

Maureen Gruben. QULLIQ: In Darkness, Light

Clint Burnham

Number 120, Fall 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/88826ac>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Burnham, C. (2018). Review of [Maureen Gruben. QULLIQ: In Darkness, Light]. *Espace*, (120), 86–87.

Maureen Gruben. *QULLIQ: In Darkness, Light*

Clint Burnham

**LIBBY LESHGOLD GALLERY
VANCOUVER
FEBRUARY 2 –
APRIL 22, 2018**



In Mini Aodla Freeman's 1978 Inuit autobiography, *Life Among the Qallunaat* ("qallunaat" is the Inuktitut word for white people), she offers an etymology for a word commonly and offensively used to describe the Inuit: "To me the word 'Eskimo' does not mean anything. It is an Indian word—'escheemau'—that qallunaat tried to say at one time. It is a Cree word: 'Escee,' yagh, sickening, can't stand it; 'mau,' human. At first encounter, Cree Indians got sick at the sight of the Inuit eating raw meat (and Indians do not eat raw meat). Today, the Inuit still eat raw meat and it's still yam yam as far as I am concerned." Of course, since that fateful encounter between the Cree and the Inuit so many generations ago, the term "Eskimo" has metastasized in global culture, and become not only an offensive sports team's name (the Edmonton Eskimos) and ice cream snacks, but also shows up on fashion labels or even on Urban Dictionary. Willie Thrasher, whose 1980s song *Eskimo Named Johnny* was a minor hit, more recently has released a song with the refrain "Don't call me Eskimo just because I play in an Inuit band."

Why am I thinking about this? Because of the Inuit artist Maureen Gruben's new exhibition, *QULLIQ: In Darkness, Light* at Libby Leshgold Gallery. What is most compelling is how Gruben's work is situated between traditional, land-based materials such as beluga whale intestines, moose hide, polar bear, rabbit, wolf fur and whale bones and the contemporary industrial or consumer materials of reflective tape, aluminum sheeting, bubble wrap and zap straps. Compartmented to Jessica Stockholder, who relies on consumer goods as her raw material, and Brian Jungen, who takes the same materials and subjects them to a *détournement*—Gruben is closer to the latter. And so in one corner of the exhibition space is *Consumed* (2017), a work in which we see strips of beluga intestine, with "found objects"—a credit card, a condom wrapper, a label for an "Eskimo" sweater—sewn inside. Another piece, *Fresh Artifacts* (2017), reverses the logic: now a fur stretcher that Gruben's father uses to stretch fox furs for tanning is preserved inside resin. The references to the fur economy are political and not only autobiographical: a large sculpture made of fur (real and acrylic), *FUK* (2018), is in the shape of a cock and balls and has "#SEALFIE" carved into the fur, a reference to Inuit singer Tanya Tagaq's social media critique of anti-fur protests. Of course, the fur trade is a part of the global fashion economy, and not merely a matter of traditional Inuit practices: it is to Gruben's credit that even an apparently vulgar work like *FUK* unsettles such questions.

The most monumental piece in *QULLIQ* is the six-minute video *Stitching My Landscape* (2017) that curator Tania Willard first presented as part of the *LandMarks/Repères* series of works in Canada's National Parks. The video has already been shown in Gruben's first solo exhibition, *UNGALLAQ*, at the grunt gallery in Vancouver. Willard also curated *UNGALLAQ* and describes her coming to Gruben's work as a combination of Indigenous curatorial practice and digital-age serendipity. Planning a visit to Gruben's summer home in Tuktoyaktuk, Willard writes in an essay, "I did a quick Google search to see if there were interesting National Parks sites near Tuktoyaktuk and ... found the Pingo National Landmark. Part of my curatorial practice is being open to my intuition and I was floored." Willard's practice works because it meets Gruben's similarly intuitive, associative, outlook.

I offer this curatorial digression also as a way of situating what is so remarkable about the video in the *QULLIQ* exhibition. In the video, we see Gruben drilling dozens of holes in the ice in a truly spectacular

Arctic landscape. She then unrolls an immense ball of red fabric, moving from one hole to another. As the camera rises into the sky, we see a striking pattern on the ice, an enormous zigzag that seems both a scar and a stitch, ornament on cloth and mark on the land. The video's title offers one suggested viewpoint: the artist is healing her landscape, stitching it back together after a century of extractive colonialism. A century during which Inuit people were removed from the land—by forced relocation, by residential schools—all the better for resource companies or military sovereignty to triumph. Gruben's artwork is thus a rejoinder to that colonial history, a healing of that wound. But a healing that perhaps is only virtual?

