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# Identity

*noun* | iden•ti•ty

\ī-'den-tə-tē , ə- , -'de-nə- \

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## HOW TO EXPLORE:

**Slow down and look closely.** Each object has a story to tell.

**Ask questions.** Be curious about details.

**Make this journal yours.** Use the pages to draw, write, and note in your own way.

**Share.** Share with a friend, a family member, or mentor about your experience.



## DEFINITIONS

### **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.

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, 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.

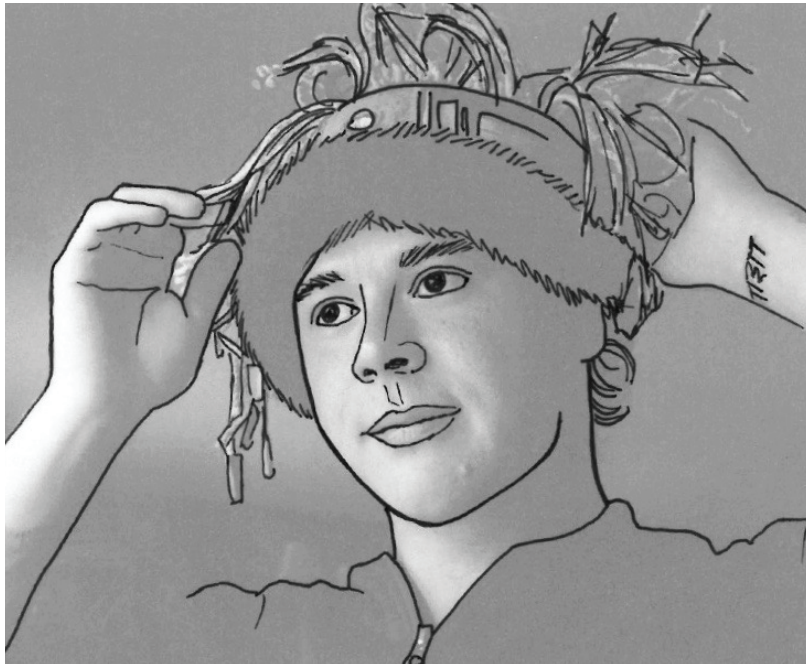






## RICKY TAGABAN / L'EIW YEIL

American  
(b. 1990-) Juneau, Alaska



Sketch of photo of Ricky Tagaban

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 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."*

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

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

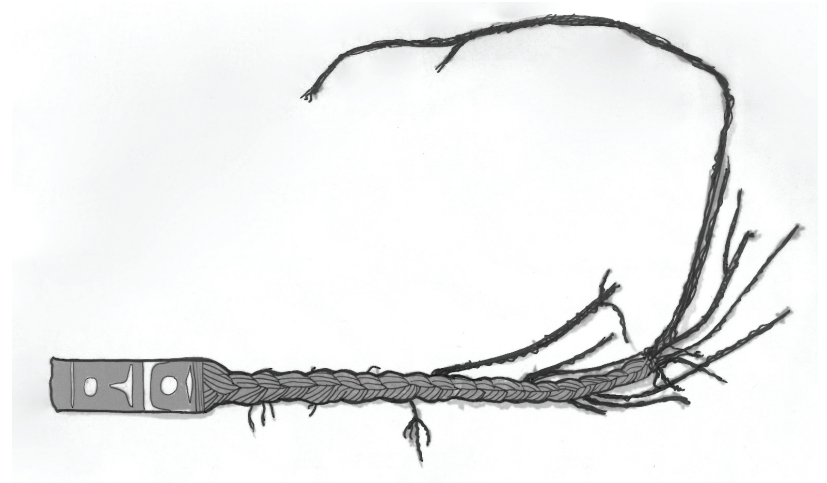
## THOMAS CHUNG

American  
(b. 1988-) New Jersey



Sketch of photo of Thomas Chung

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 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."*<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Anchorage Museum. "Our Story' Ricky Tagaban." YouTube. June 16, 2016. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zllTgjF6dY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zllTgjF6dY).



## NICHOLAS GALANIN / YÉIL YA-TSEEN

American  
(b.1979-) Sitka, Alaska



Sketch of photo of Nicholas Galanin

Artist Nicholas Galanin (Yéil Ya-Tseen) is of Tlingit and Unanga 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.

*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-Combs<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Contemporary Native Artists. "Sonya Kelliher-Combs - Ifiupiaq, Athabaskan." Contemporary North American Indigenous Artists. March 14, 2012. [contemporarynativeartists.tumblr.com/post/19262685549/sonya-kelliher-combs-ifiupiaq-athabaskan](https://contemporarynativeartists.tumblr.com/post/19262685549/sonya-kelliher-combs-ifiupiaq-athabaskan).

