

# ANCHORAGE MUSEUM

EXTRA TOUGH: RECLAIMING IDENTITY THROUGH ART  
GRADES 7-12



**ALISON BREMNER**

***WAT'SA WITH A PEARL EARRING, 2014***

Ink, paper  
2019.007.004

**ERICA LORD**

***NATIVE LOOKING, 2005***

Ink, paper  
2012.008.001

## ACTIVITY AT A GLANCE

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In this activity, learn more about the artworks *Wat'sa with a Pearl Earring* by Alison Bremner and *Native Looking* by Erica Lord. Return several times to look closely at the artworks while learning more about the artists who created these pieces. Examine the artists' opinions, processes, and inspirations. Then, create an artwork inspired by these artworks.



### WAT'SA WITH A PEARL EARRING

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Begin by looking closely at the *Wat'sa with a Pearl Earring* by Alison Bremner.

If investigating the artwork with another person, use the questions below to guide your discussions. If working alone, consider recording thoughts on paper:

#### CLOSE-LOOKING

Look closely, quietly at the artwork for a few minutes.

#### OBSERVE

Share your observations about the artwork or record your initial thoughts

#### ASK

- *What do I notice about the artwork*
- *What colors and materials does the artist use?*
- *What moods do the artworks create?*
- *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

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### FROM THE EXTRA TOUGH EXHIBITION

Tlingit artist Alison Bremner's *Wat'sa with a Pearl Earring* is a digital collage of Vermeer's *Girl With a Pearl Earring* - a canonical work of Western art history - and a Tsimshian otter mask. In Tsimshian mythology, land otters would often take the form of beautiful women, appearing to unsuspecting men to steal them away. By juxtaposing these two artworks, Bremner pushes back against the male gaze while playfully commenting on the exclusion of Northwest Coast art from the art historical cannon.

### ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Alison O. Bremner (b. 1989) is a Tlingit artist born and raised in Southeast Alaska. Bremner is believed to be the first Tlingit woman to carve and raise a totem pole and has studied under father and son master artists David R. Boxley and David A. Boxley. Bremner uses a variety of mediums in her artwork to challenge assumptions and expectations of Tlingit art, including: painting, woodcarving, regalia and digital collage. Her work subtly subverts the narratives of a patriarchal Western tradition and reflects on contemporary Tlingit experiences and Indigenous identity. In addition to her work as an artist, Bremner is committed to Tlingit language revitalization efforts and creates pieces for traditional and ceremonial uses.

## ARTIST QUOTES

“Culture is not stagnant. Through contact and the technological revolution Tlingit culture is constantly adapting, observing, and searching for its place in the world.”

“*Wat’sa with a Pearl Earring* examines the exclusion of Northwest Coast art from the canon of “great art” in mainstream art history. It also speaks to the male gaze present in many famous paintings of women. ‘Wat’sa is Sm’algyax for land otter. Land otters would take the form of a beautiful woman and appear to unsuspecting men to steal them away.”



## NATIVE LOOKING

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Look closely at *Native Looking* by Erica Lord.

If investigating the artwork with another person, use the questions below to guide discussions. If working alone, consider recording thoughts on paper:

### CLOSE-LOOKING

Look closely, quietly at the artwork for a few minutes.

### OBSERVE

Share your observations about the artwork or record your initial thoughts

### ASK

- *What do I notice about the artwork*
- *What colors and materials does the artist use?*
- *What moods do the artworks create?*
- *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

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### FROM THE EXHIBITION

Artists use self-portraiture to question oppressive norms surrounding how women are seen, categorized, and expected to behave. Works in this section draw attention to, and push back against, constricting social expectations and norms.

This photograph is part of a series titled *The Tanning Project*, which addresses issues of racial and cultural identity, exoticification of mixed-race people, power, and contemporary feminism. In *Native-Looking*, Athabaskan/Iñupiaq/European/Japanese artist Erica Lord emphasizes the impossibility of fitting within colonial stereotypes. She sees her work as part of “...an evolution of new ways to demonstrate cultural identity beyond the polar ideas that exist within a strictly two-worlds discourse.”

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Erica Lord (b, 1978) creates work inspired and informed by her Iñupiaq, Athabascan, 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.

