

Sonya Kelliher-Combs



Stepping beyond Identity: The Secret's Destination in the Work of Sonya Kelliher-Combs

When moving the eye across the Alaskan field of contemporary art, it is easy to distinguish Sonya Kelliher-Combs's work. Conventional tropes and motifs, whether Alaskan or Alaska Native, are absent. In their stead is a unique vocabulary of forms -- the circular "pore", the oblong "secret", the spiraling "eddy" and appropriated objects such as kuspuks, lingerie, and mittens. The articulation of these shapes and garments through painting, drawing, sculpture and installation art makes for an unusually diverse practice. Muted color tonalities, novel applications of materials, and complex surfaces also set her work apart, as does an intensity of mood, a longing or sorrow that emanates from well below the picture plane.

But to focus on the originality -- the difference -- of her artwork is to overlook its recitation of a variety of traditions and modes of production, which encompass but extend beyond the arena of conventional art. Her work is engaged as much with art as with craft, with the past as much as the present or the future, and it oscillates between cultures and vantage points: Native and non-Native, Western and non-Western, Eskimo and Indian.

If the organic form and line of her paintings and drawings relate to a tradition of Euro-American abstraction, they resonate just as profoundly with archaic or modern Alaska Native ornamentation and craft, such as Eskimo tattoos or late twentieth-century Athabaskan beadwork designs. Some pieces could be equally qualified as sewing as much as painting or sculpture. Her use of nearly any material, whether beads, gut, fur or a synthetic product, can often simultaneously be termed domestic, industrial, conventional, and avant-garde.

In Kelliher-Combs's work, traditions metamorphose into one another. In doing so, they assert their differences only in the act of their existence, not as they might had they been juxtaposed for contrast. These artistic acts emphasize their innate inseparability, their commonality, and no single tradi-

tion can be grasped as a point of origin or be privileged over another: they are naturally interdependent. In transforming traditions into one another Kelliher-Combs displaces the common conception of art as a declarative expression of ethnicity. The removal of comfortable, stable, and distinct ethnic traits likewise displaces viewers who seek the stereotypes that this work does not offer.

Her choice for displacement precludes the making of any politically charged statements about ethnicity in Alaska, and allows her to embark on an investigation of identity in general. How identity is constructed, carried out, how it impacts the individual, and how she or he might function in relation to it are issues central to her artistic endeavor. Each of the serialized forms in her vocabulary offers its own inflection of these concerns. In the current exhibition, it is the "secret" that is the primary means of their address.

A secret is, by definition, something hidden, unspoken, repressed, and kept unknown. Kelliher-Combs gives it the appearance of an irregular lozenge shape, and as such it is manifested throughout her oeuvre in various media, dimensions and guises. While perceptible, all of these adhere to a secret's quality of invisibility.

At times her secrets are made of paper or gut that is collaged into a stretched expanse of acrylic gel medium. Such versions of the form create delicate shifts in texture within the medium's larger membranous field. They function as negative space to be seen through and around, and they form the composition's ground by the contour and texture that they give it. In return, the ground affords them camouflage. Compositions of this sort model the way in which an actual secret participates in the construction of identity to ensure that the identity will be successful in concealing it from the world.



Grey Secrets

In other stretched pieces (a number of which are currently on display) and when painted on panel, Kelliher-Combs's secrets can become solid, opaque focal points. While opacity emphasizes their presence, these secrets are not increasingly visible. They are shrouded and bound, implying that the secret is degraded and abject. The secret's confinement in this context is necessary, for if such a debased substance were to be exposed, the integrity of an identity hard won would collapse. The power which that identity renders would also be called into question, so the threat posed by the secret turns out to be very real.

Nearly all of the panel and stretched secrets exist in environments suggestive of skin, a biological organ that identity and ethnicity is regrettably often projected upon. Kelliher-Combs's two-dimensional works resist simplistic projections and they act out the instability inherent to the process of identity formation. Built of numerous layers of pigment, material and gel medium, the dermal tissue of these works is a succession of coverings that have been patched and reconstructed in order to protect the secret as external conditions change. Some portions are tough and impervious, appearing to have been either hardened by age and wear or fortified by repairs. Other sections can seem on the verge of breaking down or have already decayed and now await restoration. This continuous adjustment or response to external conditions -- the process of forming identity -- has caused the skin to take on an exaggerated character: it is intermittently too colored, too troubled, too compromised, and too dense. It is at best a composite, a pastiche, or a succession of differences that can in no way allow the present surface to be considered inherently pure. Any assertion of purity would be disingenuous.

