigenous northern languages—carriers of knowledge and an essential resource for healing—beyond contemporary art world concerns, is therefore paramount to circumpolar artists and curators, as well as lawyers, leaders, educators, cultural workers, and communities.

The political and cultural recuperation of language in this exhibition is especially significant in the Canadian context. The cultural genocide enacted by the residential school system from 1874 to 1996 led to a loss of language by separating children from their parents, communities, and culture, as well as by banning the use of Indigenous languages in schools. The Calls to Action published by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada challenge the government to recognize language rights as inseparable from Indigenous rights.[4] This challenge was echoed by the United Nations Human Rights Commission, which noted the urgency of this task in the context of "the risk of disappearance of Indigenous languages."[5]

4. Truth and Reconciliation Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), 2.

5. According to "The Situation of Indigenous Peoples in Canada," a report by James Anaya, UNHRC Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, "there are approximately 90 aboriginal languages spoken in Canada. Two-thirds of these languages are endangered, severely endangered or critically endangered, due in no small part to the intentional suppression of indigenous languages during the Indian [and Inuit] residential school era." https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Ipeoples/SR/A.HRC.27.52.Add.2-MissionCanada_AUV.pdf (accessed July 10, 2018).

Sámi Indigenous languages have been primarily subsumed under majority "status" languages, such as Finnish, Norwegian, Swedish, and Russian—the languages of schools, governance, and popular and official media outlets. Moreover, the constructed portrayal of "Lapps" in Sami literary tradition have their own projective history and tradition in images and vocabulary.[6] Today, however, a renewed appreciation of Sámi languages, at one time nearly abolished, has led to a revival.[7] A successful model for language revitalization can be seen in the use of Kalaallisut in Greenland. Efforts to standardize the language began in the 1960s, and today it is the official language of Greenland, spoken by eighty-eight percent of the population, and is becoming a model for other Arctic language revitalization initiatives.[8]

On one level, *Among All These Tundras* incorporates the presence of Inuktitut[9] and Sámi languages, which appear throughout the works both conspicuously and in subtly discursive ways. Texts and poetic forms become significant symbolic and rhetorical tools, as well as mediums of intervention, inviting contemplation on relationships between textual and embodied Indigenous knowledges.

6. Sámi (*sápmelaš*) is the term Sami people use for themselves, supplanting "Lapp," a term applied by outsiders, which came to be derogatory. It should not be confused with the term "Laplander," which refers to residents of the Finnish province of Lapland, whether Sámi or Finn. See Veli-Pekka Lehtola, *The Sámi People: Traditions in Transition*, trans. Linna Weber Müller-Wille (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004): 9–17.

7. Ibid.

8. Office of the Languages Commissioner of Nunavut, "Greenland's Language Success," http://langcom.nu.ca/blog-entry/dshadbolt/greenlands-language-success (accessed July 10, 2018).

9. "Inuktut" is the collective name of the official languages of Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun spoken across Inuit Nunangat.

Inupiaq performance artist Allison Akootchook Warden, for example, employs verbal and textual expressions in the Inupiaq language, using the metaphor of ice (*siku*) to invoke simultaneously the devastating effects of methamphetamine use in her northern community as well as the spiritual, life-giving power of ice as a site of land-based knowledge. Likewise, Carola Grahn's text-based installations exploit the porous nature of language; her open-ended provocations challenge viewers with such statements as, "look who's talking" and "you know nothing". Her textual mediations are thus an opportunity for challenging claims to truth and representation that enable deeper reflections on indigeneity, land, belonging, and place.

Land

The artists in this exhibition are united in their desire to protect northern ecologies, languages, knowledges, and peoples, and to resist the deleterious effects of climate change, mineral and hydrocarbon resource extraction, encroaching industry, and transnational competition. In so doing, they assert their aesthetic and cultural sovereignty and connections to what Inuit call *nuna* (land): the tundra and taiga, as well as the waters and landfast sea ice upon which many circumpolar peoples rely, and all of the plants and animals that populate this world, which have generously provided food, clothing, shelter, and security for millennia.

