

# Bulletin

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In this issue of the *Bulletin* we have the pleasure of presenting interviews with two Alaska artists who currently have exhibitions of their work at the Alaska State Museum. To further explore the work of these artists through images from the exhibits and the artist's statements, please go to On-Line Exhibits on our web site at: [www.museums.state.ak.us](http://www.museums.state.ak.us)

## **Sonya Kelliher-Combs Interview**

Anchorage artist Sonya Kelliher-Combs has an exhibition of recent mixed media works on view at the Alaska State Museum from November 2 to January 12, 2002. Titled *Idiot Strings: Catch and Release*, the show is a combination of large works on wood panels, and wall pieces comprising groups of smaller objects arranged in grids. The works feature semi-abstract shapes and markings, and sometimes incorporate articles of clothing such as *kuspuks*. The works are built up using acrylic polymer, polyurethane, cloth, thread, hair, walrus stomach, beads and other materials, many of which reflect her Alaska Native heritage. Ken DeRoux interviewed her at the Museum on November 2, 2001.

Ken: Could you tell us a little bit about your background, how you got interested in making art...

Sonya: I'm from Nome. I was born in Bethel, but raised in Nome. My mother's from Nulato and my father's from Nome, and I also have family up in Barrow. My cultural background includes Athabascan, Inupiaq and also a mixture of German and Irish. I think where I come from - in the sense of place, culture, and family - is important to me and impacts the work I create. Growing up with a culturally diverse background is a major influence in my work.

As far as art goes, I was always drawing when I was growing up. I took a couple of art classes in high school and junior high, but I didn't take it that seriously. When I went to school up in Fairbanks, at the University of Alaska, I took a class from David Mollett (Fairbanks artist and painting instructor). He was really challenging. He said only one of you out of this class is going to continue doing this in twenty years...and I thought, well, that's going to be me. So I started from there, took a lot of art classes and Alaska Native Studies classes. I took three years off before I went on to get my Master's degree, and during that time period I was really influenced by formline design, the northwest coast design. In this earlier work I was interested in nature and man, and the conflict of nature and man. I think this theme still runs through my work. In retrospect I see a direct connection between these older works and those I make today. Issues of personal, family, and cultural identity continue to be at the heart of my work. I use traditional symbols and patterns, and non-traditional mediums to illustrate these ideas.

K: Your presentation is definitely contemporary, and from a first impression of the work, you don't necessarily make the connection with traditional Alaska Native art. But then, when you start to look at it, you start making connections. Like the circular drill marks remind me of patterns on old Eskimo scrimshaw.

S: Yeah, sometimes I wonder if people make those connections. I'm really interested in ivory carving. I grew up around it and I love it. I've tried ivory carving, but I'm terrible at it. But I really love the marks, symbols, and patterns. I am especially interested in the geometric patterns, like the Old Bering Sea Period. I think they relate to nature. It hits home for me.

I am also influenced by skin sewing and beading. I think that can be seen in pieces like *Scraps*. When you're growing up and you spend time, with your mom and your dad, or your grandma and grandpa, there's this time spent learning how to do certain life skills. I think that's what *Scraps* means to me. Time spent with my mother learning how to sew and bead; that's such an important time. Those times are really precious.

K: What about the shapes? There are these repeated shapes, like one shape I think of as something like a cocoon.

S: Yes, I repeat certain symbols and often use them as patterns. The cocoon shapes are actually from the same place as these little secret forms (small sewn and beaded pouches). I call them secrets. They're metaphorical for the things that are hidden, secrets just beneath the surface. Everybody's got them. They can be cultural secrets, family or personal secrets. I don't know exactly how that form came about. I guess I was thinking of bags and baggage, the things you carry along with you.

K: In your opening statement, or poem -(about the title of the exhibition: *Idiot Strings-Catch and Release*)-I made a connection to the strings that tie you to your culture, to your past. And I was wondering... I couldn't tell if there was a positive feeling about it, or negative.

S: It's both. I think you can take the good with the bad, it's about that middle ground where everything meets, and one day it's one way and another day it's another way. It's about definition, about self-definition and identity and realization. Every day it changes and evolves. But you can't really cut those strings. You have to hold on to them, because that's where you come from.

K: What artists have had influences on you? Or would you care to say?

