ARCTIC HIGHWAYS — WORKS BY TWELVE INDIGENOUS ARTISTS FROM SÁPMI, CANADA AND ALASKA

A new exhibition exploring culture and identity opens at Scandinavia House with a special performance, film screening and panel on April 15.

New York, NY—Opening April 15 at Scandinavia House, Arctic Highways brings together the artwork and handicrafts of 12 Indigenous artists from Sápmi, Canada and Alaska in an exhibition highlighting the thriving cultural and spiritual communities of the Arctic region. Curated by Indigenous artists Tomas Colbengtson, Gunvor Guttorm, Dan Jáma and Britta Marakatt-Labba, the exhibition includes their own works alongside those of artists Matti Aikio, Marja Helander, Laila Susanna Kuhmunen, Olof Marsja, Máret Ánne Sara, Sonya Kelliher-Combs, Maureen Gruben and Meryl McMaster.

The exhibition includes a wide range of artworks and duodji (Sámi handicrafts) including Britta Marakatt-Labba’s narrative embroidery portraying motifs from Sámi culture and history; sculpture works by Máret Ánne Sara utilizing traditional objects such as the komsekula silver amulet (believed in Sámi culture to have protective powers); handmade clothing and sculpture works by Laila Susanna Kuhmunen; mixed-media sculptures by Gunvor Guttorm; and Tomas Colbengtson’s The Children of the Sun, which incorporates a traditional shaman drum with portraits of Sámi heroes, including poets, artists and linguists.

Many works explore Sámi identity, such as the sculptures of Olof Marsja, which incorporate organic, industrial and handmade materials into ambiguous figures and objects; photographs by Meryl McMaster, which examine the self in relation to land, lineage, history, and culture; and video works by artists Matti Aikio and Dan Jáma. The exhibition also looks at the contemporary context of the Arctic, as in Sonya Kelliher-Combs’s mixed-media art focusing on the changing North and our relationship to nature and each other; images and video by Maureen Gruben, who investigates life in the Arctic within global environmental concerns; and Marja Helander’s photography series North, which examines the dependence between humans and nature through landscapes and portraits.

The exhibition’s opening weekend will include a performance by Greenlandic dancer Elisabeth Heilmann Blind; a screening and film Q&A with artist Britta Marakatt-Labba on the film Historjá – Stitches For Sápmi (dir. Thomas Jackson), which explores the Sámi battle against threats of climate change; and a performance by Sámi Yoiker Lars Henrik Blind, followed by a panel discussion with Britta Marakatt-Labba, Thomas Jackson, Elisabeth Heilmann Blind, and Tomas Colbengtson. Coordinated alongside the UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues 2023 from April 17-28, the opening weekend will be followed by a film event “Climate Actions — Future Changes” at Scandinavia House on April 21 & 22. Generous support for this exhibition has been received from Nordea, the Inger G. & William B. Ginsberg Support Fund, the Bonnier Family Fund for Contemporary Art and the Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation. Additional support has been received by the Consul General of Sweden in New York.

PUBLIC OPENING: Saturday, April 15, 2023
WHERE: Scandinavia House
58 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10016
GALLERY HOURS & ADMISSION: April 15 through July 23, 2023
Tuesday through Saturday, 12—6 PM
ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Matti Aikio (b. 1980) is a Sámi visual artist from the Finnish side of Sápmi. He has a background in Sámi reindeer herding culture and holds an MA in contemporary art from Tromsø Academy of Contemporary Art, and has had artwork exhibited in various countries in Europe, Asia and Latin America. He works with mixed media, photography, sound, installations, video, sculpture and text, and his main interest as an artist is to try to offer the spectators a possibility to shift perspective on often marginalised issues. Lately he has focused on topics such as the concept, the idea and the image of nature and how the Indigenous cultures seem to be squeezed by the schizophrenic nature relationship of the nation states and capitalism. Aikio also performs as a DJ. Aikio is currently a 2022–2023 Sámi Fellow at The New School, a joint initiative between Frame Contemporary Art Finland, the Finnish Cultural Institute in New York and the Vera List Center for Art and Politics.

Tomas Colbengtsson (b. 1957) grew up in a small Sámi village near Björkvattnet in Tärna, under the Arctic circle in Sweden. In his artwork, he asks how colonial heritage has changed Indigenous heritage and landscapes, both of the Sámi and other Indigenous peoples. Having lost his mother tongue, the Southern Sámi language, he works with visual art, using Sámi history and collective memory as the source of his art. He is continuously experimenting with new forms of media and material, from overlay glass and metal printing to etching and digital art forms. This way, he seeks to assemble a language to formulate the loss but also rejuvenation of Sámi identity. He is the initiator of one of the first art residences for Indigenous artists, Sápmi salasta / Sápmi embraces. His work has been featured in numerous international exhibitions. He is represented at the new National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo, Norway and the Sami Parliament in Karasjok Norway.

