

The form of the kayak came from its function as a hunting boat

Mark Igloliorte & Clint Burnham

In April 2020, Mark Igloliorte, an interdisciplinary artist of Inuit ancestry, was scheduled to visit my English graduate class at Simon Fraser University's Burnaby campus. The COVID-19 pandemic had cancelled all in-person visits, so we did this by video conference. Thanks to Mark for the time and insightful discussion and brilliant art, and to Rawia Inaim for the transcription. – *Clint Burnham*

Clint Burnham Let's start talking about your painting "Kayak is Inuktitut for Seal Hunting Boat," which I was really happy to see in February 2020, when I was in Winnipeg. It's amazing, and I especially like the work's dimensions, its size. I first saw it on Tania Willard's Instagram in the summer of 2019, and seeing your painting that way, it mimicked the cultural genre that the painting references — sort of a meme. But before we talk about genre or medium, can you talk about how the painting is an intervention into what we think of a kayak, especially here on the West Coast, a kind of lifestyle boat for settlers, retirees paddling around the Gulf Islands. Because your take is more complicated than that, presenting what is also a boat for the seal hunt, the very activity that is also, perhaps, disavowed or reviled by that same kind of leisure-class of people. So, I want to know if you want to talk about that.

Mark Igloliorte Yeah, yeah, for sure. One thing all kayakers have in common, that I see people respond to, and that's in keeping with the kayak, is this idea of sustainability. I see hunting as an intrinsically sustainable practice because there are so many Indigenous laws and understandings about hunting, about never taking more than you need, which speak to sustainability. The kayak as a hunting vessel is part of that, even if just in terms of a human-powered vessel. So, I think that there's some alignment there, an appreciation, between all of these groups of people. The separation that I'm trying to reconnect is that the form of the kayak came from its function as a hunting boat. When I made this painting at Wintec (Waikato Institute of Technology / Te Kuratini o Waikato, New Zealand), where the RAMP Gallery is housed, I was working very closely with the design technician, Martin Page, who was very helpful, and being in that design space, I saw a text on the wall, "form follows function." I was thinking about this kayaking work that I was doing and thinking about the precolonial function of the kayak as a hunting boat and its form, this agile boat for an individual or a hunter, and that everything about the craft was manifested towards this function. So, the idea of having a meme was about communicating that message directly.

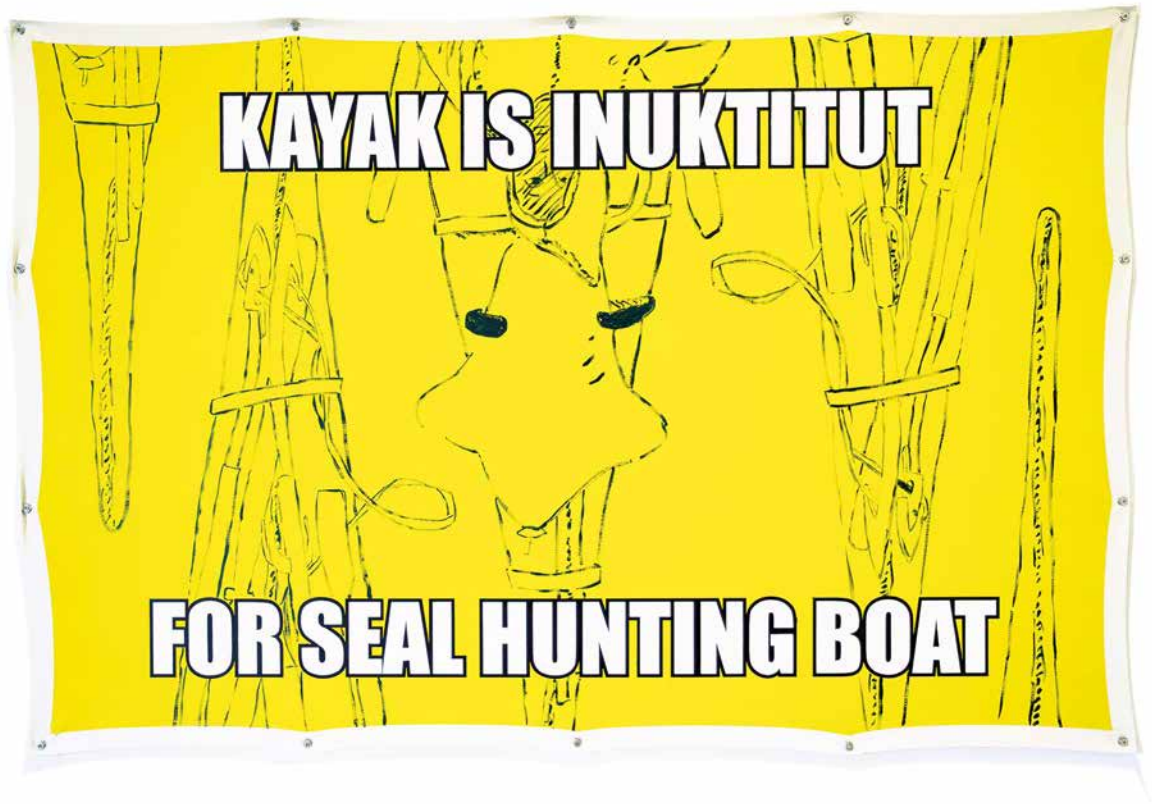
I was doing a different work with the kayak around that time, learning how to do an Eskimo roll, and making that video was part of this project. So I was spending a lot of time physically engaging with the kayak as an embodied practice. At the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia, I noticed a mini qamutiik, a sled on the back of one of these kayaks, and I realized, "oh, that's the dolly," because we have these wheel dollies for getting the kayaks around on the land. And then I realized this is obviously what you're gonna use to get the kayak out in the winter too and you need a form of caddy to get it out to the edge of the ice. Looking at the different kayaks,