S: You know, when I went to undergraduate school, it was artists like Picasso and De Kooning, and of course the ivory carvers back home. Joe Kunnuk is a great man who I had the chance to work with in Nome, and Jim Schoppert had a huge impact on me when I was an undergraduate. Schoppert was challenging himself to break out of a rigid mold and did not deny the influence of other styles and cultures. His work helped me to realize I could be inspired by other forms of art and not to deny these. Currently I am looking at people like Maya Lin, Ellen Gallagher, Jane Hammond, Anne Wilson.

K: Do you cover over a lot of stuff as you work, do you change things and work over them?

S: Yeah, I'm really interested in the history of the piece. I feel like I have to put a lot into the work, both in time and process. Although some of them are more on the surface I am especially interested in creating a strong sense of history within each work. The dialogue I have with the

work is also really important. Time spent. If a work comes too easy, and I have not had that dialogue, it has not made the journey.

K: Where does most of the color come from? Is it acrylic paints...?

S: Yeah, acrylic. And I use things like coffee, dirt, grass, whatever's around, some wine, things like that.

K: And you work flat?

S: Yes. I build up the surface by spreading acrylic polymer with spatulas and pouring with polyurethane. The work needs to be flat with this process.

K: I noticed, looking at the titles of some of the pieces, and also the title of the show, some of the titles are: *She Was Only Ten*, and *Her Favorite Color Was*...there's a use of past tense there. A connection to the past. Is that something you're exploring?

S: Yes, a lot of them are kind of "in memory", especially the kuspuks. In memory of loved ones. These are different (*She Was Only Ten* series). These are in response to stories I've heard about terrible experiences many people have had as children. They could be about physical or psychological abuse, any kind of neglect or trauma.

K: You went to graduate school in Arizona?

S: In Tempe. I was there for three years, in painting and drawing. It was a really wonderful experience in the end, but at the beginning it was very, very hard. Being away from Alaska and my family was very trying. I had never lived outside Alaska. Being away gave me a whole different sense of where I'm from and what's important in my life.

That experience really changed my work. In my earlier work I felt like I had to put everything into each piece. It was all about struggle, it was all about conflict...they were very dense paintings, there was little breathing room. I think I'm now able to simplify things in some respects.

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## **George Provost Interview**

Anchorage photographer George Provost has an exhibition of photographs on view at the Alaska State Museum from November 2, 2001 until January 12, 2002. The exhibition is titled *Isle Royale* and consists of work done during an artist-in-residence program at Isle Royale National Park, located in Lake Superior between Michigan and Minnesota. The residency took place in the summer of 1998. Much of the imagery focuses on the textures and arrangements of rocks and water.

Provost uses a view camera that makes an 8 x 10 inch negative on a single sheet of film. His black and white prints are often modified through a process called split-toning, which creates a range of subtly-colored tonal values. He makes contact prints from the negatives, meaning the photographic paper is placed in direct contact with the negative, so that the resulting print is the

same size as the negative; and he also makes enlargements up to 16 x 20 inches. The enlarged prints are issued in a limited edition of seven prints; the contact prints are limited to twelve.

Provost completed nine years of college including two years of postgraduate work in clinical psychology in order to establish a career to help support his photography. He currently works at Southcentral Counseling Center, a non-profit community mental health agency in Anchorage. He is presently working on a series of portraits of severely and chronically mentally ill persons.

Ken DeRoux interviewed George Provost at the Museum on November 2.

Ken: Could you speak a little bit about your background? How you got interested in photography, where you've worked, where you studied?

George: OK. I've been really involved with art all my life. When I was a kid I was into painting, and I took some painting classes in college, although I was actually in a seminary, it wasn't an art school. My other passion as a youth was music--still my first passion in art. When I was about nineteen I started playing guitar, and that sort of pushed painting out, and I focused on music for quite awhile. But, after maybe about ten years of that, I wasn't making any money so I said, "I've got to do something where I can make some money," so I said, "I think I could do photography." So I took a class at a junior college in California, about 1986. And I remember developing my first roll of film, making my first contact sheet, and I was hooked. I just loved it. And of course I went immediately to the art side of things and not the commercial side of things, and so it became another thing that I didn't make money at. But ever since then I've been into photography...

I knew from the beginning that I wanted to work in a large format, because when I (enlarged the 35mm negative to 8x10) it deteriorated so much that I knew a bigger format was the way to go. I've been mainly a landscape photographer. I was into backpacking and the wilderness. I did a lot of backpacking in the Sierras, so that made landscape seem the natural way to go. That's what interested me most. I do believe that large format has the greatest advantages in landscape photography, another reason why I have used the 8x10 camera exclusively for more than 10 years. I have another body of work that is in portraits, but landscape has been the primary one...I moved to Anchorage shortly after getting serious about photography, so most of my work has been in Alaska. This exhibit is really the exception.