Maureen Gruben (b. 1963), is a Canadian Inuvialuit artist who works in sculpture, installation and public art. In her practice, polar bear fur, beluga intestines and seal skins encounter resins, vinyl, bubble wrap and metallic tape, forging critical links between life in the Western Canadian Arctic and global environmental and cultural concerns. Gruben was born and raised in Tuktoyaktuk, where her parents were traditional knowledge keepers and founders of E. Gruben’s Transport. She holds a BFA from the University of Victoria and has exhibited regularly across Canada and internationally. She was longlisted for the 2019 Aesthetica Art Prize and the 2021 Sobey Art Prize, and her work is held in national and private collections.

Gunvor Guttorm (b. 1958, Karasjok, Norway) is a Professor in duodji (Sámi arts and crafts, traditional art, applied art) at Sámi allaskuvala/Sámi University of Applied Sciences, Guovdageaidnu/Kautokeino in Norway. Her research is interconnected with cultural expression in the Sámi and Indigenous societies, especially duodji. The focus of her research deals with duodji in a contemporary setting, and Indigenous people’s context. She has written extensively about how the traditional knowledge of Sámi art and craft is transformed to the modern lifestyle. In an Indigenous world, she has participated as invited speaker at Indigenous research congresses and participated in exhibitions in Sápmi and abroad. From 2016–2018 she worked in a reference group for the exhibition Let the River Flow, organized by the Office for Contemporary Art, Oslo. She has also been editor, together with Harald Gaski and Katya Garcia Antón, of Let the River Flow: An Indigenous Uprising and its Legacy in Art, Ecology and Politics (Office for Contemporary Art Norway/Valiz Amsterdam, 2020).

Marja Helander (b. 1965) is a Sámi photographer, video artist and filmmaker with roots both in Helsinki and Utsjoki. In her work, she has studied various themes, including her own identity between the Finnish and the Sámi culture. Since 1992, Helander’s work has been exhibited in two dozen solo exhibitions and over 50 group exhibitions in Finland and abroad. In her art, Marja Helander often builds from her own background between two cultures, the Finnish and the Sámi culture. What drives Marja as an artist is curiosity and the willingness to always learn something new. “This is why making video art and short films has been so inspiring after a long career in photography,” Helander says. At the 2018 Tampere Film Festival, Marja Helander was awarded the Risto Jarva Prize for her film Eatnanvuloš lottit, Birds in the Earth. The Mänttä Art Festival selected Marja Helander as the curator for the 2019 exhibition.

Dan Jåma (b. 1953) is a filmmaker and still photographer living in Luleå, in northern Sweden. He grew up in a reindeer-herding family in Norway. At the age of 23 he was employed at the Swedish National Television as a cinematographer, and 19 years later he began freelancing to be able to work with still photography and to direct his own films. Jåma also works part-time as a teacher in television journalism at the Sámi University of Applied Sciences in Kautokeino, Norway. Dan has, since 2011, been chairman at the South Sámi Museum
Meryl McMaster (b. 1988) is a Canadian artist with nêhiyaw (Plains Cree), British and Dutch ancestry based in the city of Ottawa. Her work is predominantly photography-based, incorporating the production of props, sculptural garments and performance forming a synergy that transports the viewer out of the ordinary and into a space of contemplation and introspection. She explores the self in relation to land, lineage, history, culture and the more-than-human world. McMaster is the recipient of several awards, and her work has been acquired by significant public collections within Canada and the United States, including the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the Ottawa Art Gallery, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, the Heard Museum, the Eiteljorg Museum, and the National Museum of

Sonya Kelliher-Combs (Iñupiaq/Athabascan, b. 1969) was born in Bethel, Alaska and brought up in Nome, Alaska. Through visual art, community engagement, curation and advocacy, Kelliher-Combs works to create opportunity and feature Indigenous voices and the work of contemporary artists who through their work inform and encourage social action. Her personal mixed-media visual art focuses on the changing North and our relationship to nature and each other. Traditional women’s work has taught her to appreciate the intimacy of intergenerational knowledge and material histories. These experiences and skills have allowed Kelliher-Combs to examine the connections between Western and Indigenous cultures, and to investigate notions of interwoven identity through her work. Personal and cultural symbolism forms the imagery. These symbols speak to history, culture, family and the life of her people. They also speak about abuse, marginalization and the historical and contemporary struggles of Indigenous peoples. Kelliher-Combs currently lives and works in Anchorage.