Two cinematic elements of *Stitching My Landscape* complicate this reading; the drone-view of the camera, and the video's place in the gallery. We are perhaps only now becoming used to thinking of drones as agents of empire (Obama was the first drone-war president) but also of capital (the fantasy of drones delivering parcels for Amazon); here, however, is a use of the drone for neither power nor profit, but instead as an artistic riposte to same. Gruben's lens accomplishes this through its complicity with the gaze of the eye in the sky. The drone's eye view, that is, reveals not only the pattern of the red fabric on the landscape, but also tire treads, Skidoo tracks, and other marks in the snow and ice. Indeed, the ice and snow look rather more blue than white—can this video be said to be a critique of the qallunaat fantasy of the “great white north?”

Then, a video in an art gallery is seldom watched in a linear fashion as in a cinema with its fixed schedule—rather, it is recursive, you walk in at whatever point, leave at whatever point. In this temporal loop, *Stitching My Landscape* is less a “post”-colonial artwork than one that interrupts the colonial everyday. Or a post-colonial artwork not in the sense that colonialism is “over” in Canada, for it surely is not, but in the sense that the interruption Gruben's art occasions means we, the viewers, have to re-adjust our thinking. And there is little nostalgia in Gruben's exhibition: rather, we witness the antagonistic relations at work between the materials, between the land and its manufactured invasion. Like Mini Aodla Freeman's *Life Among the Qallunaat*, a “reverse ethnography” of her sojourn among exotic white people, Maureen Gruben's art unsettles the gallery, inverts our expectations, and unsettles, indeed, the “white cube” that is the Canadian art world.

Clint Burnham is a professor of English at Simon Fraser University. He has recently written on the work of Rodney Graham, Ron Terada and Walker Evans. The title of his latest book is *Does the Internet Have an Unconscious? Slavoj Žižek and Digital Culture* (Bloomsbury, 2018).

Hédonisme délirant. NSPSLL! de Ludovic Boney

Marie Perrault

ACTION ART ACTUEL
SAINT-JEAN-SUR-RICHELIEU
15 MARS –
21 AVRIL 2018

Connu pour ses œuvres monumentales réalisées dans le contexte de l'application de la Politique d'intégration des arts à l'architecture¹, Ludovic Boney complète ici un cycle de présentations en galerie échelonnées sur la dernière année, ses premières expositions individuelles à ce jour. Présentée au centre Action Art Actuel d'artistes de Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, l'installation *NSPSLL!*, acronyme de la consigne parentale « ne sautez pas sur les lits », s'inscrit dans la continuité de *Afin d'éviter tous ces nœuds*, exposée à Oboro en avril 2017, et de *Sous les chatons*, présentée à la Galerie Michel Guimont en décembre de la même année.

Inspirée par l'espace d'Oboro et ses planchers qui craquent, *Afin d'éviter tous ces nœuds* consiste en une plate-forme de bois que traverse un sentier étroit bordé de 2000 tiges verticales dont les têtes s'ornent de fanions de sacs de plastique. La flexibilité des planches soutenues seulement à leurs extrémités permet que l'ensemble s'anime lorsqu'on y déambule, en faisant valser cette prairie métallique comme les herbes d'un pré. Le craquement du bois, le cliquetis des tiges qui s'entrechoquent et le froissement des sacs composent alors une trame sonore en phase avec notre déambulation. En contraste avec l'alignement des lattes du plancher, les planches de cette passerelle rappellent l'arrangement de terres cultivées vues à vol d'oiseau. Ce geste sculptural monumental s'appréhende aussi en retrait comme un paysage que l'on contemple et que d'autres animent devant nous.

Présentée à la galerie Michel Guimont durant la période des Fêtes, *Sous les chatons* se déploie comme une nuée de 15 000 fleurs de bouleau en céramique suspendues au plafond. La quantité impressionnante d'éléments forme une canopée enveloppante à laquelle répond une couronne de branches de sapin déposée au plancher. Perceptible de jour comme de nuit à travers la vitrine de la galerie, l'ensemble multicolore constitue un clin d'œil monumental aux boules dont on décore les arbres de Noël et évoque l'opération de séduction commerciale à l'œuvre à cette période de l'année.