

## Untitled

wearing trim  
a crest, a clan, an identifier  
who you are

a pore  
sifting, shifting  
catching, releasing  
pouring

secrets  
hiding, guarding  
gathering  
scraps  
the stuff one does not talk about

the three that got away  
cords of regret  
a tie that can not be cut  
idiot strings

tattoo  
marking, seaming  
wearing, waiting  
passage

Sonya Kelliher-Combs

### SONYA KELLIHER-COMBS

#### EDUCATION

1998 MFA, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ  
1992 BFA, Cum Laude, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, AK

#### SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2006 *Secret*, Modo Gallery, Hudson, NY  
2006 *Untitled Secrets*, Well Street Art Company, Fairbanks, AK  
2001 *Idiot Strings, Catch and Release*, Alaska State Museum, Juneau, AK  
1998 *Asianggataq*, Harry Wood Art Gallery, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ  
1994 *Transformation*, University of Alaska Fine Arts Gallery, Fairbanks, AK  
1990 Carrie McLain Museum, Nome, AK

#### SELECTED INVITATIONAL AND GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2005 *Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation 2*, American Museum of Art & Design, New York, NY  
2005 Cheongju International Craft Biennial, Cheongju Arts Center, Cheongju, South Korea  
2002 The 8th Native American Fine Art Invitational, Heard Museum, Phoenix, AZ  
2000 *Invitational 7*, Decker/Morris Gallery, Anchorage, AK  
2000 *Convergence: The Exhibition of the 2000 Arctic Winter Games*, Yukon Arts Center Whitehorse, Yukon  
1995 First Peoples Gallery, New York, NY

#### SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Anchorage, AK  
University of Alaska Museum, Fairbanks, AK  
Alaska State Museum, Juneau, AK

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CONTEMPORARY NATIVE ART

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*Unraveled Secrets*, quilting needles and thread  
dimensions variable, 2006

Cover: *Small White Secrets* (detail), found fabric, cellulose,  
glass bead and nylon thread, dimensions variable, 2006

Photography by Kevin G. Smith

UNRAVELED SECRETS  
Sonya Kelliher-Combs

December 2, 2006 - March 4, 2007

INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN INDIAN ARTS MUSEUM

# UNRAVELED SECRETS

Through her mixed media painting and sculpture, Alaskan artist Sonya Kelliher-Combs chronicles an ongoing struggle for self-definition in the contemporary cultural context. A post-modern collage of imagery and techniques from sewing thread and needles to acrylic polymer, beads and fabric scraps encompass a complex body of work. Like her "canvases," these works conceptually stretch taut between mystery and subtlety, whispered secrets and bold revelations.

Born in Bethel and raised in Nome, Kelliher-Combs' cultural heritage includes Inupiaq Eskimo, Athabaskan Indian, Irish and German. Raised with traditional ways defined through kinship and relationship to the land, the labors of hunting and gathering, collecting and preserving inform her work. Yet she defines a contemporary style, creating paintings with the modern material of acrylic polymer mounted on wooden stretchers. By encasing an unconventional array of elements in the acrylic, she creates a tension between nostalgia and innovation. The layered and worked appearance of each object invites one to look deeply beneath the surface.

In the "Secret Paintings" series, Kelliher-Combs explores the relationship of her work to skin, the surface by which a person is culturally mediated. Layers of acrylic polymer are poured and spread on found cloth. Fragments of bed sheets and garments like underclothes glimmer faintly beneath skin-like translucent surfaces. Color has an emotive quality, marking individuality while also resisting the illustration of skin. Because range of color is too broad to describe skin/outer body, the images are more suggestive of the inner body or psychological revelations. Thus, the artist reveals and resists the possibilities of defining identity only through the surface.

Through the introduction of pigments, thread, beads and hair, Kelliher-Combs produces a fleshy body, resembling epidermis or organs, a tattooed or scarred body, or a wound. The overall image is both beautiful and disturbing. Complex overlays draw you to examine content and experience beneath the surface as the locus of identity or meaning within the work. This mix of synthetic, organic, traditional and modern materials challenges oppositional cultural thought-patterns such as Western/Native, self/other, man/nature, pure/impure.

