Catalogue of the exhibition UNGALAQ (When Stakes Come Loose)
by Maureen Gruben

grunt gallery
116 - 350 E 2nd Ave
Vancouver, BC
V5T 4R8
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This exhibition includes Stitching My Landscape, commissioned for LandMarks2017/Repères2017 created by Partners in Art and presented by TD - A Canada 150 Signature Project.
I want to start with this gratitude: As a visitor to the Inuvialuit territories and the homelands of the Gruben family, I was honoured to witness the strength and beauty of your lands and communities. This extraordinary opportunity to visit Maureen Gruben’s home is a debt to the artist’s generosity, because to be invited into someone’s homeland is a gift, producing an awareness and resonance that contextualizes an artist’s body of work in new ways. To understand the rolling land, the sea, the beluga whale and whitefish and relationship to traditional foods is such a true gift it is still moving in my memory. Of course it is important to contextualize not just this amazing experience of the land but how it cradles the work in this exhibition. I came to know of Maureen’s work through a colleague, Peter Morin, and I had curated a series of works—Moosehide #1, #2, #3 (2015)—for a previous exhibition at the Kamloops Art Gallery during my curatorial residency there (2015-2016). In those works Gruben collaborated with traditional hide tanners and an important part of the art was the proliferation of the smell of smoke-tanned hide within the gallery. It is this seeping of senses that I now come to relate to the materiality and context of her practice as embedded in the Inuvialuit landscape and translated with elegance to her home in Coast Salish territories.

These ways of working, hosting and visiting Indigenous communities other than our own have been a focus of my curatorial and artistic inquiry for a number of years since I returned to my home in Secwepemculecw. When all the city galleries, funding, resource and infrastructure fell away to the reality of small and rural Indian reservations in BC, I was searching for relevance and connection in my work. I wanted to work more directly with artists who were invested in and relating to their lands and cultures without the mediation of the gallery, to go directly to the land and to enact and problematize the ways we—as Indigenous artists from other territories showing in city galleries which are built on unacknowledged Indigenous lands—navigate cities. How do we give back to the land? How do we relate to another’s territory without the burden of colonial history that unmaps our belonging?

In working through these ideas I took on an ambitious curatorial project for LandMarks2017/Repères2017, which was commissioning artists for works situated in or related to Canada’s National Parks. I was already working with another artist and park site, which was co-managed by a First Nations community, as many newer Northern parks have important collaborative relationships with Indigenous groups. Maureen at this time was back home for her regular summer visit. As I was thinking through my LandMarks2017/Repères2017 projects, she was simultaneously (but unaware of my other curatorial work in this area) texting me images from her visit—skinned polar bear heads atop plywood smoke houses, bear bones harvested from the town dump and other images of her home community in Tuktoyaktuk, NWT. I was struck by the images and kept sending her many replies, asking about what she was up to. Maureen invited me to come visit her, as I was preparing another site visit to Old Crow in the Yukon for LandMarks2017/Repères2017.

With that invitation I did a quick Google search to see if there were interesting National Parks sites near Tuktoyaktuk and I found the Pingos National Landmark. Part of my curatorial practice is being open to my intuition, and I was floored: We had just spent a considerable time arriving at the new title of LandMarks2017/Repères2017 and Maureen was within viewing distance of the pingos, which are the only designated ‘Landmark’ in the Canadian Parks system. I started planning my trip. With that trip and that visit to the pingos, my heart was with the land, and I felt that heart within the materials, precision, and humble elegance of Maureen’s aesthetic. Her materials are informed by both traditional and contemporary traces: transparent PVC becomes a reference to the glassy ice; red borders echo rick-rack and delta trim patterning on parkas; and polar bear fur is worked in different ways that remind us of the power of this animal and its ubiquity with the North. This exhibition is all of that—years of Indigenous women’s experience: the amazing work of Kyra Kordoski, who writes for this catalogue and accompanied and supported Maureen in much of the work; deep earth time and ecology; advanced skill and knowledge of materials; refined aesthetics and the smell of the land. I feel that when
I reflect on Maureen’s work now; I will always re-experience the smell of the land in the first few steps I took as we climbed Ibyuq, one of the Canadian Landmark pingos, in summer 2016. Mixing in the air I smell the new green growth, the Labrador tea and cranberry leaves underfoot and the ocean around us. Maybe we could even smell the ice that is permanently at the core of these hills that rise out of the ocean. I also smell the less fragrant bones drying in the sun on Maureen’s porch, the beluga whale carcass on the spit of land, beluga whale intestines harvested from community whale fishers, and fresh and dried whitefish. I feel that this relating to the land-base of Maureen’s Inuvialuit heritage has enriched my experience of her work. I don’t think you need to take that journey to feel this within her work, and I humbly thank her, Kyra, the land, and Inuvialuit people for all the beauty they bring to the world, the fierce beauty, the scars of trauma beauty, the power beauty and the complex balance of humanity and the land.

