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Sonya Kelliher-Combs by Louis Bury

Indigenous artworks engaged with ideas of containment.

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(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Slip-with-Red-Quill-Sonya-Kelliher-Combs1_2023-10-29-122942_tkil.jpg)

Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *Slip with Red Quill 1–4*, 2023, acrylic polymer, seal intestine, nylon thread, cotton fabric, steel pin. Photo by Brian Wallace. Courtesy of Alaska State Museum.

Sonya Kelliher-Combs's sculptures address weighty subjects with a lightness that feels like grace. For example, her *Idiot Strings* installations (2001–5; 2012–13)—paper-thin mitten sculptures, strung together in pairs, that dangle across the gallery like a mobile—began as memorials to relatives of hers who took their own lives. *Remnants* (2016) mummifies actual animal body parts, from walrus bones to seal intestines, within translucent resin rectangles. *Mark, Polar Bear* (2019) defamiliarizes a US flag by overlaying it with scruffy polar bear fur. While such themes and materials may sound grisly, Kelliher-Combs's handiwork imbues her art with tenderness.

This capacity for complexity derives in part from Kelliher-Combs's experience as an Alaskan native of Athabascan, Iñupiaq, and German descent. Her work's delicate materials and hybrid forms make no absolutist aesthetic or political claims. Instead, she understands craft as an ongoing communal activity, renewed or not by each generation, rather than as a static, fetishized tradition. This approach allows her to acknowledge intergenerational traumas while also affirming the importance of intergenerational knowledge and all of the wisdom, beauty, and joy that persists.

—Louis Bury

Louis Bury
How did you start working with animal viscera and furs as artistic materials?

Sonya Kelliher-Combs
When I moved to Arizona for grad school, I was homesick for Alaska, so I brought with me a bunch of natural materials, such as a sealskin and a walrus stomach, and hung them on my residence wall. At the time, I was making paintings about Indigenous identity and colonialism, but the wall hangings started to creep into the work.

LB
How so?

SK-C
I first tried recreating them synthetically by exhibiting, say, an actual walrus stomach alongside a painting of one. From there, I started playing with the contrast between synthetic and natural materials, sometimes submerging the latter in plastic. I also made artworks based around the idea of sitting with your family and learning how to work with scraps of natural material.

LB
How do you understand your work in relation to domestic labor?

SK-C
Anybody who's lived in a small, rural community knows that you can't do everything on your own. You have to come together and help each other. For example, a friend of mine was recently studying for her acupuncture certification, and we brought her dinners when she was at her

busiest. When I fabricate my *Idiot Strings*, which are braided twine sculptures, I need another person to help me hold the twine. I'm sometimes envious of artists who have assistants, but I'd also rather make work by hanging out with friends and buying them pizza and wine.

LB

An assistant implies hierarchical relations while the communal relations you just described involve mutual care. What's it like working far from major art centers?

SK-C

I moved back to Alaska in 1998, and soon after had my first solo show at the Anchorage Museum. I really wanted it reviewed in a national magazine and was willing to pay for a critic's hotel and airfare. I phoned a critic covering the US Northwest, and he told me, "There is no art in Alaska. You need to move somewhere else."

LB

Yikes.

SK-C

The world has changed a lot since then! Regardless, being here is important for my artwork and quality of life.

LB

In what ways?

SK-C

I feel like something would be lost if I lived in New York or LA. Creating space for others is important to me. I do other things for money here, such as arts administration and grassroots organizing, that impact my own artwork. It's also important that I not feel beholden to a specific art market, particularly because Indigenous artists can be pigeonholed into making certain types of work.

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Credible-Small-Secrets-Sonya-Kelliher-Combs2_2023-10-29-122938_kcls.jpg)

Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *Credible, Small Secrets*, 2022–23, printed cotton fabric, nylon thread, human hair, glass bead, walrus stomach, reindeer and sheep rawhide, acrylic polymer, steel pin. Photo by Brian Wallace. Courtesy of Alaska State Museum.

LB

How might those dynamics manifest in the interplay of concealment and disclosure in your work? You've made several series of pouch-shaped forms that have the word *secrets* in the title.

SK-C

Now the mystery will be gone!

LB

You don't have to answer if you don't want to!

SK-C

Those works' walrus tusk shape is a form found in Indigenous parkas. I adapted the form to look more like a pouch because I was thinking about the concept of baggage. Secrets vary, but everybody carries some around in both literal and metaphorical ways. For example, I learned that the Catholic Church has acknowledged thirty-five allegations of abuse in Alaskan communities since the 1930s. But many more instances went unacknowledged, with the offending priests quietly relocated. The abuses and the silences have roots in the Canadian Indian residential school system, which was run by the church.

LB

It strikes me that your work addresses these horrifying histories in a quieter aesthetic register.