including the miniature kayaks, on display at the MOA, some of which are a hundred years old, very close to that precolonial culture—and you know the connections between the makers of those would be so close to that precolonial culture—the kayaks were just covered in harpoons, three in the front, two in the back, and they were different shapes because they had different functions, and that just spoke so loudly to me about the original intention of the kayaks as a hunting boat.

And so as we're moving ahead in universities talking about Indigenization and decolonization, I was wondering, what would a decolonization or Indigenization of the kayak look like? And that would be, I think, first acknowledging and then returning to this original function of the boat. And I think an embodied practice, such as hunting from a kayak, is part of the decolonization and Indigenization that I'd like to see. I take part in a lot of these discussions in our university and a lot of the times it's on a theoretical level, or how we're going to change the way we relate to one another in the classroom, and all that stuff is excellent. But what I'm really concerned with are these physical manifestations and thinking about these Indigenous ways of being a part of a landscape and having this sustainable focus, and that gets me really excited.

CB Yeah. And just to talk about something that doesn't get you as excited, which is Indigenization or decolonization in the classroom or in the university setting. In early 2020, I was at a talk you led at Emily Carr University, and I wonder what you think of the argument that it shouldn't just be up to Indigenous faculty to initiate these conversations, to carry the burden, and that more non-Indigenous faculty should also be participating. I mean, there were non-Indigenous faculty there, but it seemed to be that it was up to you and your colleague as Indigenous faculty to lead this discussion. This event seemed to be an example of one more thing, one more committee you have to be on, one more mentorship you have to do, and so on.

MI Well, I mean for myself, I see that event as part of my role as "Indigenous Pedagogy Coordinator" at Emily Carr. But for that academic work, for myself, I made a point of ensuring that I would be compensated, and thankfully there's the leadership at Emily Carr to support that. I think in terms of the work being shared amongst faculty, I was really grateful for that talk because there was a follow-up one as well, and these discussions are not just for the Indigenous faculty—it's incumbent on all to pick this up and to figure out how they're going to do it, and then also, figure out how to seek guidance and be respectful. But the onus is on the individual faculty to incorporate this work or to change how they do it in their curriculum.



Mark Igloliorte *Kayak Is Inuktituk For Seal Hunting Boat* 2019 acrylic on unstretched canvas
Image credit: Holly Marie Russell Courtesy of the artist and The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery,
Newfoundland and Labrador

When I first started going to university in the nineties, there was so much momentum around feminism, but it seemed to be coming off of the seventies and eighties feminism movement. From that time going forward any art class that did not discuss female artists or LGBTQ artists—it would have been a very large and glaring omission. Presently I feel it's similar for Indigenous artists. We need to be included in the conversation, especially in an academic setting. And so I don't think it's just about inclusion, because, as the Indigenous people of this continent, including and incorporating these different points of view is essential.

CB Cool, thank you. I want to come back to your art and I wanted to stay another minute or so with the kayak painting. I'm looking at it right now and the ways in which the painting itself is almost a diagram, visually, in terms of a field of it. On the far left—you have the point of a kayak pointed down, and then you have one slogan (KAYAK IS INUKTITUT) moving across the top, and then you have a centre, and maybe it's as if someone is in the kayak, and then to the right, with the line drawing quality showing how bundled the harpoons and spears would be on the kayak. That's going on, on the one hand, but then on the other, it's on unstretched canvas, which, I mentioned to you in the email I sent yesterday, suggests to me the African American artist, Kerry James Marshall—

MI Absolutely.