Quyannainni and Kukstemic
There are times when life’s patterns feel fixed. There was a time, for example, when the behaviour of seasons felt almost as predictable as the smooth, cyclical expansion and contraction of daylight hours throughout the year. Change happens differently. It can be imperceptible; it can be violent. There are also periods in between these extremes when everyday predictability melts away, when what is familiar palpably shifts. Things may become lost in these periods. They can also be found. Tuktoyaktuk elders describe Ungalaq, the west wind, as a phenomenon that amplifies rising tides, softening the ground and rearranging features of hamlet and landscape by releasing things which the earth had secured, from tethered dogs to entire smoke houses. The works in Ungalaq, Maureen Gruben’s first solo show, draw on traditions-based skills to join diverse materials together in possibly unexpected but deeply intuitive and uninhibited ways. They reveal fluctuating dynamics and transitional states in which multiple possibilities remain open.

In Communion Thin (2016), polar bear guard hairs are pressed and stitched between small rectangles of clear industrial vinyl that are connected with hand-tied red threads. They are suspended in a large array that hovers nearly transparent in the air, catching the light, as a sheet of ice might sit, might eventually break away and float over water. The title, Communion Thin, lightly drapes ecclesiastical associations over the work, making it reminiscent of veils worn to first communions, or even the pale ritual wafers of bread that are interspersed with sips of red wine. The piece presents intersections of delicate visual beauty and immense, potentially threatening power such as can be found within the history of the Catholic Church or—though very differently—in an ocean blanketed with rapidly thinning ice. Touching on undertones of risk, it incorporates dual modes of protection, the vinyl having been produced to serve similar aims as the fur: to guard as much as possible against the potential ferocity of the elements.

The polar bear fur used to create the large-scale linear pattern of Message (2015) was once, like the fur in Communion Thin, part of a beloved rug. In reutilizing it, Gruben upholds Inuvialuit values of using as much of a harvested animal as possible, for as long as possible. A polar bear rug might hold meaning for a particular person or family by embodying connections to a place or to personal stories and histories. In Message, Gruben’s proficiency with materials developed over a lifetime of sewing and working with local hides and furs becomes a conduit for opening up communicative agency to the animal, the nunuuq, itself. The Morse code SOS, ‘written’ out in guard hairs invokes, certainly, recent circulated images of polar bears that are dirty and desperately skinny, starving because the sea ice that was their traditional hunting ground at a specific time of year has disappeared. But Message doesn’t rely on dramatic representational footage and statistics. Rather, sitting between abstraction and syntax, it uses a restrained eloquence that admits viewers to the urgency of a real, material presence. It also admits them to a unique and beautiful manifestation of an interspecies relationship—now threatened—that had existed in a strong and stable balance for thousands of years.

