

CONTEMPORARY IDENTITIES TEACHER CONTENT PACKET

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INTRODUCTION

This resource examines objects on view in the Art of the North galleries.

The term identity holds a complex set of meanings. Identity can be personal—the ideas and concepts we develop and express about who we are. Identity can also be social—the ideas and concepts we develop and express about groups of people. Ethnicity, physical appearance, class, sex, gender, beliefs, values, actions, experiences and relationships are amongst the many elements that influence the way in which identity is constructed. Ideas and expressions of identity are formed and reformed throughout our lives, and at any given time we may express multiple identities.

Identity can be positive—identity helps us cultivate a sense of self and connection to community. Identity can also be negative—perceptions of the identity of others, and even ourselves, can lead to stereotypes, bias and discrimination.

This book highlights contemporary artists, artists living today, who examine identity through their artworks. The five featured artists use a variety of creative media and artistic approaches to make work that seeks to affirm multiple identities and challenge negative stereotypes.

The artists—Erica Lord, Thomas Chung, Ricky Tagaban, Sonya Kelliher-Combs and Nicholas Galanin—come from diverse backgrounds and life experiences. Each of the artists identify as part of a group or groups that have been historically—and continue to be— negatively stereotyped and marginalized. Through photography, performance, painting, textiles and sculpture, these artists foster awareness of these histories of exclusion. Their artworks offer a platform for conversations about social justice and cultivating a more inclusive society.

These artists and their artworks invite us to reflect upon our own ideas, concepts and expressions of identity. Use this book for your own thoughts and creative response as you consider what identity means to you.



USING THE GUIDE

Inside of this teacher’s guide you will find an expanded explanation on each topic present in the booklet alongside additional information and activities.

This guide highlights objects of the North found in the Anchorage Museum collection. The prompts are intended to engage ninth grade students and up with the context of the objects, creating deeper understanding of ways our unique place in Alaska shape lifestyles and traditions through objects and artworks.

- **Explore:** Challenge students to be curious when observing the objects, artworks and information presented throughout the guide. Support students to do their own research and delve deeply. The information is intended not only to educate but to spark interest in students and encourage further exploration on these topics. Slow down and look closely, each object has a story to tell.
- **Discover:** Encourage students to look beyond the artworks that they see and examine the details they notice either in the guide or in the exhibitions. As you move through this resource, share the additional knowledge and information presented in this packet to allow students to develop a deeper understanding of landscapes and resources of Alaska, Alaska Native lifestyles and cultures. Make this journal yours. Use the pages to draw, write and note in your own way.
- **Ask questions:** Build an inquiry-driven experience for the students. Ask students to share what they observe and/or what they may already know. As you introduce background knowledge and object information, encourage students to ask questions about what more they want to know and what they don’t understand. Be curious about the details.
- **Connect:** Encourage students to reflect on their own life and experiences. Invite students to consider their own personal connections to what they have learned. The activities of this guide foster opportunities for such personal reflection. Ask students to share with each other what connections they have found. Share with a friend, a family member or mentor about your experience.





Sketch of photo of Erica Lord

American
(b. 1978-) Nenana, Alaska

Artist Erica Lord creates work inspired and informed by her Iñupiaq, Athabaskan, Finnish, Swedish, English and Japanese heritage. Lord was raised in Nenana, Alaska until the age of six when she moved to Michigan with her mother. Lord cites this early experience as formative in understanding herself as someone embodying and continually navigating multiple identities. As a self-described mixed-race artist, Lord uses a variety of media to examine perceptions and representations of herself and others. Much of her work examines her Alaska Native identity. She often features her body as a subject, using her own image to challenge stereotypes of Indigenous peoples and to question misconceptions based on physical appearances. Lord works as an artist in Santa Fe, New Mexico.