For Indigenous peoples, language and culture are rooted in the land. Knowledge is place-based, embodied, and interrelational. This worldview, and the artistic practices based in it, has become politicized by settler colonialism, which is characterized by a historical and ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands. Decolonial thought and aesthetics, therefore, must also centre on the land. As Jarrett Martineau and Eric Ritskes have explained, quoting Anishinaabe curator Wanda Nanibush, Indigenous art forms in the present cannot be separated from Indigenous politics:

> Against colonial erasure, Indigenous art marks the space of a returned and enduring presence. But this presence is complicated by its fraught relationality to the persistence of settler colonialism, which always threatens to reappropriate, assimilate, subsume/consume and repress Indigenous voicings and visuality, their forms and aesthetics, within its hegemonic logic of domination.[10]

The works in this exhibition most often demonstrate their defiance of the ongoing logics of settler colonialism via the expression of a profound, enduring connection to the land and its peoples evinced through "decolonial love," which Junot Diaz has described as "the only kind of love that could liberate [us] from that horrible legacy of colonial violence."[11] Rooted in a politics of place, for example, Inuuteq Storch's land-based, compelling, and quirky photographs, from his *At Home We Belong* series (2010-15), challenge and destabilize dominant outsider narratives of Kalaallit by re-storying the land with images of family and familiarity. Asinnajaq's video work *Rock Piece* (2018)—in which the land appears to breathe, then birth, then re-envelope the artist—is another quiet yet radical act of Indigenous sovereignty. The work exhibits another facet of decolonial love, reflecting on the potential of the land to heal by drawing an embodied connection between land, self-care, and thus, self-determination.

10. Jarrett Martineau and Eric Ritskes, "Fugitive indigeneity: Reclaiming the terrain of decolonial struggle through Indigenous art," in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2014): II.

11. Paula M.L. Moya, "The Search for Decolonial Love: An Interview with Junot Diaz," *Boston Review*, June 26, 2012, http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/paula-ml-moya-decolonial-love-interview-junot-d%C3%ADaz. Accessed July 15th, 2017.

Sovereignty

Tuscaroran scholar Jolene Rickard asserts that sovereignty is essential to any understanding of Indigenous art and visual culture in that it allows for "interpreting the interconnected space of the colonial gaze, deconstruction of the colonizing image or text, and Indigeneity."[12] As image-making was—and remains—a powerful tool of settler colonialism, the fight for representation is an extremely vital part of decolonial practice. In North America, Inuit and Inupiaq have been often portrayed by settler artists as naive, childlike, and desperately in need of European "saviours." Likewise, there is a long tradition in European art of depicting Sámi as alternating between being noble savages and dangerous heathens. Contemporary artists counter these narratives by creating works that confront and disassemble the colonial gaze while articulating Indigenous values and traditions. Rickard refers to these artistic practices as "visual sovereignty," and it is evident throughout all the works in this exhibition.

In *Timiga, Nunalu, Sikulu* (*My Body, the Land and the Ice*, 2016), Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory addresses the colonial gaze while simultaneously celebrating Inuit womanhood. Her nude body lying upon the tundra seems not unlike European art historical traditions of the female nude; however, Bathory does not submit to the colonial gaze but actively challenges it. Her unromanticized, tattooed body and painted face, pitch-black and distorted in the style of a *uaajeerneq* dancer, defiantly challenges any attempt to possess her body or land.

Sovereignty is not only a concern for Indigenous artists residing in their traditional territories. Many urban artists are creating works that assert their right to be both Indigenous and cosmopolitan, reflecting the current reality wherein many Indigenous people must relocate for work and education. Jade Nasogaluak Carpenter addresses the colonial gaze, which seeks to deny Inuvialuit their modernity and keep them fixed to a certain time and place. Carpenter's delicate stone carvings of cigarettes and menstrual products refuse to conform to the market demand for "authentic" subject matters of pre-contact life—iconography frequently misappropriated by settlers to fulfill primitivist fantasies about Inuit.