K: What brought you up to Alaska? Were you from Alaska originally?

G: No. I'm from the Bay Area, but my wife was transferred up here (with her job), and I'd heard about Alaska, and I thought it'd be a great place for doing landscape photography...so I've been working up here from about 1987. As it turns out, Alaska is a great place for wilderness landscape photography. I've only been able to scratch the surface so far.

K: You mentioned you were in a seminary?

G: Yeah, that was when I was young. Five years in the seminary and two years in contemplative monasteries. The spiritual side of things has always interested me. And I meditate. I consider my view to be a contemplative view.

K: I liked your statement. It was very Buddhist, about the "chatterbox mind" and things...

G: It's the idea that if you're focusing on seeing, what interferes with seeing? What divides your attention? Because if all your attention could go toward seeing, then you'd really be seeing. Usually it's divided between our thoughts, or various other distractions. So my goal was to be as undistracted as possible - what the Buddhists call "mindfulness." And having two weeks being alone, in solitude, where I could just focus on the photography -- it was great, to have a period of time like that.

K: How did you manage to get the residency at Isle Royale?

G: You have to apply for it. It's competitive. There are a number of National Parks that have artist-in-residence programs. Isle Royale is one of the most competitive. I was right up their alley with what I do, so they gave it to me.

K: It mentioned in your newspaper interview that Ansel Adams was one of your influences, but I don't see that much of Ansel Adams in these prints.

G: Well, I mentioned other names also (to the reporter), Edward Weston, Paul Strand, and others, but that was the one he picked. Ansel Adams was my main influence in terms of technique. I learned basically from his books, he has a series: *The Negative*, *The Print* and so on, so basically I'm self-taught through his books. I took a couple more classes in photography and some workshops, but he influenced me the most in terms of technique. But he's not my favorite photographer in terms of an image-maker. However, Ansel's *Denali and Wonder Lake* is a classic image and probably my favorite of the mountain.

K: I can see a painter's eye in these photographs. Obviously composition is a strong component, and texture...

G: Yeah, well what's fun for me is working behind the ground glass. It's already a cut to a window, and you can play around with that quite a bit. To me, composition is very important and it is a matter of seeing. I work with the composition until it looks right. I don't follow any rules of composition. It's a matter of perception and judgement. Over the years I've drifted toward more intimate, more close-up type photographs than big, wide landscapes. There are some big ones here, but I think the majority are more close-up.

Photography is really an extended process. I can be really excited by what I see on the ground glass. Then I calculate the exposure and expose the film and hope things went well. Later -days, weeks, or months- the film is developed and I have a negative. Then the printing process can begin, then the toning process, then reprinting, and so on. Then after this process I may come to the conclusion that this just doesn't work and I start over with a new negative. It's ironic because

the ordinary viewer does not realize the process and generally thinks of photography as something that is quick and automated, as compared to painting.

K: There's also a sense of ordering what could be considered a kind of chaotic landscape, especially in the pictures of the rock forms.

G: Yeah, people have said that before about my work. That happens not by my design; I don't set out to create order. I think the order is already there, and the trick is to see it and then present it as it already is. The boundaries created by the film format also play a role in this apparent "ordering."

K: What about light? These aren't really about dramatic light. When you go out to photograph, are you thinking about light that much, about times of day?

G: I am. Because I usually am trying to reduce contrast. The more contrasty the negative is, the harder it is to print, and I don't want a contrasty print. I want a wide range of midtones.... If it's overcast you have a softer light, not such strong shadows and I prefer that kind of light. But I didn't really have that (at Isle Royale). Most of the time it was pretty bright. And that can be controlled to an extent...to lessen the contrast. I worked pretty much all day, every day, with whatever light I had.

Light is probably the most important element, though it may not be obvious in these photographs, because light is crucial at every stage of the process. We think that we see things, like I can see your face. All I am really seeing is light - reflecting off your face- and what I am seeing is a neurological construction in my brain. I understand what you mean about "dramatic" light though. When I see it I usual let out some kind of exclamation like, "Holy @#%\*" and deeply regret missing the photograph. Yet I've learned not to try to control it or possess it and let go of it. The whole idea of impermanence is liberating.