Sketch of Erica Lord's *Indian Looking*, 2005, ink, paper, 2012.8.1 [detail]

Artist Erica Lord's body is the subject of the photograph *Indian Looking*. Lord's face is cropped from the image as she poses with her arms wrapped around her bare torso. The words 'Indian Looking' appear on her arms lighter than the rest of her skin tone. *Indian Looking* is part of a series of photographs titled *The Tanning Project*. For each photograph of this project, Lord tanned words and phrases commenting on perceptions of Indigenous identity into her skin. She then took photographs of her body in various poses which revealed these words. By placing her own body at the center, Lord asks the viewer to confront stereotypes regarding appearances of Indigenous bodies. The *Tanning Project* also references the history of the sexualization and objectification of Indigenous women's bodies.

"Through my art, I hope to create dialogue that will help to redefine our selves, our communities, and our beliefs. Rivers hold special significance for the people of Interior Alaska. For thousands of years, Athabaskan leaders have gathered at a place called Nuchalawoyya 'Where the two rivers meet' to discuss tribal matters. Here, the Chena and Tanana rivers meet and something beautiful happens. One river, a cloudy silty light brown, meets a clear dark brown river, and they swirl until they become one. The image and idea of two beings, each distinct in their individual qualities, meeting and becoming one, resonates within me. Nuchalawoyya is a place of both great power and great beauty."¹

¹ Contemporary Native Artists. "Erica Lord - Inupiaq / Athabaskan." Contemporary North American Indigenous Artists. August 27, 2010. <http://contemporarynativeartists.tumblr.com/post/1016307462/erica-lord-inupiaq-athabaskan>.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Create a self-portrait. Determine which artistic medium and the ways you want to represent your identity and experiences. Consider the relationship of words, objects and symbols with your image.

Give a title to your work of art. Through this chosen title, what meanings can you emphasize in your self-portrait? Write a full-page artist statement about your self-portrait.