SK-C

Some of my work contains direct disclosures, but more of it is about the process of discovery. Some subjects need to be revealed slowly because they're so painful. In my series *Credible, Small Secrets* (2022), each pouch is indexed to an accusation of abuse against a clergyman. But it took me twenty years to get to a place where I felt I could address the subject in such a direct way. The story of church abuse is part of my family's story but not my own story. I had to figure out how to process it and not just bluntly declare the facts.

LB

That's such a poignant answer. Representing intergenerational trauma can be emotionally and ethically fraught.

SK-C

There are artists I love that put everything out there in the work.

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Credible-II-Sonya-Kelliher-Combs3_2023-10-29-122940_eagm.jpg)

Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *Credible II*, 2022, acrylic polymer, paper, human hair. Photo by Brian Wallace. Courtesy of Alaska State Museum.

LB

Much of your work negotiates literal or metaphorical boundaries. The intestinal lining of a deceased animal, for example, once served as a bodily boundary, albeit a permeable one.

SK-C

I'm fascinated by ideas of containment in positive and negative senses of the term. Containment is what Western cultures did to Indigenous cultures in awful ways, but containment can also reference something precious or safe. I'm currently working on a series about modern artifacts while thinking about who has the power to make and define precious objects. The series has similarities to my *Remnant* (2016–) pieces, which address what remains when the world changes so quickly.

LB

Such concerns also touch on conceptions of purity and authenticity in Indigenous cultures.

SK-C

Who defines what's pure? I think about this a lot because I often work within preexisting forms while also creating my own.

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Visceral-Verity-Legacy-Identity-Sonya-Kelliher-Combs4_2023-10-29-122941_zrvm.jpg)

Installation view of Sonya Kelliher-Combs: *Visceral: Verity, Legacy, Identity*, 2023. Alaska State Museum. Photo by Brian Wallace. Courtesy of Alaska State Museum.

LB

What happens when forms intended for one context—like a parka pouch—are moved to a fine-art context?

SK-C

At the Alaska State Museum, I currently have a solo exhibition, *Visceral: Verity*, on view alongside objects made out of gut from their collection. Both installations address similar issues in different ways. Sometimes I wish I could make purely functional objects, but artworks can foster dialogue about difficult issues in ways other kinds of work can't.

LB

To what extent does working this way serve a reparative function?

SK-C

That's not a motivation for me as an individual. The work is first and foremost for others who might encounter it and be prompted to consider the topic. It has felt most meaningful when my work has allowed other people, especially those from younger generations, to feel they could speak about things that are hard to discuss. Earlier in my career, access to Indigenous historical objects was a big issue. Today, museums offer more engagement with such objects to study and share them; but that wasn't always the case.

LB

Historically, when Indigenous cultures have been studied by non-Natives, it's often been through an anthropological lens.

SK-C

My exhibition at the state museum has three separate components that form a conceptual whole. There's an exhibition of my own artwork, an exhibition of gut parkas from the collection, and an exhibition for education and engagement. Some visitors mistakenly believe I made the parkas myself, but I'm proud to have curated them. It's the largest selection of gut parkas ever displayed at once—over twenty of them—and they're beautiful objects that should be accessible. With the artist Susan Erickson, I once had the opportunity to visit the National Museum of the American Indian's storage facility, and I remember Susie was grief-stricken because it felt like it was our relatives in those boxes. And the objects inside are treated with chemicals as though they'd been poisoned. It's a difficult subject because who knows if we'd even have those objects otherwise.

LB

This reminds me of what you were saying earlier about purity. Every person and culture has a complicated relationship to their own past, but the complexities can be more or less legible.

SK-C

Absolutely. I didn't grow up knowing either of my family's Indigenous languages, Athabascan or Iñupiaq; but my niece, who's about twenty-five years younger than me, was able to take classes in them. That's an exciting development. The past can feel hurtful, but it can feel even more hurtful to

be alienated from it. It's taken me a long time to understand that. Going forward, I want to work toward solutions, to do something positive and kind every day, to create opportunities for others and not just think of myself first.

Sonya Kelliher-Combs: The Visceral Trilogy (https://lam.alaska.gov/visceral) *is on view at the Alaska State Museum in Juneau, Alaska, until mid-October;* Sonya Kelliher-Combs: Mark (https://www.tureen.info/exhibitions/sonya-kelliher-combs) *is a two-venue exhibition on view at Tureen in Dallas until October 14 and STARS in Los Angeles until November 4; Kelliher-Combs's work can also be seen in the group exhibition* Young Elder (https://jamesfuentes.com/exhibitions/young-elder) *at James Fuentes in New York City until October 14.*

Louis Bury is the author of *The Way Things Go* (punctum books, 2023) and *Exercises in Criticism* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2015). He is Associate Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY, and contributes regularly to *Hyperallergic* and *Art in America*.

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