Britta Marakatt-Labba (b. 1951) was born and raised in a reindeer-herding family. Their winter pasture was in Swedish Sápmi, and the summer grazing period was spent on the Norwegian side of Sápmi. She was educated at the School of Design and Crafts at the University of Gothenburg (HDK). Marakatt-Labba works with narrative, or storytelling, embroidery. Her images are miniature worlds created with needle and thread. The images depict various events and scenes from everyday life, mythology, political reflections and tales about Sámi culture and history. Her work has been exhibited at National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo, Norway; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden; KODE (Art Museums and Composer Homes) Bergen, Norway; Malmö Art Museum, Sweden; Uppsala Art Museum, Sweden; Nord Norsk Kunstmuseum (Museum for Northern Norwegian Art); RidduDuottarMuseat, Karasjok, Norway; Korundi – Rovaniemi Art Museum, Finland; The Anna Nordlander Skellefteå Museum, Sweden, and Skissernas Museum, Lund, Sweden.

Olof Marsja (b. 1986 in Gällivare) is based in Gothenburg, has trained at Konstfack (University of Arts, Crafts & Design) Stockholm, and works mainly with sculptural expressions where the organic, industrially produced and the handmade are put together into ambiguous figures and objects. In his works on view in Arctic Highways, the carefully carved wood, the cast metal, the hand-blown glass coexist with the found and raw processed materials. In a playful and serious way, he addresses issues of identity, the present and history. The sculptures that emerge are hybrid figures that slide between categories such as visual arts, crafts, imagination, reality, man and animals. Olof Marsja has exhibited at Havremagasinet in Boden, Göteborgs Konsthall, Bonniers Konsthall in Stockholm, 3e Våningen in Gothenburg, Gallery Steinsland & Berliner in Stockholm, IKOLONI in Malmö, Stenungsunds Konsthall, and Gallery Box in Gothenburg.

Laila Susanna Kuhmunen (b. 1978) is an artisan who lives in an area with two Sámi cultures: the Lule Sámi culture and the North Sámi culture. Laila Susanna’s family was forced to resettle from the north to Jokkmokk in Sweden almost 100 years ago. This historic event is reflected in her artistic handicraft. The two-year program in Duodji at the Sámi Education Centre in Jokkmokk and a Master’s degree from the Sámi University of Applied Sciences in Kautokeino, Norway, gave her the formal background to practice her art and craftsmanship. Laila Susanna’s creativity emanates from the traditional duodji, Sámi handicraft, but at the same time it also expresses itself through methods that are a symbiosis of both the traditional and the modern. She has exhibited her work at the Sámi Center for Contemporary Art in Karasjok, Norway, and at the Sámi Duodji Center in Jokkmokk, Sweden, as well as the Silver Museum in Arjeplog, Sweden, and the TRAFO Art Gallery in Asker, Norway.

Handen, Hjärtat och Bältet (Hand, Heart and Belt), 2020

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Britta Marakatt-Labba, When Two Become One, 2020

Olof Marsja, Handen, Hjärtat och Bältet (Hand, Heart and Belt), 2020

Laila Susanna Kuhmunen, Urmoder (Primordial mother), 2020
the American Indian. McMaster's work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Canada House (London), Ikon Gallery, Ryerson Image Centre, The Glenbow, The Rooms, Momenta Biennale, Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, and Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, amongst others. Between 2016 and 2020 her solo exhibition Confluence travelled to nine cities in Canada.

Máret Ánne Sara (b. 1983), is an artist and an author. She is from a reindeer-herding family in Kautokeino, Northern Norway, and currently works in her hometown. Sara's work deals with the political and social issues affecting the Sámi communities in general, and the reindeer-herding communities in particular. Sara has created posters, CD and LP covers, visual scenography and fabric prints for a number of Sámi artists, designers and institutions. She is the initiator and founding member of Dáiddadállu Artist Collective Kautokeino. In 2014, Sara was nominated for the Nordic Council's Children and Young People's Literature Prize for her debut book Ilmmid gaskkas (In Between Worlds). Sara's project Pile o’ Sápmi was presented at Documenta 14 in Kassel in 2017. In 2022, Sara was one of three Sámi artists who transformed the Nordic pavilion into the Sámi pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

THE AMERICAN-SCANDINAVIAN FOUNDATION
The American-Scandinavian Foundation (ASF) promotes firsthand exchange of intellectual and creative influence between the United States and the Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. A publicly supported American nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, ASF has an extensive program of fellowships, grants, intern/trainee sponsorship, publishing, and cultural activities. Headquartered in New York City, ASF has members throughout the United States, and alumni and donors worldwide.

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