

UNGALAQ (WHEN STAKES COME LOOSE)

MAUREEN GRUBEN





Catalogue of the exhibition UNGALAQ (When Stakes Come Loose)
by Maureen Gruben

grunt gallery
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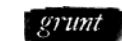
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THE SMELL OF THE LAND WHEN YOU CLIMB IBYUQ PINGO

I want to start with this gratitude: As a visitor to the Inuvialuit territories and the homelands of the Gruben family, I was honoured to witness the strength and beauty of your lands and communities. This extraordinary opportunity to visit Maureen Gruben's home is a debt to the artist's generosity, because to be invited into someone's homeland is a gift, producing an awareness and resonance that contextualizes an artist's body of work in new ways. To understand the rolling land, the sea, the beluga whale and whitefish and relationship to traditional foods is such a true gift it is still moving in my memory. Of course it is important to contextualize not just this amazing experience of the land but how it cradles the work in this exhibition. I came to know of Maureen's work through a colleague, Peter Morin, and I had curated a series of works—*Moosehide #1,2,3* (2015)—for a previous exhibition at the Kamloops Art Gallery during my curatorial residency there (2015-2015). In those works Gruben collaborated with traditional hide tanners and an important part of the art was the proliferation of the smell of smoke-tanned hide within the gallery. It is this seeping of senses that I now come to relate to the materiality and context of her practice as embedded in the Inuvialuit landscape and translated with elegance to her home in Coast Salish territories.

These ways of working, hosting and visiting Indigenous communities other than our own have been a focus of my curatorial and artistic inquiry for a number of years since I returned to my home in Secwepemculecw. When all the city galleries, funding, resource and infrastructure fell away to the reality of small and rural Indian reservations in BC, I was searching for relevance and connection in my work. I wanted to work more directly with artists who were invested in and relating to their lands and cultures without the mediation of the gallery, to go directly to the land and to enact and problematize the ways we—as Indigenous artists from other territories showing in city galleries which are built on unacknowledged Indigenous lands—navigate cities. How do we give back to the land? How do we relate to another's territory without the burden of colonial history that unmaps our belonging?

In working through these ideas I took on an ambitious curatorial project for *LandMarks2017/Repéres2017*, which was commissioning artists for works situated in or related to Canada's National Parks. I was already working with another artist and park site, which was co-managed by a First Nations community, as many newer Northern parks have important collaborative relationships with Indigenous groups. Maureen at this time was back home for her regular summer visit. As I was thinking through my *LandMarks2017/Repéres2017* projects, she was simultaneously (but unaware of my other curatorial work in this area) texting me images from her visit—skinned polar bear heads atop plywood smoke houses, bear bones harvested from the town dump and other images of her home community in Tuktoyaktuk, NWT. I was struck by the images and kept sending her many replies, asking about what she was up to. Maureen invited me to come visit her, as I was preparing another site visit to Old Crow in the Yukon for *LandMarks2017/Repéres2017*.

With that invitation I did a quick Google search to see if there were interesting National Parks sites near Tuktoyaktuk and I found the Pingo National Landmark. Part of my curatorial practice is being open to my intuition, and I was flooded: We had just spent a considerable time arriving at the new title of *LandMarks2017/Repéres2017* and Maureen was within viewing distance of the pingos, which are the only designated 'Landmark' in the Canadian Parks system. I started planning my trip. With that trip and that visit to the pingos, my heart was with the land, and I felt that heart within the materials, precision, and humble elegance of Maureen's aesthetic. Her materials are informed by both traditional and contemporary traces: transparent PVC becomes a reference to the glassy ice; red borders echo rick-rack and delta trim patterning on parkas; and polar bear fur is worked in different ways that remind us of the power of this animal and its ubiquity with the North. This exhibition is all of that—years of Indigenous women's experience: the amazing work of Kyra Kordoski, who writes for this catalogue and accompanied and supported Maureen in much of the work; deep earth time and ecology; advanced skill and knowledge of materials; refined aesthetics and the smell of the land. I feel that when

TANIA WILLARD

I reflect on Maureen’s work now, I will always re-experience the smell of the land in the first few steps I took as we climbed lbyuq, one of the Canadian Landmark pingos, in summer 2016. Mixing in the air I smell the new green growth, the Labrador tea and cranberry leaves underfoot and the ocean around us. Maybe we could even smell the ice that is permanently at the core of these hills that rise out of the ocean. I also smell the less fragrant bones drying in the sun on Maureen’s porch, the beluga whale carcass on the spit of land, beluga whale intestines harvested from community whale fishers, and fresh and dried whitefish. I feel that this relating to the land-base of Maureen’s Inuvialuit heritage has enriched my experience of her work. I don’t think you need to take that journey to feel this within her work, and I humbly thank her, Kyra, the land and Inuvialuit people for all the beauty they bring to the world, the fierce beauty, the scars of trauma beauty, the power beauty and the complex balance of humanity and the land.