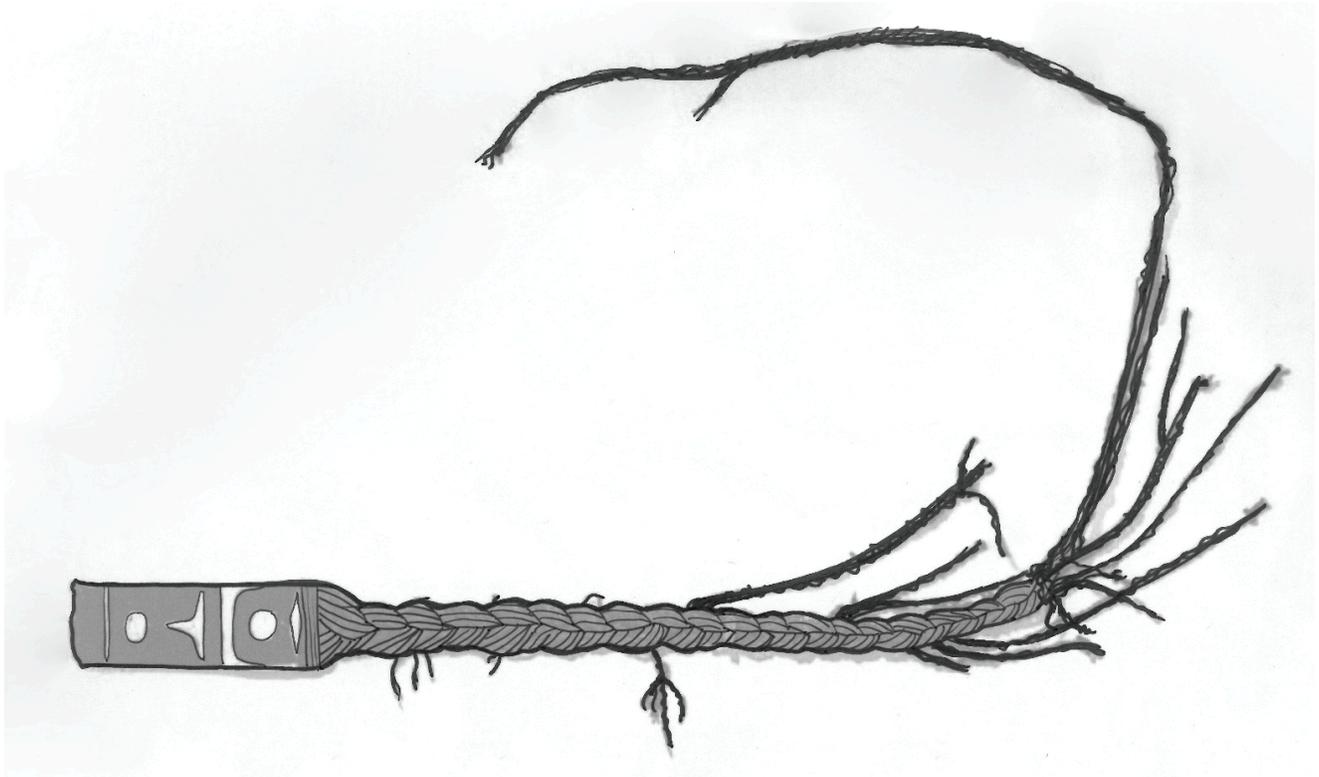




Sketch of photo of Ricky Tagaban

American
(b. 1990-) Juneau, Alaska

Artist Ricky Tagaban (L'eiw Yeil) is of Tlingit, L'uknax. ádi clan, Filipino, American Indian and Caucasian heritage. Tagaban combines Chilkat weaving with modern techniques and materials, merging his experiences with traditional practices. Traditional Chilkat weaving is taught and practiced by women, making Tagaban one of the only men trained in the art today. Tagaban's identification as 'two spirit,' someone who has both a male and female spirit in the same body, allows for this exception. Tagaban explores the boundaries of tradition by integrating modern subject matter in his weavings made of handspun fibers of wool and tree bark. His artworks address contemporary issues of sexuality and gender politics. Tagaban lives and works as an artist and drag performer in Juneau, Alaska.



Sketch of Ricky Tagaban's *Dominant Culture*, 2015, merino wool, leather, and dye, 2015.027.002

Dominant Culture is a whip with a rectangular black and white handle made of Chilkat weaving. Attached to this handle are woven strips of black leather, forming a braid and continuing into a tail at the end. The work references the historical connotation of the whip as a tool of dominance, such as one culture dominating another. *Dominant Culture* notions both personal and societal power struggles, and the taboos in Tlingit and mainstream culture. The hybridity of this work highlights Tagaban's respect for his traditional Indigenous culture while also challenging the norms of weaving and sexuality.

"As Alaska Native peoples we gather strength and are unified by sharing our own stories through words, art, and objects of the past. Until quite recently, Indigenous art was defined and described by non-indigenous people in museums, books, and galleries. This collection of artwork helps tell the story of what it means to be Alaska Native in a changing time, place, and perspective. Each object has a creator who has invested his or her life to expressing identity through art."²

² Anchorage Museum. "Our Story" Ricky Tagaban." YouTube. June 16, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zllTgjF6dY>.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Invite students to share their definitions of “dominant” and “culture.” Create a definition together. Ask students to reflect and share what they observe as the “dominant culture” in their lives—from their communities to popular culture. Write about what is considered conventional and atypical in their cultures today.

QUESTION FURTHER AND WRITE: *In what ways can we create a more inclusive environment to those who occupy the margins of the dominant culture of our communities?*

Dominant
(adjective)

[From Merriam-Webster] dom-i-nant
commanding, controlling, or prevailing over all others

Culture
(noun)

[From Merriam-Webster] cul-ture
the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time