CB So, some kind of intervention into the quality of the support, of the material support. And so those aspects of it as a fine art work exist in a productive tension with the meme quality or the digital vernacular quality of the painting, for instance the placement of text on top and bottom. And I'll just say one thing I was thinking about the meme world, Instagram, social media, etc. is that this can be a place of these hot takes, these ill-considered takes, you know, naming, blaming and shaming, and cancel culture, all of those kind of things, where someone is just going to say, "oh, I'm vegan, I'm not going to support seal hunting"—

MI Oh, sure.

CB And so that's the sort of intervention I saw your painting as being engaged with.

MI Yeah, absolutely. And just to start with the vegan point. I feel there is a large opportunity for greater understanding between especially vegans and Indigenous people. And the problem that I see, when I was on Twitter a lot, I am not there so much

anymore, but the thing is that the most visible anti-Indigenous groups that I've seen online have been vegans. At the same time, I feel there's another text piece brewing in my mind—I haven't sorted it out, but it's something along the lines of "you're not vegan if you don't support Indigenous hunting rights." Also, I feel growing up in Newfoundland and Labrador, where hunting is not exclusively Indigenous, that hunters generally have a respect for sustainability. There is a subset of vegan people that have a black and white approach to this, and then there are other people who understand that sustainability and hunting go hand in hand. So, I don't know how to suss this out. There's a couple of different things going on—we have people that are identifying as vegan that are harassing Indigenous people in online spaces, and although they are identifying as part of this group, they obviously don't represent all vegans.

There needs to be some way to parse out this type of contention, and what I would love to see is for vegans to step up and guide their own community. And if they see people piling on Indigenous people, to speak up. And you do see this, you see people saying, "Hey, I'm vegan, but I get it, I respect Indigenous rights and the sustainability of hunting." And so, it's just a tricky thing. I don't think it's appropriate for people to identify as vegan and then to harass Indigenous people online; that is inappropriate. So, in a way—we have vegans that are appropriate and vegans that are inappropriate in terms of their relationship to hunting.

CB I think the distinction is important. And then there's that whole celebrity culture moment with Ellen DeGeneres at the 2014 Oscars, taking her anti-seal-hunt selfie, which was basically an ad for the new Samsung phone.

MI Yup.

CB And so Indigenous artists or Inuit artists like Maureen Gruben have made work about this, and Tanya Tagaq, as well.

MI And I think what's difficult or insidious about it is organizations such as PETA, although they may do good work in other ways, they promote a very black and white way of thinking, and use that to garner funds, which actually leads to very generous retirement packages for their leadership, while you have many Indigenous people scraping by in their communities.

It's really upsetting but to move on, I want to acknowledge the work of Kerry James Marshall, which you brought up earlier, and that idea of using unstretched canvas. I have to give it up to a few of my students that gave a presentation on Kerry James Marshall.

In their presentation, they had cited Kerry saying that he works on unstretched canvas because he feels a sense of urgency for making the work, so making as much as possible, making it as large as possible, finding the means for it to travel. Large canvasses are very cumbersome in terms of managing and so unstretched canvas becomes a lot easier. What I hope to convey with what I'm saying—the message I'm putting into that material—is that I feel a sense of urgency about it. There's a message that I want to communicate and that feels very important to me. And that goes on a banner quite naturally. I was thinking about the congruity between a banner and a meme, and it's about communication, getting a message out to the world and communicating it to people who encounter it. And as much as there are negative memes, which you brought up earlier—I do appreciate when I'm online and I see a meme that gives me an opportunity to rethink my position on a matter. I've found myself changing my mind about how I relate to the world or how I relate to other people from a meme. I feel the potential of it, so that's where I want to work with it and hopefully change some other people's minds or give them something to think about.

And just about the composition with the kayaks: the source of the imagery is a drawing I made of one of the model kayaks at the MOA. I wasn't quite sure how it was going to be used in the drawing, so I made a number of drawings while I was up there. But I wanted to focus on the harpoons that were on the kayak. And for me the solution was using repetition and having it shown on different parts of the canvas. So, there's the hunter in the centre, and on either side there's the repeated kayak, and you can clearly see the harpoons on both sides. And I wanted the opportunity to represent the model, but at life scale, so I made the scale of the kayak the same scale as the kayak that I own, which is just about eighteen feet long, and I stretched the image to eighteen feet long and projected it as you see on the work.

CB Nice, yeah, that's great. In terms of some other kinds of works that you are also doing, *resurgent work* as people like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson or Glen Coulthard might phrase it, and I think they might—the sealskin neck pillow is pretty awesome in terms of the E.U. travel ban on the trade and exchange of seal products. So, you actually took that—used that neck pillow when you flew to New Zealand for your show. Were you worried it would get confiscated in the airport?

MI Oh yeah, absolutely. I thought I was going to be in a windowless room, you know, with some customs agents, but that never happened. I basically just got waved through. But I do think about this international travel ban, how that was the animal activists' strategy for curtailing a seal harvest in Newfoundland, and how it had detrimental

effects for Inuit communities. What I wanted was to think about an object that permeates these international borders quite often. And to use the sealskin as part of Inuit culture that looks into the future, to share how it thinks about where sealskins can go or where we are going as a people, across the globe, and how Inuit can contribute to that or how there could be a market for an object like that.

