

ANCHORAGE MUSEUM

HIGH SCHOOL: PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY



BRIAN ADAMS

MARIE REXFORD, 2016

Ink, paper
2018.7.13



ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Brian Adams uses medium-format photography to capture portraits of people and the environment. He is of Iñupiaq heritage and currently lives in Anchorage, Alaska.

Adams has traveled to many Arctic villages in Alaska to document life, culture, and society through portraits and stories of people and the landscape. The I AM INUIT series, supported by the Inuit Circumpolar Council-Alaska, seeks to connect the world with Alaskan Inuit (Iñupiaq, Yup'ik, Cup'ik, and St. Lawrence Island Yupik) and the Arctic through shared humanity. *Marie Rexford* is part of the I AM INUIT series. In this portrait, Marie Rexford of Kaktovik stands over *muktuk*—the blubber and skin of a bowhead whale. Successful whale hunts, in the spring and fall, require significant effort and are a cause for community gathering and celebration. Whales take many community members to break down, prepare, and store before polar bears arrive. Kaktovik, traditionally known as *Qaaktugvik*, is an Iñupiaq village located on the northern edge of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

STATEMENT FROM MARIE REXFORD

We are getting the *muktuk* ready to serve during Thanksgiving. We caught this whale on September 23rd. It is a bowhead whale. We are allowed three—our quota. We had lost one, so we had asked one of the villages if it was okay to have one of their whales, and we are thankful to Kivalina for giving up one of their whales. In the past we did that with them. We knew we would be short on *muktuk* if we had only two, so we asked one of the captains to ask them. Ours was 44.6 feet long.

I am the captain's wife, second in authority—actually, first from what I was told. When I found out, I said, you all know what to do, do your thing. My first crew I went on was my dad's crew. I was 16. Then I married Eddie. I used to go out with his uncle's crew, then he passed the crew down to Eddie, and that's when we found out how it really works... Eddie's uncle showed us how the authority works, how to do this and that. How to talk to new crew members, what not to do out there and what to expect from them. Sometimes you don't know about first timers—one of our first timers went out and he hollered out there, and that's not a good thing. We went right over the whale and he was like "AAH!" You're not supposed to holler when you're hunting! You keep quiet; you keep your eyes out for the blows. All eyes are always looking out because there is a whale out there somewhere. You will find it, and sometimes there is a bunch of them, all at once, one strike—we go for that one strike. We never caught two whales at a time before. I never want to see that happen because it will drain out everybody, trying to cut them up and get them put away before the polar bears get to them. There is 24-hour *Nanuk* patrol during whaling, because we've got polar bears waiting. You can see one of our pictures over there, one of our guys is bringing blubber to a polar bear that didn't want to go away, so they brought him some blubber to keep him away from the cutting.



ARTIST QUOTES

- “I am Alaskan. I am Iñupiat. I am a photographer. I am a citizen of the North and also the world. I am a son, a father, a friend. I am me. I am Alaskan.

I make photos to try to make sense of our fragmented, emulsified identities. I make photos of my neighbors, the parts of them define Alaska and therefore me also.

Alaska is the first love of my life, photography the second.”

- “Photography, to me, is a way to show someone the fraction of a second where there exists the truth of expression. The majority of my photographic undertakings have been portraiture, focusing on the ordinary and extraordinary, the serious and the playful, all the while attempting to capture each subject at his or her ‘best.’ It is my belief that when we are at our ‘bests’ we are the most capable of change, the most capable of positive growth. My photography seeks to portray the subjects when they are in this element and in a place of natural emotion, capturing what is the essence of their surroundings.

My work on Alaska Native villages extends beyond portraiture and seeks to document decaying surroundings in some of the most beautiful places I’ve ever seen. Instead of focusing on mere destruction, I choose to show the evidences of life in the villages: a lone basketball hoop awaiting the summer in a world of ice, a proud mother with her baby on a wintery walk, a well-intentioned civilization at the edge of the earth crumbling into a tumultuous and frighteningly beautiful sea. Just like beauty, ugliness exists in the eye of the beholder; survival is never only beautiful, it is a struggle as well.”

- “Alaska is a big state with a relatively small road system, islands, and no physical connection to the contiguous forty-eight states of the U.S. As a result, the state is incredibly diverse and, in my ways, polarized.

As a half-Iñupiat who grew up first in the mountain town of Girdwood, Alaska, and then Alaska’s biggest city, Anchorage, I have had the opportunity to be exposed to the variety of cultures that have come to define what it means to be Alaskan to me.”

KEY TERMS

<i>Landscape</i>	An area of land and collection of landforms; culturally this may include the resources found in that area and the interaction of those resources with human inhabitants; the term may also reference a visual representation of an area of land. As a term in the visual arts, landscape is a type or genre of subject depicting scenes of nature, such as mountains and seascapes, and urban sceneries that may feature people, animals, or architecture. Landscape is derived from the Dutch word of <i>landschap</i>
<i>Lifestyle</i>	Habits, values, and ways of daily life
<i>Muktuk</i>	Iñupiaq term for traditional meal of whale skin and blubber
<i>Nanuk</i>	Iñupiaq term for polar bear
<i>Photograph</i>	An image made using a camera
<i>Portrait</i>	A representation of a person or a group of people, usually in painting, photograph, drawing, sculpture, etc



INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE

Begin this art lesson by looking and discussing about the artwork together for 15 minutes.

CLOSE-LOOKING Invite students to look closely, quietly at the artwork.

OBSERVE Invite students to share observations about the artwork.

ASK

- *What is going on in this artwork?*
- *Describe the perspective in this artwork.*
- *Describe the sensory experience you imagine of this place. What do you see, smell, taste, touch, hear?*
- *What colors do you see?*
- *What moods does the colors create?*
- *What symbols and objects do you see?*
- *What does it remind you of?*
- *What more do you see?*
- *What more can you find?*

DISCUSS USE [20 Questions Deck](#) for more group discussion questions about the artwork.

LEARN MORE

- Artist Website brianadams.photoshelter.com/index
- I Am Inuit Project [instagram.com/iainuit](https://www.instagram.com/iainuit)
- Adams, Brian. *I Am Alaskan*. University of Alaska Press, 2013.



PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY

TIME FRAME 45+ minutes

MATERIALS Digital or smartphone camera
Printer

DIRECTIONS Share the quote below the students:
“I am a photographer, and as such, I take in the world one frame at a time. My subjects become parts of who I am. Parts of who I am become my subjects.”
– Brian Adams

1. With a parent or guardian, create a photographic portrait of someone you admire from your school or community using a digital or smartphone camera. As the photographer, consider how you want to represent the portrait’s subject. Consider your perspective. *How you are taking the photograph? How are you capturing the subject’s pose? The setting?*

Interview the subject and document their story. *Who are you? What do you like? What do you like most about Alaska? How has living in Alaska shaped or influenced you?*

Write a short biography about the person and provide a quote from the interview.

2. Facilitator will print student’s photographs and arrange classroom for an art showcase.

[5 mins] Invite students to participate in a gallery walk to see their classmate’s projects.

[5 mins] Students present about their artwork and share about the portrait and the person they admire.

ASSESSMENT

Students will be assessed based on their participation in the discussion, completion of the project, and presentation to class.

For more teaching resources, visit anchagemuseum.org/teachingresources

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