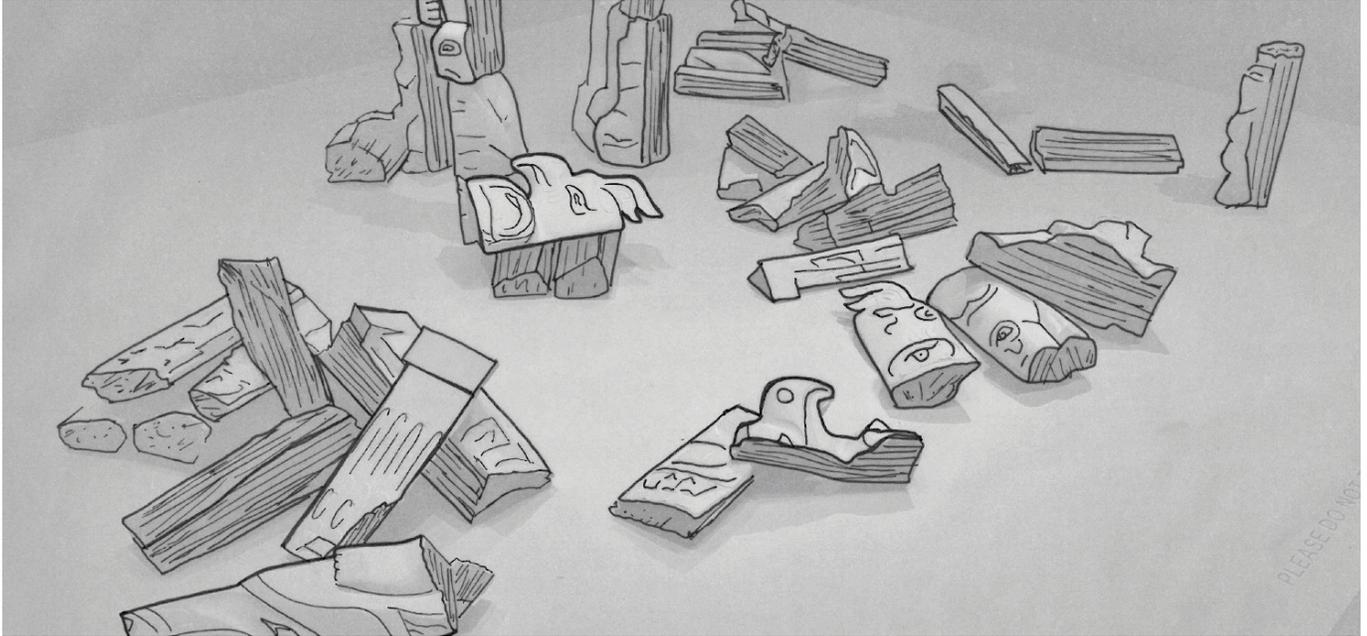




Sketch of photo of Nicholas Galanin

American
(b.1979-) Sitka, Alaska

Artist Nicholas Galanin (Yéil Ya-Tseen) is of Tlingit and UnangaX heritage. He connects past to present and traditional to contemporary through his art practice. Galanin learned traditional methods of wood-carving, metal and stone-working from elders in his community and also trained at art schools in England and New Zealand. Galanin combines materials and processes that reflect his heritage with contemporary methods and forms to create work in a variety of media: jewelry, sculpture, installation, video, performance and music. Through his interdisciplinary practice, Galanin examines the importance of claiming personal and cultural identities. Galanin preserves and passes on traditional knowledge and art forms while also expressing his individual perspective and creative approaches as a contemporary artist. Galanin lives in his birthplace Sitka, Alaska working as an artist, musician and arts instructor.



Sketch of Nicholas Galanin's *I think it goes like this?*, 2017, wood, paint and metal, 2012.8.1

The sculpture *I think it goes like this?* is made of a totem pole, painted white, chopped into pieces resembling firewood and arranged. Galanin purchased the Tlingit-style totem pole—created by an anonymous—non-Indigenous, Indonesian carver—from a wholesale market in Seattle. Similar styles of totem poles are made for tourists and sold in Alaska. This work comments on the appropriative market of Northwest coast style art as non-Indigenous artists mimic and profit from Indigenous artworks and cultures in their attempt to make it their own. In *I think it goes like this?* Galanin emphasizes issues of cultural appropriation, the act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own.