In the course of negotiating the secret's isolation from the world, the deterioration, shedding, and accretion of successive layers of identity/skin have seemingly formed a matrix of detritus. This debris contributes to the sense of the secret as an archaeological artifact or relic, an impression which is supported

by the secrets' mummified quality in the panel paintings. As an artifact, the secret precedes and extends beyond the lifespan of any layer of identity. Preserved and inaccessible, the secret as submerged artifact is capable of outlasting an individual, a generation, or even an entire culture. However, the longer that the secret remains submerged the greater the likelihood that the information or knowledge embodied by it will be lost.

Kelliher-Combs recovers the secret from oblivion by locating it within elongated pouches or sheaths made of gut or hide. In the transition from the two-dimensional works to three-dimensional pouches, the secret has been hypothetically excavated from the sedimented matrix of skin. The pouch provides a gentle, less restrictive form for the secret's containment subsequent to its liberation. These vessels, which are themselves titled Secrets, have typically been installed en masse in a row or grid formation, but in this exhibition they are joined together for the first time in the configuration of necklaces. The unseen archaeological labor has transformed the secret from burden to near weightless treasure and has rendered it immanently portable as well as capable of storage in a small, delicate vessel. The ornamentation of each container announces the worth of the contents, and a special use value is intimated because the secret can hypothetically be implemented at will (at most a matter of lifting a flap to retrieve whatever is inside) and then returned for safe keeping. The secret can now possibly be conceived as tool, as an instrument of utility. The new environment of skin is notably unblemished, diaphanous, and fragile in appearance though its elongated shape does endow the secret with a hint of the abject, of the informe.

The resemblance of the pouches to the widely produced medicine bag draws upon a connotation of the latter as a container of items such as charms that are of significance and empowering only to the wearer. The contents i.e., the secrets, of Kelliher-Combs's pouches read as being similarly capable of



Untitled



Idiot Strings VI

fortifying a presumed bearer, thereby articulating the secret even more clearly as a tool and, indeed, as medicine that might release the strictures of identity to reveal the basic commonality of individual, infinitely variable subjectivity. This excess of differentiation is seen in the unique ornamentation of each container. In previous exhibitions, Kelliher-Combs arrangement of the pouches in grids or rows implied that this variation existed into infinity, that everyone might have his or her own secret to utilize as a tool in resisting the limitations of identity. Here, in the most recent work, the joining of the pouches to form necklaces, makes the reference to the medicine bag all the more direct. And the bearer/wearer now has the privilege of having a number of secrets serving as tools in the struggle to maintain subjectivity. The secret-laden necklace is also a badge of the wearer's fortitude, evidence of his or her success in having transformed the secret from burden to tool not just once, but many times over.

In the context of the exhibition Kelliher-Combs has, for the first time, introduced the secret form into her ongoing *Idiot Strings* series. In previous works from this series, tethered pairs of mittens made by Kelliher-Combs herself hang from the wall. Haunted by their missing wearers, they are intended as memorials to male relatives who have passed away. In the latest pieces, tubular, pouch-like versions of the secret have replaced the mittens heretofore standard to the series. These three-dimensional secrets are distinctly different from those installed in larger groups— or presented as necklaces. They lack embellishments and the skin around them appears extraordinarily delicate and transparent, and they are so light that they are almost ready to float away or dissolve – but their cord grounds them in relation to one another. Gender of the male-associated mittens is gone, but a human is now insistently present — a tuft of someone's hair emerges from the hole where a mitten's thumb would be. The secret is neither a building block of identity nor burden, neither a treasure nor artifact,

neither a tool nor medicine nor badge of strength in the effort to claim subjectivity. The secret is in all respects human; the secret is itself a human subject.