## ARTIST QUOTES

“My culture and idea of home began in Alaska, moved and adopted Michigan, and ever since, has existed somewhere in between, amongst, and within a mixed cultural legacy. That legacy and my identity stem from many families: Athabascan, Iñupiaq, Finnish, Swedish, English, and Japanese. My origins include a lineage that I was born into, and a land I was removed from. My cultural limbo and precarious balances have molded my identity and fueled my art. Because of circumstance and chance, I became an emigrant from each home, adapting with each move. Constant moving and rootlessness are part of the American experience, but my near perpetual movement is an experience that lies within a larger history: the Native diaspora.”

“Self-portraiture- whether through my writing or my images- began sort of by default, and grew to be more intentional over time. At first I wanted to document Native life and people, from a modern, and internal perspective. So when I began taking photos at IAIA, I had many friends around me to take photos of. Then, I moved back to Carleton College, and there, I was the only Native student. So, I started using myself as a stand in. I became more and more comfortable in front of the camera. When I took photos of other people, I worried about representation issues, and the responsibility that comes with taking and owning an image of another person. With myself, I had control over the image, I didn’t have a problem using myself as a medium to translate the concept or story through. So, whether it was photography or writing, I felt more comfortable writing from a direct first-person perspective. I felt I couldn’t speak for other people, but I could think, and process, and discuss experience through myself, through my experience. Then I was being honest, and open, and I think people can relate to that. You are right in your question, I often write, or make images to better understand myself, but my experiences. I think I have often done this in order to reflect and make sense of a particular experience, emotion, or idea. It’s a way of working it out.”

## COMPARING THEMES

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### MATERIALS

Pencil  
Paper torn into small pieces or sticky notes

### DIRECTIONS

1. Return to *Wat’sa with a Pearl Earring*. Using what you have learned about Alison Bremner, make new observations about the artwork. Record one observation on each sticky note or small piece of paper.
2. Repeat this process with *Native Looking* using what you know about artist Erica Lord.
3. Compare your thoughts about the pair of artworks. If working with another person, discuss and compare your thoughts. Ask yourselves: *how do the themes of the artworks interrelate? Why might these two artists and their works have been chosen to be displayed together?*



## LEARN MORE

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### FROM THE ARTISTS

“The idea of home becomes complicated and this is reflected in my work; I have formed multiple homes throughout this diaspora, each of them holding significance and meaning to me. This repetition of displacement, making homes, leaving and returning home cyclically, leads to a feeling of leading several lives, the idea of one’s self begins to divide into multiple perspectives. The qualities that tend to define my identity create an overlapping and blurring of borders; the multiplicity of selves becomes indivisible, not split or partial, not singular, but a flexible amalgamation of many. Mixed experiences differ with each generation; the description of one split between two worlds is a simplification of an idea that is much larger and complex. My experience may be multiple or mixed, but I am not incomplete in any location. My art explores the next wave of cultural examination, an evolution of new ways to demonstrate cultural identity beyond the polar ideas that exist within a strictly two-worlds discourse. Through my art, I hope to create dialogue that will help to redefine our selves, our communities, and our beliefs.” -Erica Lord

“The government-regulated definition of “Indian,” combined with visual reinforcement of what Indian is supposed to look like, creates a nearly unachievable level of Indian-ness and leaves very small room for mixed-race acceptance. The blood-quantum regulations create a questioning of cultural authenticity that is always underlying. The visual example parallels the quantum issue in that it is easier to subscribe to a simple idea of Indian rather than working through the complex reality that exists. The difference exists in the levels of Indian-ness: The United States government initiated a minimum blood quantum of one-quarter to be nationally recognized as Native. Beginning in the 1990’s many tribes began to shed the U.S. government’s initial blood quantum approach, so tribal recognition may have a lower quantum requirement or use other methods such as lineal descent. Unfortunately, to be nationally recognized, one must comply with tribal, state, and national standards, despite their tribal criterion. The issue bothers me for many reasons- primarily, I feel the quantum requirements create more anxiety than an inclusionary community. The strange and almost surreal reality is that our blood, our “pedigree” is being recorded and monitored by a government agency. It makes one conscious of blood quantum when choosing a mate, when having a child- areas of life that this issue should never enter. I guess it makes me sad that even though I will pass my culture and values on, my child-if or when I have one- will not be considered legally Native, at least not by government standards. And that bothers me on a very deep level.” -Erica Lord

**READ:** Interview with Erica Lord from [Contemporary North American Indigenous Artists Blog](#)

**LISTEN:** National Public Radio Code Switch podcast [So What Exactly Is Blood Quantum?](#)

**A NOTE ABOUT TERMINOLOGY** The Anchorage Museum refrains from using the terms Eskimo, Indian and Aleut and instead uses language identified by the Alaska Native language groups. Due to these words’ complicated history, the Anchorage Museum does not use these terms. However, it is important to note that Indigenous communities and individuals are at a different place of healing and self-identity.