“The viewer, collector, or curators’ definition will often convey more about themselves than that of the “Native Artist.” In the past I have struggled with this title, though I now embrace my position as a contemporary indigenous artist with belief that some forms of resistance often carry equal amounts of persistence.”³

“Culture cannot be contained as it unfolds. My art enters this stream at many different points, looking backwards, looking forwards, generating its own sound and motion. I am inspired by generations of Tlingit creativity and contribute to this wealthy conversation through active curiosity. There is no room in this exploration for the tired prescriptions of the “Indian Art World” and its institutions. Through creating I assert my freedom.”⁴

³ Galanin, Nicholas. “Nicholas Galanin.” Artists | Beat Nation - Hip Hop as Indigenous Culture. April 21, 2009. <http://www.beatnation.org/nicholas-galanin.html>.

⁴ Exploring the Artistic Worlds of Nicholas Galanin.” Indian Country Media Network. August 25, 2017. <https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/travel/destinations/exploring-artistic-worlds-nicholas-galanin/>.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Invite students to research news and media that showcase examples of cultural appropriation. Summarize findings and present to class. Challenge students to ideate about ways to prevent cultural appropriation.

ACTIVITY 1

In much of his work, Nicholas Galanin uses objects, forms and designs connected to his cultural identity. Think about a design or object connected to your identity. Sketch that design or object below.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Invite students to reflect and write a narrative about the meanings of the design or object in their life. How do these symbols and objects represent your identity? What memories and stories are evoked by this design or object?