Secrets are implied with a subtlety that invites you like a whisper. As the central subject, the secret appears as an ovoid

form emblematic of a medicine pouch or appendage. The secret drifts in and out of focus, alternately floating to the surface and sinking deeply into a mysterious distance. Layering of media builds history, a context for each piece. As the shape undergoes metamorphosis and embellishment, erasure and excavation, Kelliher-Combs imbues each with an individual narrative. Repetition evokes a community of images, emphasizing shared heritage and common stories. Yet each image presents unique traits. Differences in each frame range from visceral to delicate, vivid to quiet, elegant to abject. The subject therefore oscillates between submission and resistance, the subordination of individual identity to the group versus the effort to rise above it. The labor of building and defining the image expresses a struggle against hegemonic identity constructs. The work builds and deconstructs, expresses and unravels the threads of identity.

First used in skin sewing, thread connects Kelliher-Combs to that tradition she learned from her mother and continues today. The artist has distilled the secret's



*Pink Unraveled Secret*, acrylic, walrus stomach, and thread, 2' x 2', 2006

*Small White Secrets* (installation detail), found fabric, cellulose, glass bead and nylon thread, dimensions variable, 2006

shape to its symbolic essence: a line that is alternately continuous and buried. Thread is a symbol for tradition and lineage, family line. Weaving in and out of the work, thread suggests unity and fragmentation of lineage. Simultaneously a container and a broken or buried line, the secret glimmers faintly as both a source of identity, a subject, and an absence or search for self-definition.

Many threads form a cloth. The identity of each individual is created by more than a single thread. Threads of identity include family and friends, genetic, extended, ancestral and communal. Thread represents traditions passed down, family stories and family secrets. There are threads that are strong, expressing the strength of family, and there are threads that are loose and broken lines symbolizing individuals that are unraveled by difficult experiences. Kelliher-Combs proposes a post-modern idea of family/identity as something both found and made. Greater than family in the hegemonic, genetic or traditional sense, family is that which is similar/alike, collected/saved together, and built/made.

"Secret Portraits," permeated by delicate lines, express rich connections between line, lineage and thread. Here the line is both decoration and disguise. Each image is an elaborate collection of lines that work as a container of possibilities. The line is delicate and dynamic, elaborate and embellished. Secrets twirl playfully between sexual and floral, biological and fantastical. Suggesting fingers and phalluses, cocoons and hollows, secrets sprout like seeds and larvae, winged and hairy.

The secret, as a finely drawn thread of a line, evolves and articulates a collection of distinct and beautiful, fragile and vulnerable individuals. That which marks us also defines us. That which scars us may also be seen as a source of strength and distinction.

Simultaneously disturbing and delightful, elegant and abject, dense knots and frayed ends, threads explore the construction and dissolution of identity/subject. As if to embellish the truth or deny its existence as something negative the secret undergoes myriad variations. From one basic form, in the drawings, the secret spins in a new direction in each piece. As the secret fluctuates between the surface and the depths of the paintings, similarly, in the installation piece, "Unraveled Secrets", which is made solely of needles and thread, the secret moves at different levels or planes, as a thread passing in and out of sewing needles. As stories are passed from one individual to the next, the secret changes in depth.

"Unraveled Secrets" expresses the complexity of identity. By acknowledging complexity the artist reveals confining cultural codes. Identity is presented here as a layered construct built of honesty and insight, resistance to and respect for tradition. Kelliher-Combs creates an empathetic visual text that weaves disparate experiences and legacies together suggesting that experiences both painful and beautiful source a rich individual identity.

ASIA FREEMAN is an artist and art instructor for the University of Alaska - Kachemak Bay Campus. Artistic Director of Bunnell Street Gallery in Homer, Alaska, she enjoys writing about art.

*Secret Portraits*, archival ink and beeswax on paper, 5" x 5" ea., 2006

