

Sonya Kelliher-Combs in "Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor"

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Image of the artist's studio, 2008

Shoebbox containing sculptural forms made of walrus stomach and thread

Photo taken during Kathleen Ash-Milby's visit to Sonya Kelliher-Combs's studio
(found at blog.nmai.si.edu/main/2009/12/index.html)

On Saturday March 6th the National Museum of the American Indian, George Gustav Heye Center in New York City opened the first in its two-part exhibition *Hide: Skin as Material and Metaphor*. The purpose of this presentation is to highlight the work of Native American artists who utilize materials that include or reference skin as a means for investigating personal and cultural phenomena. The chosen works reveal and conceal, both literally and symbolically, using (according to the NMAI exhibition announcement) "both the material and concept of skin as a

metaphor for widespread issues surrounding race, representation, as well as personal, historical and environmental trauma and perseverance.” Part I (March 6, 2010–August 1, 2010) features installations by Sonya Kelliher-Combs (Inupiaq/Athabaskan) and Nadia Myre (Anishinaabe). Part II (September 4, 2010–January 16, 2011) will include works by Michael Belmore (Ojibway) and photographers Arthur Renwick (Haisla), KC Adams (Métis), Terrance Houle (Blood), Rosalie Favell (Cree Métis), and Sarah Sense (Chitimacha/Choctaw).

The only artist in the two part series who makes explicit use of animal parts is Sonya Kelliher-Combs, and the first rooms of the exhibit are dedicated to her pieces that use a combination of synthetic and organic materials to create two and three-dimensional sculptural works. In an introductory catalogue essay entitled “*Hide*,” Kathleen Ash-Milby considers the Native history of hide and its multiple connotations: “For Native people, skin encompasses an entire universe of meaning. Our own skin functions as a canvas that we can inscribe with messages about our identity, or use as a shield.... Animal skin as a material, used for protection and artistic expression, also has a long history within Native culture. Whether considering hide or Native skin, skin is a deeply symbolic reminder of historical misrepresentation, exploitation, and racial politics.” [1] The use of hide as a material for personal expression goes back to time immemorial, however its perishable nature has resulted in a scant material record. In the past decade there has been a resurgence of artistic interest in the use of animals and their parts. Not since Victorian times has popular culture—or at least its fringes—been so amenable to blood, guts, and taxidermy, and the near celebrity status of artists such Sarina Brewer and Damien Hirst attests to this. In contrast to those works that are dependent upon their macabre aspect, Kelliher-Combs’s combination of synthetic and organic elements creates an interplay between perception and materiality, leaving viewers to question which aspects of her pieces are genuine, which improvisation, and if it is necessary to differentiate between the two.



Sonya Kelliher-Combs, *Small Secrets* (detail), 2009.

Walrus stomach, human hair, glass bead, nylon thread

Variable dimensions, Collection of the artist

Photo by Kevin G. Smith

(found at http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/hide/sonya_002.cfm)

Kelliher-Combs uses viscera, skin, pelts and their synthetic proxies not to draw attention to themselves as materials, but as integrated means to realize her work aesthetically and conceptually. *Small Secrets* (2009), is a horizontal arrangement of nineteen tiny tusk, finger, or phallic shaped pouches that echo a form found repeatedly in both her *Walrus Family Portraits* and her larger scale installation *Common Thread*. These tiny sculptures are made of walrus gut, and finely worked with combinations of glass beads, human hair and nylon thread, creating an impression of desiccated sea creatures neatly pinned to a gallery wall. Nearly all of these thimble sized sculptures sprout “hair” from their rims or tips, and are filled with an enigmatic presence that far outweighs their actual size.

The Cream Walrus Family Portrait 1 and 2 are two of Kelliher-Combs’s most compelling paintings in the exhibition, and were created using a backdrop of tinted acrylic polymer stretched on wooden frames. Paper, walrus stomach, porcupine quills, and a red metallic thread are worked into the surfaces, lending them a quality of natural accretion. The artist began creating these series (of which there are a number in different colors) using walrus gut, but soon realized its limitation, and

turned to acrylic polymer as a versatile substitute that shared the transparency and malleability of gut, without displaying its fragility. Kelliher-Combs has chosen to work with this synthetic material opposed to the more “authentic” gut for her paintings because once treated, the polymer displays nearly all the preferable qualities of gut, while allowing her to better control surface texture and transparency.

The Kelliher-Combs pieces on exhibit at NMAI prove her work to be one of the most exciting bodies among the new generation of artists using animal parts as component materials. Her cultural affiliation has made it possible to source many of these ethically from friends on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska who practice subsistence hunting, and she complicates tradition through the discreet handling of time-honored and synthetic mediums to create a body of work that simultaneously venerates and transcends materiality.

Sonya Kelliher-Combs was born in Bethel, Alaska, in 1969. She holds a bachelor of fine arts from the University of Alaska Fairbanks, and a master of fine arts from Arizona State University, Tempe. Kelliher-Combs has been awarded a number of honors including the Anchorage, Alaska, Mayor’s Individual Artist Award, the Arctic Education Foundation Academic Excellence Award, the Best of Show honor at the Visual Arts Center of Alaska’s Vision of New Eyes exhibition, and the Eiteljorg Museum Fellowship.

For more on the NMAI exhibit, click [here](#)

Notes:

1. *Hide: Skin as Material Metaphor*. New York: National Museum of the American Indian, 2010.