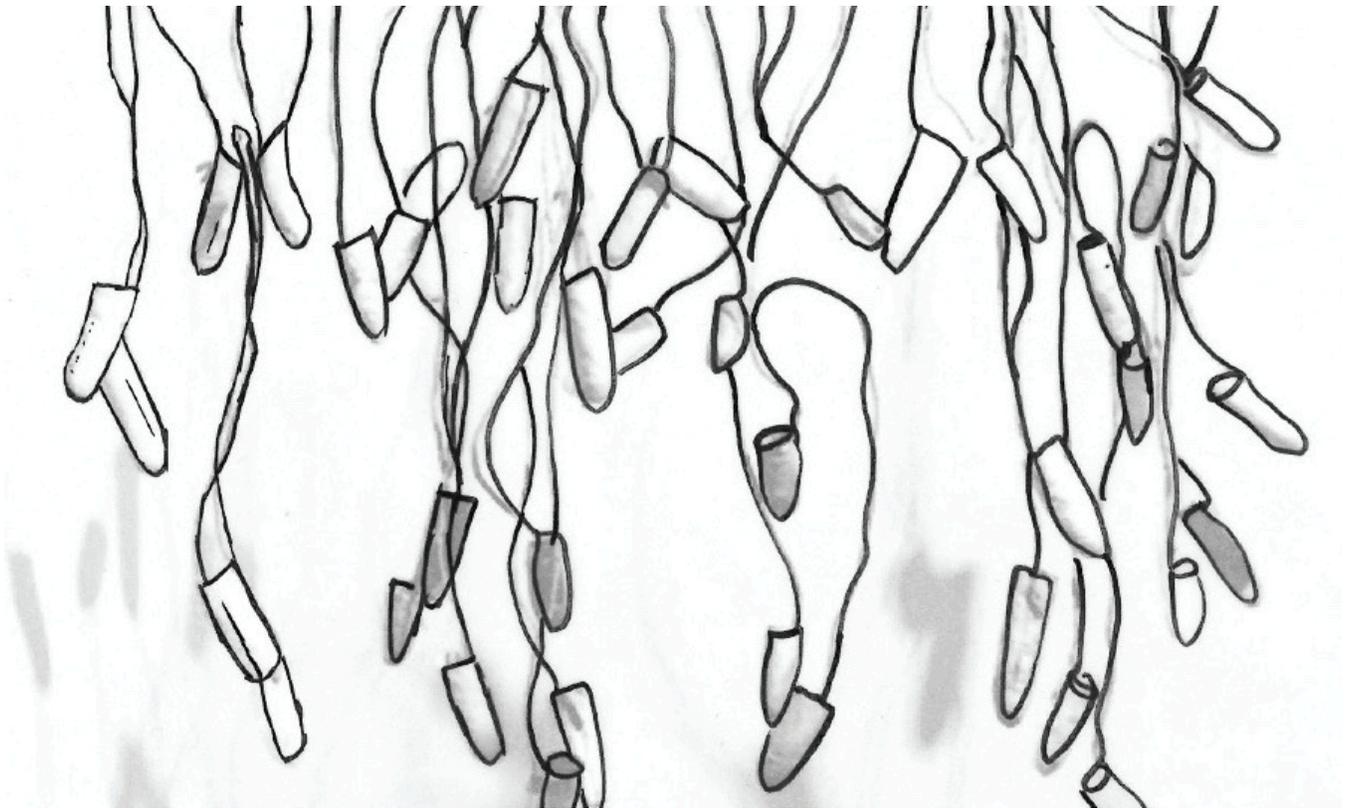




Sketch of photo of Sonya Kelliher-Combs

American
(b. 1969-) Bethel, Alaska

Artist Sonya Kelliher-Combs is of Iñupiaq, Athabascan, Irish, German, Dutch and Welsh heritage. Through mixed-media, painting and sculpture, Kelliher-Combs examines the importance of her traditional Alaska Native heritage, the values of elders and respect for Indigenous land. She uses traditional methods of her Iñupiaq and Athabascan heritage such as sewing with sinew to create images and forms that highlight contemporary issues including abuse, marginalization and the historical and struggles of Indigenous peoples. By combining synthetic, contemporary materials with organic materials and traditional practices, Kelliher-Combs explores intergenerational knowledge of making as well as how practices may change as methods are passed from individual to individual over time. Kelliher-Combs works as an artist and curator in Anchorage, Alaska.



Sketch of Sonya Kelliher-Combs's *Idiot Strings IV*, 2005, walrus stomach, rawhide, wool, hair, wax, wire, 2005.13.1ay

In *Idiot Strings IV*, twenty-five pairs of small, mitten or pouch-like forms connected to strings hang from the ceiling. Each form is hand-stitched and made of gut or hide. The stiff strings, made of braided fiber and wax, connect each pair of form to another. The paired forms reference the familiar practice of connecting mittens by strings so that individual mittens are not lost. This sculpture expresses ideas of maintaining connections between individuals. Kelliher-Combs created this work after the loss of three uncles to suicide. For the artist, the series relates to her community, family and history, referencing ideas of loss and preservation of culture through identity and connection.

“As an undergraduate student I fought against the stereotype and title of Alaska Native Artist. I refused to use those terms. At some point, years later, I understood that I could not and did not want to deny my cultural background and how essential it is to the work I create, although the cultures I come from are not the only inspiration I draw from. I do not like the limitation that these titles pose but like in many other fields I understand the need to list and categorize. I think of artists like Judy Chicago and the Feminist Art Movement and how this work fits in the larger field of Contemporary Art and hope that one day the art world opens to all that Contemporary Native Art has to offer and say.”⁵

⁵ Chela, Perley. “Sonya Kelliher-Combs - Iñupiaq, Athabascan.” Contemporary North American Indigenous Artists. March 14, 2012. <http://contemporarynativeartists.tumblr.com/post/19262685549/sonya-kelliher-combs-ifuipaq-athabascan>.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Reflect and identify issues that your community face today.

CONSIDER AND WRITE: *What is the cause of this issue? What action steps can we take to address this today? What resources do we need?* Share your reflections and resolutions in writing.

Create a work of art inspired by this issue. Write a full-page artist statement about the work of art.



In the poem *Idiot Strings - Catch and Release*, Kelliher-Combs writes about the connection of unbreakable strings that tie culture to past. After reading the poem below, write your own poem about your identity and how your identity is connected to your cultural background, family or community traditions.