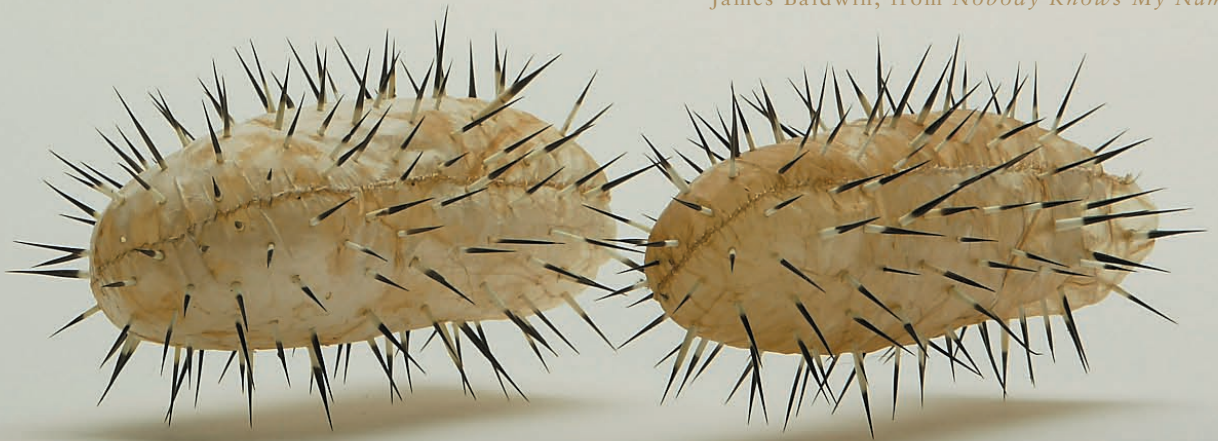
Recently, Kelliher-Combs has begun to render the secret in an entirely new modality. She (per)forms the characteristic oblong shape one after the other, from left to right, by passing a length of thread through the eyes of needles arranged along a wall in a horizontal constellation. The thread descends to the floor at the point where the needles stop. Here her secret is insistently gestural. It is created over and over again in an obsessive, repetitive motion through an armature of identity until that structure runs out and it returns to formlessness. This gesture unequivocally declares the exhibition's central assertion as well as the secret's ultimate destination: identity is the instrument of the secret's (i.e., the individual's) containment, for as long as the structure of identity is in place the secret (the individual) will be reinscribed and perpetuated in restricted form. Elsewhere in her work the transformation of the secret and the deconstruction of identity could be achieved through an implied process of arduous excavation. But now only a gentle, sustained tug would be required for the secret to be undone and for the identity that has long kept it in place to become a skeleton or vacant husk.

With the fall of the thread to the floor, the secret and identity part company and the safety of confinement is gone. The world as one has known it ceases to exist and the future has yet to be imagined. At that very moment, Kelliher-Combs and her viewers stand on the threshold of a state that the entire body of her work expresses a deep longing for – a space where identity and the secret can no longer be possessed, where higher dreams and greater privileges are to be had.

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Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one identity, and the end of safety. And at such a moment, unable to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or thought one knew: to what one possessed or dreamed that one possessed. It is only when one is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream one has long cherished, or a privilege one has long possessed, that one has set oneself free for higher dreams, for greater privileges.

James Baldwin, from *Nobody Knows My Name*



Sonya Kelliher-Combs was born in Bethel, Alaska in 1969, and raised in Nome. Her cultural background includes Inupiaq Eskimo, Athabaskan Indian, Irish and German. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree from the University of Alaska Fairbanks, 1992, and Master of Fine Arts Degree from Arizona State University, 1998.

Kelliher-Combs' work has been shown in numerous individual and group exhibitions in Alaska and the contiguous United States. Collectors of her work include the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Alaska State Museum, University of Alaska Fairbanks Museum, Cook Inlet Region Incorporated and South Central Foundation.

Solo Exhibitions

- 2004 Anchorage Museum of History and Art
Alaska Artists Solo Exhibition Series
- 2000, 02 Decker/Morris Art Gallery, Anchorage, Alaska
- 2002 Well Street Art Company, Fairbanks, Alaska
- 2001 Alaska State Museum, Juneau, Alaska
- 2001 Alaska Pacific University, Anchorage, Alaska
- 2000 Bunnell Street Gallery, Homer, Alaska

Selected Exhibitions

- 2004 Works from Spenard 4215, International Gallery
of Contemporary Art, Anchorage, Alaska
- 2004 Alaska Native Art: People of a Place, Art of a
People, Sotheby's Institute of Art. New York
- 2003 Points of View, Anchorage Museum of History
and Art. Anchorage, Alaska
- 2002, 04 Earth Fire and Fibre, Anchorage Museum of History
and Art. Anchorage, Alaska
- 2002 The 8th Native American Fine Art Invitational,
Heard Museum. Phoenix, Arizona
- 2001 State of the Art Biennial, Parkland College.
Champaign Illinois
- 2000 Convergence, Yukon Arts Center. Whitehorse,
Canada
- 1997 ANA 26, Holter Museum of Art. Helena, Montana
- 1996 In Search of Self, Fort Lewis College. Durango,
Colorado
- 1993 Arts from the Arctic, Anchorage Museum of History
and Art. Anchorage, Alaska



The Anchorage Museum of History and Art is committed to fostering creative expression in the visual arts. The highly competitive solo exhibition program encourages new work by Alaska's best contemporary artists. The accompanying exhibit brochure documents the artist's achievements and help educate museum visitors about the artist's work and accomplishments.

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Patricia Wolf, *Director*
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