Erica Lord utilizes the term ‘Indian’ in her work and in her quotes to emphasize the fact that the United States federal government still uses the term to legally refer to Indigenous peoples in North America, as illustrated by the Indian Act, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and more.





## FROM THE EXTRA TOUGH EXHIBITION

Alaska has been shaped for millennia by the labor and love of Iñupiat, Yup'ik, Athabascan, Unangan, Alutiiq, Tlingit, Tsimshian, and Haida Indigenous women. Many Alaska Native cultural groups are matrilineal, meaning kinship practices prioritize the mother's bloodlines.

Prior to colonization, gender was viewed differently – men and women were seen as equal complimentary and interdependent members of society. Across most Alaska Native cultures, men primarily hunted large game and created tools, boats, and utensils while women gathered plants and berries, fished, preserved and prepared food, and sewed clothing. However, collective survival required cross-training and proficiency in a variety of tasks. Both men and women learned basic skills of sewing, hunting, building, cooking, gathering, and childrearing.

## ART MAKING ACTIVITY

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### MATERIALS

Camera  
Props  
Paper  
Pencil

### DIRECTIONS

1. Reflect on your own identity and how you wish to project that identity into the world. On a sheet of paper, brainstorm a list of qualities that make up your identity.
2. Choose props which serve to illustrate your identity. Look at the list you created and choose props to include in your photo that will illustrate each aspect of your identity. Examples of props include: clothing or regalia, sports gear, jewelry, materials used in your hobbies, a favorite book, and more.
3. Identify a backdrop location inside or outside that helps to illustrate your identity. Arrange your props in a way that showcases the various aspects of your identity. Set your device in the location it will sit to take your photo in order to get a visual of the layout. You may need rearrange objects.
4. Experiment with the lighting to get yourself and the objects in your photo lit to the desired effect. Consider how the lighting might impact the mood of the image.
5. Take your photo. You may need to set a timer on your device so you can place yourself within the frame. It may take a few tries to get your pose synced with the camera.
6. If desired, experiment with digital photo editing tools to create your final image.
7. Consider how you would wish to present your identity in conjunction with the artwork. Create a label to accompany your photo as if it were being displayed in a museum exhibition on self-identity.



## ABOUT EXTRA TOUGH

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Extra Tough is an exhibition that celebrates and upholds the stories and perspectives of Northern women. It also portrays the traditional and non-traditional roles and contributions of women throughout Alaska's history. In planning, we struggled with the challenge of reifying a simplistic male-female gender binary by focusing primarily on female-identified stories. While some nonbinary perspectives are represented, we acknowledge the need for future exhibitions focusing on the growing diversity of perspectives and voices across the gender spectrum. This exhibition is a first step towards expanding the androcentric view of Alaska and the North. We hope it will open the door for future conversations.

## KEY TERMS

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<i>Blood quantum</i>	a construct designed to determine an individual's Indigenous ancestry and implemented by the United States government; this percentage is used to determine which people of Indigenous descent qualify for government services, such as education and healthcare, and was designed to facilitate the eventual vanishing of these governmental services; original members enrolled into the tribe were assumed to have fully Indigenous blood quantum, and current blood quantum is calculated using an individual's ancestry; upon reaching a threshold of non-Indigenous blood, the federal government no longer considers an individual Indigenous and will no longer provide services agreed upon in historical government treaties; this threshold is different for various services and legal protections
<i>Identity</i>	a combination of characteristics which determine part or all of how a person sees themselves or are represented to others
<i>Portrait</i>	a representation of a person or a group of people, usually in painting, photograph, drawing, sculpture
<i>Patriarchy</i>	a society or government in which men primarily hold power with little to no participation available for women.
<i>Regalia</i>	clothing, jewelry, or other adornment worn for important or ceremonial occasions