IDIOT STRINGS -
CATCH AND RELEASE

wearing trim _____
a crest, a clan, an identifier _____
who you are _____
a pore _____
sifting, shifting _____
catching, releasing _____
pouring _____
secrets _____
hiding, guarding _____
gathering _____
scraps _____
the stuff one does not talk about _____
the three that got away _____
cords of regret _____
a tie that can not be cut _____
idiot strings _____
tattoo _____
marking, seaming _____
wearing, waiting _____
passage _____

— Sonya Kelliher-Combs⁶

⁶ Contemporary Native Artists. "Sonya Kelliher-Combs - Iñupiaq, Athabascan." Contemporary North American Indigenous Artists. March 14, 2012. <http://contemporarynativeartists.tumblr.com/post/19262685549/sonya-kelliher-combs-iñupiaq-athabascan>.





Sketch of photo of Thomas Chung

American
(b. 1988-) New Jersey

Artist Thomas Chung is ethnically Chinese and uses performance, photography, installation and painting to explore cultural anthropology, the study of human societies and the development of cultures. Through the combination of symbols, myths and stories in his works, Chung explores themes of spirituality, human experiences and representation. Chung addresses a range of contemporary issues and cultural roots of politics, spirituality, race, gender and social alienation. He creates artworks that draw upon cultural stereotypes, often combining them into at once humorous and unsettling images. Through studies of various human societies such as Hong Kong, New York, and the jungles of South America, Chung also comments on his lack of connection to his Chinese cultural heritage. Chung currently works as an artist and painting professor in Anchorage, Alaska.



Sketch of Thomas Chung's *Mother Nature Does Not Love You*, 2016, oil and acrylic paint, silk, wood, 2016.⁷

The painting *Mother Nature Does Not Love You* is a self-portrait of the artist Thomas Chung. Through form and use of specific imagery and iconography, the work addresses stereotypes about Alaska and identity. *Mother Nature Does Not Love You*, painted on an Asian-style fan, features Chung with crossed arms that each hold a gun pointed in the two polar bear's mouths. The work evokes the fantasies and imaginings of Alaska's mythical landscape by depicting a wide-open road leading to tall mountains and ferocious polar bears. His pose recalls martial arts films in which Asian cultural groups are typically stereotyped — thus addressing representations of Asians, Asian-Americans and its cultures in popular media. The fan's style also evokes stereotypical American-Chinese restaurant decorations. The Chinese text placed at the top of the fan translates to "Mother Nature Does Not Love You." Chung used Google translate for the text as he does not know the Chinese language, further making a comment on the complexity of assumptions and his experiences as an Asian-American. The artist's self-representation invites audiences to consider what biases they hold when viewing his work.

"I think that the biggest message that's left across these cultures is that great progress — some of the greatest progress — is through rule-breaking. That if everybody just did what they were told, nothing would ever emerge, nothing would ever change."⁷

⁷ Swenson, Ammon. TNL. September 10, 2017. <http://www.thenorthernlight.org/thomas-chungs-the-trickster-on-display-at-arc-gallery/>.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Research and identify stereotypes of particular social groups that appear in media representations (television, films, magazines, etc.). Invite students to critically analyze the media's representation of the group, and reflect on the effects of such representation.

CONSIDER FURTHER AND WRITE: *What ways can media be utilized to create positive impact on social change?*



ACTIVITY 2

Erica Lord, Ricky Tagaban, Nicholas Galanin, Thomas Chung and Sonya Kelliher-Combs use many words to identify themselves. These artists have also discussed the impact of the words others have used to describe their identities and their artworks.

Create a list of the words you use to describe the identities you claim for yourself. Then, create a list of all the words and ways others might describe you. The two lists may include the same or similar words as well as words that may be opposite or contrasting.

Consider how impressions of another person's identity is formed. How do biases and stereotypes shape perceptions? How might we cultivate more inclusive understanding of identities of others?

YOU:

OTHERS:



Terms

Cultural appropriation (seen in Galanin)	The act of taking or appropriating things from a culture that is not your own — especially without showing respect or understanding of the culture and heritage of said thing.
Cultural commodification (seen in Galanin)	Using a place's culture and artifacts to make a profit and meet the demand, often for the tourist market.
Social injustice (seen in introduction)	Situations in which unfair practices are being carried out by society, based upon inequality such as bias, stigma, discrimination, bigotry and racism.