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## **New Books in the Lending Library**

We have recently added some new books to our lending library. Books are available for one month, with the possibility of a one-month extension if no one else has reserved the book. There is no charge except borrower pays return shipping. To borrow books, contact Ken DeRoux, Curator of Museums Services at 1-888-913-6873. For a list of other books available, call or visit our web site at [www.museums.state.ak.us](http://www.museums.state.ak.us). The museum also has a series of conservation videos available.

## **Care of Collections**

Simon Knell

Routledge

Examines collections management and care, in particular preventative conservation. Focusing on specific, practical guidelines for collections care, climate control, indoor air pollution and handling works of art, this text is essential for all curators, conservators, and students of museum studies and collections management.

Paper 304pp. 1994

### Code of Ethics for Museums AAM 2000

American Association of Museums

AAM Bestseller! Adopted in November 1993 and revised in 1999 by AAM's Board of Directors, this code provides a framework for developing an institution's own code of ethics and reflects the current, generally understood standards of the museum field. Issues covered include governance, collections, programs, and promulgation.

Paper 16pp. 2000

### Codes of Ethics and Practice of Interest to Museums

Resource Report

American Association of Museums

Now, for the first time, all the museum-related professional codes of ethics have been assembled in one handy reference volume! With codes from all the AAM Standing Professional Committees and standards and policy statements from such organizations as the National Center for Nonprofit Boards and National Society of Fundraising Executives, this is a complete guide to ethics related to all aspects of museum operations.

Paper 311pp. 2000

### Going Public: Community Program and Project Ideas for Historical Organizations

Robinson and Sorin

Bay State Historical League

This book is a compilation of ideas for breathing new life into local historical agencies through community based programming. It presents 27 case-study program ideas as well as guidelines and methods for planning and implementing programs.

Paper 70pp. 1999

### Guide to Traveling Exhibition Organizers

Edited by Shirley Reiff Howarth

The Humanities Exchange, Inc.

Lists more than 80 organizations that offer traveling exhibitions to museums, art centers, libraries, and other display spaces. Each organization is described, giving its history, philosophy, types of exhibitions, security and transportation requirements, fee ranges, education programs, staff information, and sample lists of its exhibitions.

Spiral bound 99pp. 2000

### The Manual of Museum Planning

2nd edition

Edited by Gail Dexter Lord and Barry Lord

AltaMira Press/The Stationery Office

The second edition of this definitive text explores issues of planning, design, construction, renovation, and expansion for museums and galleries. The original chapters have been updated for the new millennium; sections have been added on visitors with special needs, fund-raising feasibility studies, and institutional planning. Contains charts, checklists, a glossary, and a bibliography.

462pp. 2000

### Museum Archives: An Introduction

William A. Diess

Society of American Archivists

This book, intended to encourage museums to preserve their historically valuable records, offers guidelines on how to establish a museum archive. Among the topics covered are why museums should have archives, planning museum archives, and basic archival procedures. A brief bibliography and some sample forms are included.

Paper 38pp. 1984

### The Museum Forms Book

Edited by Kenneth D. Perry

Texas Association of Museums

Assembled from museums across the country, more than 300 forms have been compiled covering all areas of museum activities. Selected for their clarity and usefulness, these actual forms are meant to be adapted, adopted, and improved for your institution's particular needs.

### Museums, Places of Learning

George E. Hein and Mary Alexander

American Association of Museums/AAM Education Committee

AAM Bestseller! This definitive volume provides proof that museums make a major contribution to education in the broadest sense. It provides a framework for defining learning and reflects the literature related to learning in museums. The authors explore all aspects of educational theory, museum education practice and visitor studies in a straightforward, concise, and readable manner.

Paper 57pp. 1998

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## STATE MUSEUMS ACCREDITATION RENEWED

The Alaska State Museums, including the State Museum in Juneau and the Sheldon Jackson Museum in Sitka, have again been awarded accreditation by the American Association of Museums. Accreditation certifies that a museum operates according to standards set forth by the museum profession, manages its collections responsibly, and provides quality service to the public. Of the 8,000 museums nationwide, only some 750 are accredited. Six of Alaska's 70 museums have received accreditation by the AAM.

Accreditation is one of several programs offered by the American Association of Museums to help museums achieve and maintain standards of quality and excellence in the museum profession. The AAM is a national organization, with headquarters in Washington, D.C., that has served the museum profession since 1906.