Quyannainni and Kukstemc

SHIFT; RISE: MAUREEN GRUBEN'S UNGALAQ

There are times when life's patterns feel fixed. There was a time, for example, when the behaviour of seasons felt almost as predictable as the smooth, cyclical expansion and contraction of daylight hours throughout the year. Change happens different ways. It can be imperceptible; it can be violent. There are also periods in between these extremes when everyday predictability melts away, when what is familiar palpably shifts. Things may become lost in these periods. They can also be found. Tuktoyaktuk elders describe Ungalaq, the west wind, as a phenomenon that amplifies rising tides, softening the ground and rearranging features of hamlet and landscape by releasing things which the earth had secured, from tethered dogs to entire smoke houses. The works in *UNGALAQ*, Maureen Gruben's first solo show, draw on traditions-based skills to join diverse materials together in possibly unexpected but deeply intuitive and uninhibited ways. They reveal fluctuating dynamics and transitional states in which multiple possibilities remain open.

In *Communion Thin* (2016), polar bear guard hairs are pressed and stitched between small rectangles of clear industrial vinyl that are connected with hand-tied red threads. They are suspended in a large array that hovers nearly transparent in the air, catching the light, as a sheet of ice might sit, might eventually break away and float over water. The title, *Communion Thin*, lightly drapes ecclesiastical associations over the work, making it reminiscent of veils worn to first communions, or even the pale ritual wafers of bread that are interspersed with sips of red wine. The piece presents intersections of delicate visual beauty and immense, potentially threatening power such as can be found within the history of the Catholic Church or—though very differently—in an ocean blanketed with rapidly thinning ice. Touching on undertones of risk, it incorporates dual modes of protection, the vinyl having been produced to serve similar aims as the fur: to guard as much as possible against the potential ferocity of the elements.

The polar bear fur used to create the large-scale linear pattern of *Message* (2015) was once, like the fur in *Communion Thin*, part of a beloved rug. In reutilizing it, Gruben upholds Inuvialuit values of using

as much of a harvested animal as possible, for as long as possible. A polar bear rug might hold meaning for a particular person or family by embodying connections to a place or to personal stories and histories. In *Message*, Gruben's proficiency with materials developed over a lifetime of sewing and working with local hides and furs becomes a conduit for opening up communicative agency to the animal, the nanuq, itself. The Morse code SOS, 'written' out in guard hairs invokes, certainly, recent circulated images of polar bears that are dirty and desperately skinny, starving because the sea ice that was their traditional hunting ground at a specific time of year has disappeared. But *Message* doesn't rely on dramatic representational footage and statistics. Rather, sitting between abstraction and syntax, it uses a restrained eloquence that admits viewers to the urgency of a real, material presence. It also admits them to a unique and beautiful manifestation of an interspecies relationship—now threatened—that had existed in a strong and stable balance for thousands of years.

Gestation (2016) uses the guard hairs and underfur of the polar bear each in distinct ways, creating a relational dynamic between psychologies of actively protecting and of being protected. The careful, precise construction of the felt circle that tightly binds guard hairs into tufts that radiate outwards in defined lines contrasts technically and aesthetically with the intuitive, improvisational approach to the dense underfur, which has been bundled and coaxed into soft, nascent forms. The circle is big enough to encompass a clutch of the fuzzy nodules. It is also big enough to encircle a fully grown human, bringing gestational inferences to an adult scale, encouraging viewers to engage emotionally with an embryonic state of being that is at once intensely generative and entirely passive—one in which you could have no control and yet still feel entirely safe. Just as easily, a viewer can connect to an innate desire to protect what is, in fundamental respects, vulnerable and utterly subject to contingent environmental conditions. Here, the material presence of fur supports recognition that infancy and parenthood, vulnerability and strength, are cross-species states of being. This can lead in turn to considerations of how, as sentient

KYRA KORDOSKI

beings, we might on a basic level desire both the power to protect and nurture, and the security of knowing we are protected and being nurtured.

The intensity of this dynamic is thrown into particular urgency by *POPs* (2012), one of Gruben's most explicit engagements with environmental threats to date. The piece draws on the words of two poems, one of Gruben's own and one from a performance she witnessed decades ago in Nome, Alaska, by a poet named Wilma Brown. Perforated lettering drilled into two long, narrow Plexiglas plates reads: "The medicine from my body is poisoning our future ancestors the meat here has turned to glass." POPs—persistent organic pollutants—are a unique concern in the Arctic. Numerous pesticides and toxic industrial chemicals have a high degree of resistance to breakdown so when they are released into the atmosphere they will travel vast distances on warm and buoyant air currents until they reach the Arctic where cold air creates a 'sink', trapping them and causing an accumulation in the ocean and land. From there, they enter and work their way up local food chains. The benefits of breast milk for infants is a deep knowledge, and its specific benefits for their developing immune systems have been well researched and reported. Arctic mothers have to contend with the awareness that their traditional diet has laced their breast milk with dangerous toxins. The clear Plexiglas echoes the glass invoked in the text. The notion of a mouthful of glass vividly articulates what may be for a long time and until serious illness gradually develops, a physically imperceptible but psychologically oppressive anxiety. The Plexiglas also recalls ice; the perforated lettering, perhaps even drilled ice-fishing holes. On the one hand this seems to present a contrast between natural and synthetic elements, as Plexiglas is persistent in a way that ice, as the world is increasingly coming to terms with, is not. But it also speaks again to values of resourcefulness, of employing all of the materials at one's disposal to subsist, create, communicate, and cause change.

When Tuktoyaktuk's coastline softens, the earth also often releases artifacts from past generations—hand carved tools, buttons, beads—as well as bones. As fragments of what was

once a physical whole, bones are a very particular, potent form of memory. Gruben's small *Memory Bones* (2016) are themselves constructed of fragments: little sections of vinyl tubing; bits of moose hide employed to secure the ends; clutches of tiny beads, safe inside. They draw connections between skeletal structures as architectures of living bodies and memories as foundational structures of living cultures. The comparison speaks to the depth of loss that is affected by the abrupt severing of familial relationships and stories, by the dissolving of once-communal memories that can only be fully communicated through specific languages. But Gruben's memory bones also lovingly gesture towards how much can be recovered and rebuilt from even the smallest available scrap. The hint of a smell or sound, a tiny piece of an object, can carry with it a vast array of associations, an entire dimension of self and community. Beads are creative tools; each individual Memory Bone contains within it potential grains of storytelling—generative means of strengthening, adorning, celebrating and expanding the fabric of a culture.

Stitching My Landscape (2017) is Gruben's first large-scale work of land art and it is deeply tied to memory, family, and healing. The core visual elements of red material stretched across ice are embedded in a recollection Gruben has of her brother harvesting seal: during the processing a long, vivid, red string of fresh gut was flung out taut against the white snow. Consisting of 111 ice holes connected with red broadcloth, *Stitching My Landscape* extends for nearly a thousand feet. It was installed April 23rd, 2017 on an expanse of the frozen ocean surrounding Ibyuq Pingo. Pingos are ice-filled hills created by permafrost that have functioned as navigational aids and hunting viewpoints for generations of Inuvialuit people. Ibyuq is part of the Pingo Canadian National Landmark and is a defining feature of the horizon southwest of Tuktoyaktuk. It is estimated to be at least 1000 years old and features deeply in local cultural memory: Mangilaluk, a man whom Tuktoyaktuk elders refer to as the community's first chief, passed on the story of three polar bears who came to Ibyuq Pingo looking for women to be their mothers.

Ibyuq has been a site of profound comfort and healing throughout Gruben's life. In 1997, she spent a night on Ibyuq with a friend. They had crossed the channel that winds around its base on a driftwood raft lashed together with a rope her father had given to her specifically for that purpose. That night, she used a needle and a thread coated in charcoal from their campfire to hand-stitch a traditional Inuvialuit facial tattoo that would ultimately consist of three lines on her chin: one mark for each of her sons. Thirty years later, in stitching the surrounding sea ice with red broadcloth, the artist has expanded an intimate, personal moment out into a communal, global context via entwined sculptural and performative events.

Gruben prepared over 300 metres of broadcloth in a labour intensive method that involved splitting it in half by hand and rolling it into large balls. Preparing the site took a small team of community members. The artist's solo performative process of rolling the cloth across the ice from hole to hole was an act of endurance and of careful devotion as her body physically generated the familiar pattern both of raw stitching and the beautifully worked delta trim that adorns Inuvialuit drum dancing parkas. Aerial views reveal the sheer scale of the piece. They also reveal stunning marks in the snow: footprints, and sled and skidoo tracks. These are the usually invisible traces left by the artist's process, by everyone who was involved in supporting the process, and by those who visited the piece after it was created. The background audio for the film is the sound of a traditional chisel that had belonged to Gruben's father, working the ice. It has been slowed down such that each moment of contact becomes reminiscent of a heartbeat.

Exhibition curator Tania Willard has written about the piece: "In skills-based arts the act of making something beautiful also becomes about valuing what you have, the gifts and harvests from the land. Principles of hard work and relationships to the environment are expressed in traditional art forms." Drawing on a simple aesthetic of white ice and red lines that zigzag across the landscape, the work simultaneously evokes suggestions of traditional clothing and means of subsistence; the strength of family and community; and the potential for healing, and for being healed by, the land."



Communion Thin
2016
Polar bear guard hair, vinyl, cotton thread
70" X 76"



Message
2015
Polar bear guard hair, cotton thread, black interface
180" X 24"



Gestation (opposite page)
2016
Polar bear guard hair, silicone wrap, polar bear underfur, white glue, thread
53" diameter

Memory Bones
2016
Plastic tubing, beads, moosehide
4" (each piece)



Stitching My Landscape
2017
Broadcloth, ice
12' X 850' (approx.)



Stitching My Landscape
2017
Broadcloth, ice
12' X 850' (approx.)



Stitching My Landscape (detail)
2017
Broadcloth, ice,
12' X 850' (approx.)



Stitching My Landscape (still)
2017
Colour High-definition video
5:45 min

BIOGRAPHIES

ARTIST BIO

Maureen Gruben was born in Tuktoyaktuk, NWT. She studied at Kelowna Okanagan College of Fine Arts (Diploma in Fine Arts, 1990), the En'owkin Centre in Penticton (Diploma in Fine Arts and Creative Writing, 2000 and Certificate in Indigenous Political Development & Leadership, 2001), and University of Victoria (BFA, 2012). She has been recognized by Kelowna s En'owkin Centre with both their Eliza Jane Maracle Award (1998/99) and their Overall Achievement Award (1999/2000). In 2011 she was awarded the Elizabeth Valentine Prangnell Scholarship Award from the University of Victoria. Gruben has most recently exhibited in the group show Blink at University of Victoria (2012) and *Custom Made* at Kamloops Art Gallery (2015).

CURATOR BIOS

Tania Willard, Secwepemc Nation, works within the shifting ideas around contemporary and traditional, often working with bodies of knowledge and skills that are conceptually linked to her interest in intersections between Aboriginal and other cultures. Willard has been a curator in residence with grunt gallery and Kamloops Art Gallery. Willard's curatorial work includes the national touring exhibition *Beat Nation: Art Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture*, co-curated with Kathleen Ritter at the Vancouver Art Gallery. In 2016 Willard received the Award for Curatorial Excellence in Contemporary Art from the Hnatyshyn Foundation. Willard's selected recent curatorial work includes *Unceded Territories: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Nanitch: Historical BC photography* and *BUSH gallery* as well as the upcoming *LandMarks2017/Repères 2017*.

Born in Whitehorse, YT, Kyra Kordoski is now based in Victoria, BC. For the past year she has been working with Maureen Gruben as an artist assistant and writer, and has had the great privilege of spending time at Maureen's home in Tuktoyuktuk as a guest on multiple visits. Prior to this she completed an MA in Cultural Studies at Leeds University with a dissertation on visual strategies of social resistance, and an MFA in Art Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London. While in London she organized and participated in art writing events at Whitechapel Gallery, X Marks the Bokship, and Goldsmiths University. Her writing has been published in various arts publications, including *C Magazine*, *White Fungus*, *BOMB* and *Art Handler Magazine*. She is currently also working to document artworks created as part of *LandMarks2017/ Repères 2017*.