FINAL NOTES AND DISCUSSION

Allow students time to reflect on what they have learned.

- What objects did they find interesting?
- What drew them to those objects?
- What surprised them or challenged them?
- What more would they like to learn?



For more teaching resources, visit anchoragemuseum.org/teachingresources

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HEARST foundations



ATWOOD
FOUNDATION



ALASKA
HUMANITIES
FORUM

RECOMMENDED READING

Books below are available at the Anchorage Public Library.

Preschool to Kindergarten

<i>Mary's Wild Winter Feast by Hannah Lindoff</i>	J-N LINDOFF
<i>Recess at 20 Below by Cindy Aillaud</i>	E-N 371.2424 AILLAUD

Lower Elementary (1st to 3rd grade)

<i>Tlingit Indians by Suzanne Williams</i>	J-N 979.8004972 WILLIAM
<i>The Girl Who Dreamed Only Geese, and other Tales of the Far North by Howard Norman</i>	J-N 398.2089971 NORMAN

Upper Elementary (4th to 6th grade)

<i>Native Alaskan String Figures by David Titus</i>	J-N 793.96 TITUS
<i>Hands on Alaska: Art Activities for All Ages by Yvonne Merrill</i>	J-N 745.5 MERRILL

Middle & High School

<i>Alaska's Secret Door by Judy Ferguson</i>	J-N 979.8 FERGUSO
<i>Finding Alaska: the Life and Art of Shannon Cartwright by Shannon Cartwright</i>	J-N 759.198 CARTWRI
<i>Children of the First People</i>	

Adult/teacher resources

<i>Tlingit Moon & Tide Teaching Resource : Elementary Level by Dolly Garza</i>	J-N 371.829 GARZA
<i>Aleut and Eskimo Art: Tradition and Innovation in South Alaska</i>	N 745.08997 RAY



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- Leborg, Christian. *Visual Grammar*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004.
- Yenawine, Philip. *Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2013.

WEB RESOURCES

- Anchorage Museum Resource Center anchagemuseum.org/collections/archives
- Anchorage Museum Collections onlinecollections.anchagemuseum.org
- Smithsonian National Museum of American History [Engaging Students with Primary Sources](#)

RELATED CONTENT AREAS

Alaska Standards for Visual Arts 9-12
C.E. Culturally-knowledgeable students demonstrate an awareness and appreciation of the relationships and processes of interaction of all elements in the world around them
VA:CN11a-HSAC a. Compare and connect contemporary and/or local art through the context of society, culture and history
VA:PR6a-HSP a. Analyze and describe the impact that an exhibition or collection has on personal awareness of social, cultural, or political beliefs and understandings
VA:PR6a-HSAC a. Make, explain, and justify connections between artists or artwork and social, cultural, and political history

Alaska Standards for History K-12
Hist.A5 understand that history is a narrative told in many voices and expresses various perspectives of historical experience
Hist.A6 know that cultural elements reflect the ideas and attitudes of a specific time and know how the cultural elements influence human interaction

Hist.A8 know that history is a bridge to understanding groups of people and an individual's relationship to society
Hist.A9 understand that history is a fundamental connection that unifies all fields of human understanding and endeavor

Alaska Standards for Culturally-Responsive Students
B. 1. acquire insights from other cultures without diminishing the integrity of their own;
B. 2. make effective use of the knowledge, skills and ways of knowing from their own cultural traditions to learn about the larger world in which they live
E.7. determine how cultural values and beliefs influence the interaction of people from different cultural backgrounds;
E. 8. Identify and appreciate who they are and their place in the world

Alaska Standards for Literature
W.9-10.2.a-f Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas,



concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content

W.9-10.3.a-e Use narrative writing to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences

W.9-10.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, style and features are appropriate to task, genre, purpose, and audience

W.11-12.2.a-f Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content

W.11-12.3.a-e Use narrative writing to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequence

