

Alaskan Artist Creates True Indian Petroglyphs

Written by {ga=tommoore}

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While more than 2,500 miles may separate Alaskan artist Nicholas Galanin from Northeast Ohio, one of his more creative projects would look right at home outside of Progressive Field in downtown Cleveland.

Galanin, a Tlingit-Aleut artist from Sitka, Alaska, and the recent recipient of a [Rasmuson Fellowship from the United States Artists organization](#), works in a variety of mediums to create art that touches upon aspects of authority, authenticity, representation and the commoditization of Native American culture.

His work has taken him across the world as he earned degrees from the University of Alaska Southeast, Guildhall University in London, and Massey University in New Zealand. In addition to his artwork, he spends time as a lecturer and instructor and recently finished a term as the 2012 [Audain Professor in Contemporary Arts of the Pacific Northwest](#) at the University of Victoria in British Columbia.

Galanin tapped into his heritage in 2010 when he decided to create a series of Indian petroglyphs, similar to the [design and symbols carved into volcanic rocks by American Indians and Spanish settlers](#) between 400 and 700 years ago.

And it was his whimsical side that led him to use the Cleveland Indians script logo as the symbol and create something that would be familiar to Tribe fans everywhere.

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After seeing a mention about Galanin's work at [Uni Watch](#), we reached out to Nicholas and he was gracious enough to sit down for a virtual question and answer session about his work.

Q: This is an interesting project, how and when did you come up with the idea to do petroglyphs?

Nicholas: This has been a developing series that started in 2010 here in Alaska where I live. The idea of creating works that are intended for a projected audience (4,000 years from now) is exciting. I imagine that archaeologists of some sort will potentially find versions of these petroglyphs. With time, ideas we have created and are familiar with like icons such as the Indians logo, etc., will have lost social context. The timelessness of work like this in the land will outlast things humanity creates like political borders, etc.

A reminder that we are all essentially indigenous (human), this statement is not a license to be Indian for the hipsters out there that like to bite romantic ideas of another persons culture. The logo was used as a whimsical play on the viewer's assumption of what to expect when they think of an Indian petroglyph.

Q: Where have you placed them?

Nicholas: The Vancouver Art Gallery in Vancouver, B.C. (author's note: the work was featured on the cover of the exhibition catalogue promoting the *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture* exhibit); Southeast Alaska, where I come from and reside; on the streets of New York City; and I will fly to Ottawa soon to install some petroglyphs at The National Gallery of Canada for the [Sakahan: International Indigenous Art exhibit](#) (although those will not have the Indians logo on them).

Q: How do you create the artwork?

Nicholas: It is carved by hand with stone carving tools (think graffiti, just a slower process) and the petroglyphs in Alaska have taken several days to create as the stone is very hard. The first petroglyph I had created in Alaska was done on the shoreline and I had a window of time to work while the tide was low. One day, as the tide started to rise, I put my head up and on the

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beach in front of me were three large brown bears (who had not noticed me). I was trapped on this small rock with the tide coming up. Luckily they left and I was able to get out of there safely.

Q: Does your artwork generally target social issues?

Nicholas: Yes, my visual work offers a platform for dialogue and discussion & hopefully progress. I also create music at www.silverjackson.com, the creative process of my music tends to be more emotional, based off of life experiences and how I process those from within, a feeling.

Q: Why this particular project?



Nicholas: Creating is a form of seeing and experiencing the world. I am often taking risks creatively and this challenges myself and hopefully the audience. Creating is an act of freedom; I am inspired by many, in return I hope to contribute to the inspiration of others.

The work I create will often tell me more about the viewer based on their reaction than of myself or my beliefs; again, a social catalyst for dialogue via creativity.

The petroglyph series was inspired by the land and our relationship to it; this also includes our relationship with each other on this land. It was created with a linear idea of time in mind, where the politics that surround iconic images – like the Indians logo or even familiar household logos

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like the Nike swoosh – will lose their social value over time and eventually become actual Indian petroglyphs that are full of new ideas of history, created by a future society that will be left with the job of translating these petroglyphs.

Q: Why the Cleveland Indians?

Nicholas: I chose this logo primarily as a play on the title of the piece Indian petroglyph.

Q: So it wasn't necessarily a statement on the use of Native American names or imagery in sports?

Nicholas: That has nothing to do with my concept and this work, though I am glad you bring this up! I feel mascot politics have been discussed by many with educational and in-depth answers that all should familiarize themselves with if they are confused by Native American dialogue and response to such.

Cultural miss-appropriation and race characterization has an ugly historical context, and a lack of education contributes to cultural stereotyping. Lots of names are 'just words' and the portrayal of indigenous communities via the western lens often generalizes, stereotypes and misappropriates while neglecting needs or values of the communities they misrepresent or take from."

Q: Have you had much feedback to the project?

Nicholas: Yes, the work is written about in a few publications that can be found on my website. It is also part of a wonderful exhibition currently up in Toronto at [The Power Plant](#) .

Q: Do you have plans to expand this in any way? Maybe exhibit your work in Cleveland?

Nicholas: Yes, the work is taking many wonderful forms, and will continue to develop. The next petroglyph will be installed at the National Gallery in Canada in May, though the form and imagery will not be logo based.

My creative work has taken me all over the world, hopefully it will get me to Cleveland in the

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future!

Thanks again to Nicholas for taking time out of his busy schedule to talk with us. To learn more about his work, visit his website at <http://galan.in/>

(Petroglyph image courtesy of Nicholas Galanin)

(Artist image courtesy of [Native Arts Collective](#))