One of the things that I have always been troubled by in terms of animal rights activists is that they'll be against the seal hunt because it's commercial and because it's killing animals. But then they'll make an exception for "traditional and Indigenous practices," you know. And they'll also use language in their outgoing material in terms of "barbarism" or "outdated practices." And that stuff makes me really uncomfortable because I feel it doesn't show respect, it doesn't show a holistic respect for Indigenous peoples. It's more of a begrudging acknowledgement that this is an important part of the culture but doesn't acknowledge that there was never anything wrong with those practices and that there continues to be nothing wrong with it. The sense that I get is that in tying it to tradition there is the hope people will move away from seal hunting or that it will become such a minority activity that it would be insignificant. That attitude does not show respect for Indigenous practices. And so, I wanted to make a product that, unlike a garment, wouldn't be tied to tradition but was thoroughly contemporary and modern. I'm hoping to push back against this placement of Indigenous practices in the past, that tie it to tradition. Working with, say, air travel would make it much more forward-looking.

CB And also the neck pillow is this kind of a modern device for our bodies being caught in these weird little compartments during air travel where we can't actually move around the way we want to move around. So, it's this sort of ergonomic adaptation to this kind of constraint.

MI Yeah.

CB I want to finish up our discussion by talking about *Eskimo Roll*, another kayak piece, and a performance, I think. There's a very kind of Beckett "try again fail again" aspect to it, where it's not just showing you doing the roll successfully because you're Inuit so you have the technique. But also, it seems you're using the word "Eskimo" in the title as a strategic thing. So I wonder if you want to talk about those two aspects, or whatever others, of that work.

MI Yeah, well, I think that including the failure very much comes out of skateboarding video language. That piece was created to be paired with a skateboarding video, which



Mark Igloliorte **Seal Skin Neck Pillow** 2019 seal skin

Image credit: Holly Marie Russell Courtesy of the artist and The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery, Newfoundland and Labrador



Mark Igloliorte *Eskimo Roll* 2019 still from video loop
Filmed and edited by Navarana Igloliorte Courtesy of the artist

was part of the exhibition *Boarder X*, and the connection that I see there. Both kayaks and skateboards are individual vehicles, but it's really a community that teaches us how to use them. So, as much as they are individual vehicles, they're part of a community.

Being a teenager and learning all of these different skateboard tricks and figuring out ways to jump down stairs with the board flipping under me and catching it with my feet and doing all these things which I was very proud to do and very excited to do... Learning those different skills gave me the confidence to say to myself, "I can learn how to do anything. I can learn how to paint, I can learn how to be a professor, and I can learn how to take up my Indigenous practices and be successful with them." And so, I bought a kayak as part of my research when I first got on faculty at Emily Carr, and I didn't know what I was going to do with it, but I knew that if I set things up, then interesting things would happen. And so, I bought the kayak and I was at a social gathering and just chatting with people about it. And right from the start my friend Faran said: "I kayak! I taught myself how to do an Eskimo roll." I said to him, "I would love for you to teach me." And so, we were going to this pool in Kitsilano on Friday nights where you can do kayaking skills, and you know, it's a really awkward thing to be upside down in the water, strapped to a boat. And even though it took me around six trips in order to learn how to do it, I never doubted that I would learn it. Just as I taught myself how to do all these different things with skateboarding—or rather my friends helped me learn how to do all these things with skateboarding—I was confident that Faran would be able to help me learn how to do an Eskimo roll.

And so, for the name, it is a peculiar thing in that "Eskimo" isn't a name that Inuit would use for themselves. It was a name that was imposed on them. At the same time, where I see a strength or power in the name is that it acknowledges that the maneuver is a precolonial one, that it comes from a certain group of people, and that there's all this Indigenous knowledge and ways of being in the maneuver itself. I myself don't find Eskimo to be that offensive. I do know that other people do and that there's hurt there and there's harm there. So I do feel a little bit weird about the naming of it, yet I also feel in that naming the possession and acknowledgement of a precolonial communication. This knowledge is of the Inuit, it existed before a colonial worldview, and all those things I find valuable enough to keep the title as it is.

CB I love that walkthrough. I'm not—this is my first time doing a Zoom meeting, so I don't know if we're gonna get cut off at thirty minutes exactly, which we are at within a minute or something. So just in case that happens, Mark, I'm just gonna thank you...

MI —No problem.

CB ...for the time and for your generosity. I hope to see you once the lockdown is over and we can have a coffee or something.

MI Yeah, that'll be great. I really appreciate you and all your students taking the time to have a look at my practice, and then think about the different things that I'm bringing up. ■