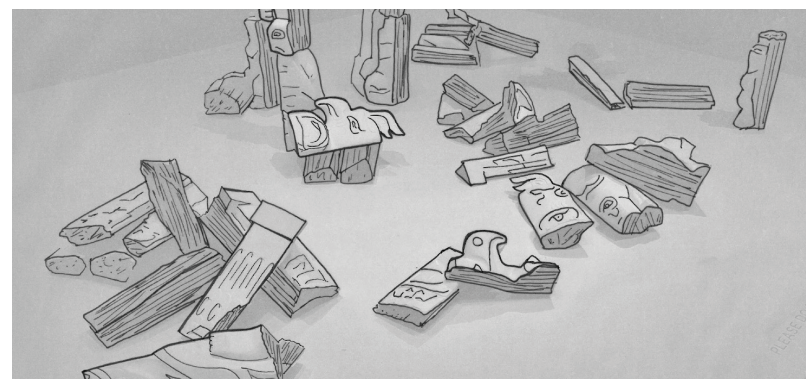


Sketch of Sonya Kelliher-Combs's *Idiot Strings IV*, 2005, walrus stomach, rawhide, wool, hair, wax, wire, 2005.13.1ay

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."<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> Chela, Perley. "Sonya Kelliher-Combs - Iñupiaq, Athabaskan." Contemporary North American Indigenous Artists. March 14, 2012. <http://contemporarynativeartists.tumblr.com/post/19262685549/sonya-kelliher-combs-iñupiaq-athabaskan>.



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.

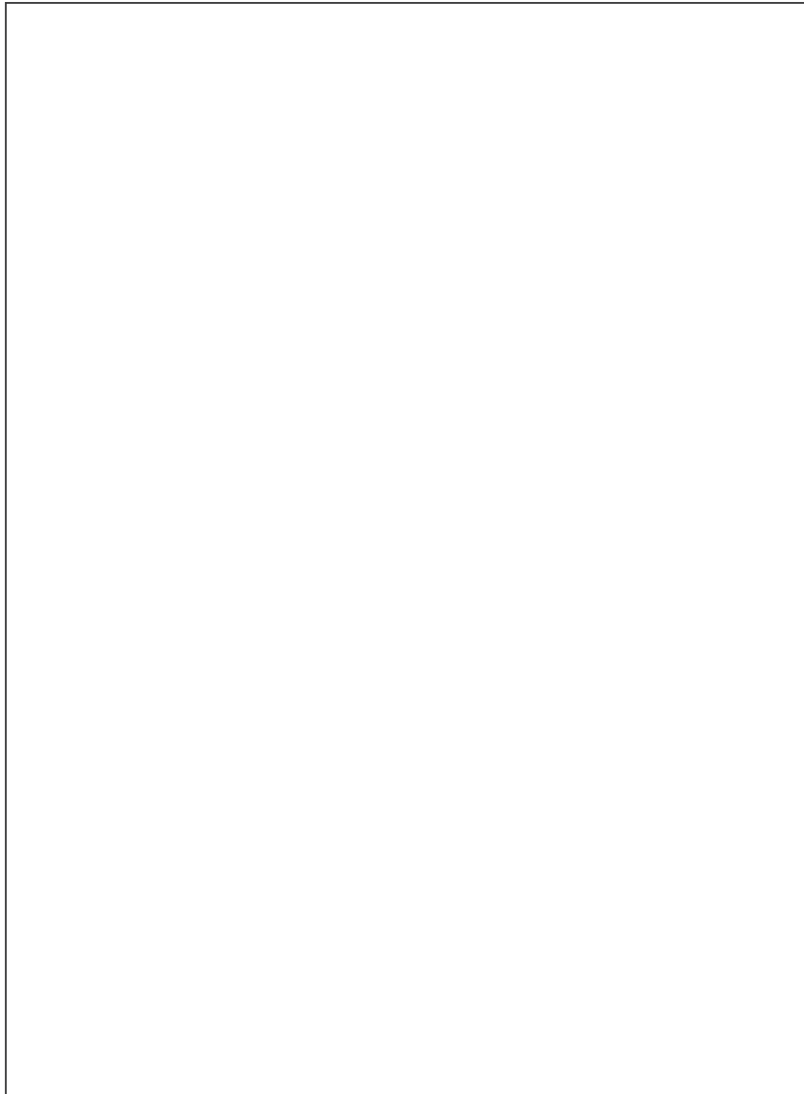
*"The viewer, collector, or curators' definition will often convey more about themselves than that of the "Native Artist." In the past I have struggled with this title, though I now embrace my position as a contemporary indigenous artist with belief that some forms of resistance often carry equal amounts of persistence."<sup>2</sup>*

*"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."<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> Galanin, Nicholas. "Nicholas Galanin." Artists | Beat Nation - Hip Hop as Indigenous Culture. April 21, 2009. [www.beatnation.org/nicholas-galanin.html](http://www.beatnation.org/nicholas-galanin.html).

<sup>3</sup> "Exploring the Artistic Worlds of Nicholas Galanin." Indian Country Media Network. August 25, 2017. [indiancountrymedianetwork.com/travel/destinations/exploring-artistic-worlds-nicholas-galanin/](http://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/travel/destinations/exploring-artistic-worlds-nicholas-galanin/).

*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.*



## SONYA KELLIHER-COMBS

American  
(b. 1969-) Bethel, Alaska



Sketch of photo of Sonya Kelliher-Combs

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.