Joar Nango also explores themes of transculturation and Indigenous contemporaneity. His traditional Norwegian sweaters display real-life, knitted examples of modern *lavvu* shelters, traditional Sámi buildings that today blend Indigenous and Nordic architectural elements. In doing so, Nango nods to the Sámi tradition of semi-nomadism while highlighting their capacity for adaptation. It is these qualities that have allowed his people to survive both physical dispossession and "Norwegianization"—centuries of harsh policies enacted by the government to force cultural assimilation on Sámi peoples.

12. Jolene Rickard, "Visualizing Sovereignty in the Time of Biometric Sensors," in *South Atlantic Quarterly* (spring 2011): 471.

Home(Lands)

The plural "tundras," expressed in Áillohaš's poem and emphasized in the exhibition title, is a curious proposition: at once, it expands a definition of "home"—one that denotes a rooted structure but also a dependence on language to express complex articulations of identity and belonging—while also expressing subjectivities, memories, and impressions linked integrally to the land and the environment. Each circumpolar region and people represented has its own unique history of colonization and separate cultural, linguistic, and geographic attributes; yet they are joined together in a shared fight for autonomy and self-determination, and in love for their homelands. Several works evince a shared concern for the ability of

Arctic Indigenous peoples to sustain a millennia-old way of life for the people and non-human entities of the North in the face of fast-approaching, perhaps irreversible change. Some works express a brazen refusal of that attempted disconnection. Others poke fun, reflecting on the absurdity of our current situation. And some quietly draw our attention to the things we need to listen to most carefully.

Whether through the physical medium of text, the language of materiality (archives, drawings, sweaters, pallets, beadwork, hide), or the visual proximity that photo and video afford, the works in this exhibition collectively create moments and spaces as intimate, perhaps, as those captured so eloquently in Áillohaš's poem.

List of Works

1. Asinnajaq
   Rock Piece
   (Ahuriri edition), 2018
   Video, colour, sound
   4 min. 2 sec.
   Courtesy of the artist

2. Joar Nango
   Sámi Shelters #1 - 5, 2009-
   Hand-knitted wool
   sweaters in ten different
   shades of colour
   Courtesy of the artist

3. Sonya Kelliher-Combs
   Secret Portraits, 2018
   Ink, pencil, beeswax
   on paper
   Courtesy of the artist

4. Allison Akootchook
   Warden
   siku/siku, 2017
   Two-part performance
   with a plinth

5. Inuuteq Storch
   Untitled, 2010-2015
   From the series *At Home*
   We Belong
   Digital inkjet prints on
   archival paper
   Courtesy of the artist

6. Laakkuluk Williamson
   Bathory
   Timiga Nunalu Sikulu
   (My Body, the Land and
   the ice), 2016
   Video by Jamie Griffiths,
   music by Chris Coleman,
   featuring vocals by
   Celina Kalluk
   Video, colour, sound
   6 min. 28 sec.
   Courtesy of the artist

7. Taqralik Partridge
   Tusarsauvungaa, 2018
   Series of five elements
   Cotton, polyester, wool,
   silk, glass beads, metal
   beads, Canadian sealskin,
   reindeer leather, thermal
   emergency blanket,
   Pixee lures, plastic tarp,
   Canadian coins, tamarack
   tree cones, dental floss,
   artificial sinew, goose
   feather and river grass
   Courtesy of the artist

8. Carola Grahn
   Look Who's Talking, 2016
   Video, 3 min. 40 sec.
   Courtesy of the artist

9. Allison Akootchook
   Warden
   we glow the way we choose
   to glow, 2018
   3D printed figurines in
   glow-in-the-dark filament
   Courtesy of the artist