Gestation (2016) uses the guard hairs and underfur of the polar bear each in distinct ways, creating a relational dynamic between psychologies of actively protecting and of being protected. The careful, precise construction of the felt circle that tightly binds guard hairs into tufts that radiate outwards in defined lines contrasts technically and aesthetically with the intuitive, improvisational approach to the dense underfur, which has been bundled and coaxed into soft, nascent forms. The circle is big enough to encompass a clutch of the fuzzy nodules. It is also big enough to encircle a fully grown human, bringing gestational inferences to an adult scale, encouraging viewers to engage emotionally with an embryonic state of being that is at once intensely generative and entirely passive—one in which you could have no control and yet still feel entirely safe. Just as easily, a viewer can connect to an innate desire to protect what is, in fundamental respects, vulnerable and utterly subject to contingent environmental conditions. Here, the material presence of fur supports recognition that infancy and parenthood, vulnerability and strength, are cross-species states of being. This can lead in turn to considerations of how, as sentient
The intensity of this dynamic is thrown into particular urgency by POPs—persistent organic pollutants—are a unique concern in the Arctic. Numerous pesticides and toxic industrial chemicals have a high degree of resistance to breakdown so when they are released into the atmosphere they will travel vast distances on warm and buoyant air currents until they reach the Arctic where cold air creates a ‘sink’, trapping them and causing an accumulation in the ocean and land. From there, they enter and work their way up local food chains. The benefits of breast milk for infants is a deep knowledge, and its specific benefits for their developing immune systems have been well researched and reported. POPs—persistent organic pollutants—are a unique concern in the Arctic. Numerous pesticides and toxic industrial chemicals have a high degree of resistance to breakdown so when they are released into the atmosphere they will travel vast distances on warm and buoyant air currents until they reach the Arctic where cold air creates a ‘sink’, trapping them and causing an accumulation in the ocean and land. From there, they enter and work their way up local food chains. The benefits of breast milk for infants is a deep knowledge, and its specific benefits for their developing immune systems have been well researched and reported.
Communion 36
2016
Polar bear guard hair, vinyl, cotton thread
70" X 76"
Message
Polar bear guard hair, cotton thread, black interface
180" X 24"
Gestation (opposite page)

2016

Polar bear guard hair, silicone wrap, polar bear underfur, white glue, thread

53” diameter

Memory Bones

2016

Plastic tubing, beads, moosehide

4” (each piece)
Stitching My Landscape (detail)
2017
Broadsheet, ice,
12' x 850' (approx.)

Stitching My Landscape (still)
2017
Colour high-definition video
5:45 min
Maureen Gruben was born in Tuktoyaktuk, NWT. She studied at Kelowna Okanagan College of Fine Arts (Diploma in Fine Arts, 1990), the En’owkin Centre in Penticton (Diploma in Fine Arts and Creative Writing, 2000 and Certificate in Indigenous Political Development & Leadership, 2001), and University of Victoria (BFA, 2012). She has been recognized by Kelowna’s En’owkin Centre with both their Eliza Jane Maracle Award (1998/99) and their Overall Achievement Award (1999/2000). In 2011 she was awarded the Elizabeth Valentine Phangned Scholarship Award from the University of Victoria. Gruben has most recently exhibited in the group show Blink at University of Victoria (2012) and Custom Made at Kamloops Art Gallery (2015).

Tania Willard, Secwepemc Nation, works within the shifting ideas around contemporary and traditional, often working with bodies of knowledge and skills that are conceptually linked to her interest in intersections between Aboriginal and other cultures. Willard has been a curator in residence with grunt gallery and Kamloops Art Gallery. Willard’s curatorial work includes the national touring exhibition Beat Nation: Art Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture, co-curated with Kathleen Ritter at the Vancouver Art Gallery. In 2016 Willard received the Award for Curatorial Excellence in Contemporary Art from the Hnatyshyn Foundation. Willard’s selected recent curatorial work includes Unceded Territories: Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Nanitch: Historical BC photography and BUSH gallery as well as the upcoming LandMarks2017/Repères 2017.

Kyra Kordoski was born in Whitehorse, YT, in 2007 and now resides in Victoria, BC. For the past year she has been working with Maureen Gruben as an artist assistant and writer, and has had the privilege of spending time at Maureen’s home in Tuktoyaktuk as a guest on multiple visits. Prior to this she completed an MA in Cultural Studies at Leeds University with a dissertation on visual strategies of social resistance, and an MFA in Art Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London. While in London she organized and participated in art writing events at Whitechapel Gallery, X Marks the Bokship, and Goldsmiths University. Her writing has been published in various arts publications, including C Magazine, White Fungus, BOMB and Art Handler Magazine. She is currently also working to document artworks created as part of LandMarks2017/Repères 2017.