10. Marja Helander
    Somewhere Far Away,
    2018
    Digital inkjet print
    on archival paper
    Courtesy of the artist

11. Marja Helander
    Night is Falling, 2018
    Digital inkjet print
    on archival paper
    Courtesy of the artist

12. Couzyn van Heuvelen
    Qamutiik, 2014
    Industrial found wooden
    pallets
    Courtesy of the artist

13. Jade Nasogaluak
    Carpenter
    Cigarettes and Lighter,
    2017
    Tampax® tampon, 2017
    Menstrual cup, 2017
    From the series *Uyarak/*
    Stone
    Soapstone and tung oil
    Courtesy of the artist

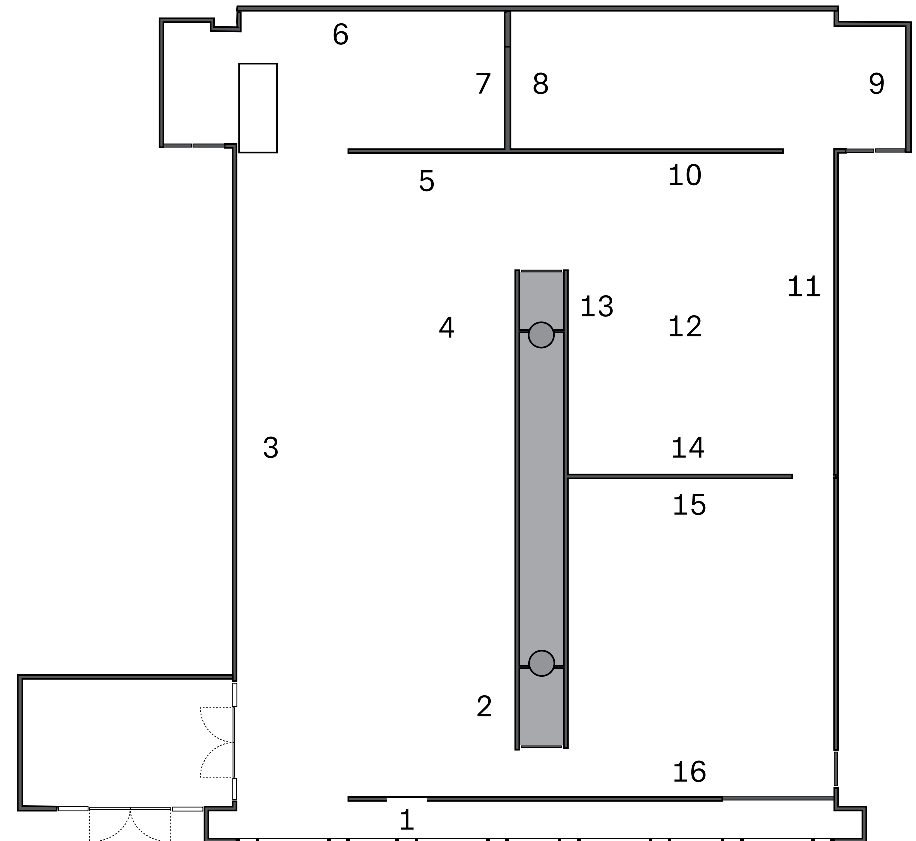
14. Marja Helander
    Dolastallat (*To have a*
    campfire), 2016
    Video, colour, sound
    5 min. 48 sec.
    Courtesy of the artist

15. Inuuteq Storch
Old Films of the New Tale, 2016
2-channel video, colour, sound
16 min. 10 sec.
Courtesy of the artist

16. Barry Pottle
After the Cut, 2012
Kanon-ized, 2012
Community Freezer, 2012
From the series *Foodland Security*
Digital inkjet prints on archival paper

The Last Supper, 2014
Digital inkjet print on archival paper
Courtesy of the artist

Exhibition Floor Plan



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