

# A CONVERSATION WITH GAIL TREMBLAY

by Cathy Denning



Figure 1. Install view, Gail Tremblay, *Re-Imagining Film Images of American Indians*, solo exhibition, Froelick Gallery, 2018.

*Known for her multimedia work, critical writing and poetry, **Gail Tremblay** (Mi'kmaq and Onondaga) is a contemporary artist, educator, and beloved Indigenous Elder who has advocated tirelessly for Indigenous artists, particularly women, throughout her career. She first began weaving film baskets—with scraps collected from the cutting room floor—in 1985 while co-teaching a course called “Feminist and Third World Film Theory and Practice” with filmmaker Marge Brown.<sup>1</sup> Tremblay continues to explore the material and conceptual possibilities of analog film, weaving non-traditional baskets inspired by ash splint and sweet grass fancy stitch patterns to comment on Indigenous life in the 21st century.*

**CATHY DENNING:** I would like to start by asking you about your teachers. How did you learn to weave baskets? Who taught you about the traditional designs and construction techniques in Mi'kmaq and Onondaga basketry? Can you talk about this transference of knowledge?

**GAIL TREMBLAY:** I started by going out with my grandfather to gather sweetgrass for my great-aunt, and I learned to braid the grass from her. As I got older, my grandfather took me on his trips to gather ash and process it, and she taught me to weave. I eventually talked with other basket makers and learned more.

**CD:** The types of stitches and forms of your baskets are loosely inspired by Mi'kmaq and Onondaga basket making traditions. Do you incorporate other traditional designs or visual language patterns in your baskets?

**GT:** Since I moved to Washington to teach, I have not had the materials to work in the traditions I learned as a young person. The forms of my baskets are derived from the form of

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<sup>1</sup> The course's title used academic terminology ubiquitous in the 1980s. Third World was a term used by political scientists to describe countries in the Global South that had been colonized. It became obsolete when the Soviet Union fell in 1991. Tremblay and Brown's course explored the film theory and practice of those living in countries in Africa, Central and South America as well as parts of Asia and the Pacific Islands; it also looked at women filmmakers in the Global North. Particular attention focused on how filmmakers designed films and what they chose to say in both fictional narrative and documentary films.

traditional ash splint baskets, and I use some of the weaving techniques but there are things I don't wish to do because of the nature of the film footage. I have adapted techniques to work with film. If I were weaving with ash splints, I would shave the edges on the top and bottom of the basket, and I could create other shapes by varying the widths of the splints on the sides. I want to keep the film with its images and sprockets for projecting it intact, so I weave only square, rectangular and cylindrical forms. These baskets cannot be used like ash splint and sweetgrass baskets. I miss having access to brown and black ash to work with, as it is a wonderful material to weave, but my art serves a different function from traditional ash splint and sweetgrass baskets.

**CD:** Many of your more recent baskets use source material from the 1967 documentary *At the Winter Ice Sea Camp*, which focuses on the traditional lifestyle of the Netsilik Inuit peoples during the winter season on the Arctic Sea ice. What inspired you to weave a series of baskets using this particular film?<sup>2</sup>

**GT:** When Evergreen [State College] replaced their films with DVDs, they gave me a series of films on hunting and fishing practices of Inuit peoples in the Arctic. I chose the documentary, *At the Winter Sea Ice Camp*, because it was about traditional hunting practices in an environment endangered by global warming and sea ice melt.

**CD:** Before we get into the specific concepts behind each basket and the ways both the title and the materials reveal layers of complexity and meaning, could you first introduce the big ideas framing this cluster of baskets?

**GT:** The film was about hunting on the Arctic Sea ice, a practice that sustained culture and gave people, not just food, but materials for making clothing, dance regalia, musical instruments, and artworks that are a vital part of Netsilik Inuit traditional culture. I was thinking about colonization in Canada and the United States, and other parts of the world where the colonizers deplete the environment and create a greed-based economy that uses up others' resources to enrich themselves. People who run the settler states in Canada and the U.S. try to assimilate Native peoples by creating educational systems where they attempt to teach the Indigenous peoples to forget how to live in a way that helps people to preserve the natural world.

The work also critiques another way in which global warming is adding to the toxicity of water and to the marine animals the Inuit eat. With global warming, the fossil fuel industries in the United States, Canada, and Russia want to exploit oil in the Arctic by drilling in areas that are suddenly available because the ice is melting. These extractive economies have

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<sup>2</sup> The following baskets use source material from this documentary and will be featured in this conversation with the artist: *Will the Hunger to Make Money from Oil Melt the Sea Ice and Flood the Coastal Cities of the World?* (2018); *When the Ethnographic Present Ceases to Exist, Does the Red Leader Get Very Thin?* (2018); *If the Ice Melts and the Grass Grows on Small Islands in the Sea, Will Images of the Inuit World Become Fragments Lost in History* (2018); *Romancing the "Primitive": The Ethnographic Filmmaker Celebrates Sewing Clothes and Eating Seals (Life In and Out of Igloos Before the Ice Began to Melt)?* (2018).

now gotten access to oil they did not have access to previously when it was buried under ice. As a result of their drilling, there have been more oil spills in the Arctic, which are causing immense amounts of pollution that affect fish and sea mammals. With expanded access, these countries can sell more fossil fuels that will speed up global warming, so life on Earth becomes even more dangerous and tenuous.

I also wanted viewers to consider the filmmakers who were shooting a film where they asked people in the 1960s to reenact the lifestyle of their ancestors in the 1930s. Those ancestors made life possible for so many creatures in the Arctic to support one another's continued existence. At the same time, the filmmakers come from a settler culture that has a history of trying to destroy Netsilik culture by encouraging the people to leave traditions they remember and know how to practice behind. Not only does the settler culture in the United States and Canada try to educate Indigenous peoples from the Arctic to live more destructive lifestyles, but they also create images that make a large number of people in industrial culture see the Inuit peoples as "primitive" and living in a doomed ethnographic present.

**CD:** To clarify language for the reader, "ethnographic present" is an anthropological term that refers to problematic representations of modern or contemporary Indigenous peoples living a mythologized way of life prior to European contact. As Tremblay pointed out, while the documentary presents traditional Inuit lifestyles, culture remains "frozen" in time. That is, the so-called documentary constructs an image of Indigeneity; it shows the Inuit family reenacting what their ancestors did in the 1930s while omitting modern cultural adaptations and evidence of intercultural exchange.

**GT:** Of course, if you think about the filmmakers who want to represent the Inuit peoples and their cultural practices as they were in the past by creating moving images that show them living like their ancestors lived, it becomes clear they want to create a complex fiction in the mind of the viewer. Even though the filmmakers stated that this film is a reenactment, it doesn't help people to understand that in 1967 when this was filmed, many Inuit were Christians living in wood houses and using all kinds of trade items made by factories in the Canada and the United States. After 1963, the Netsilik Inuit had electricity in their houses and were beginning to use new things. In fact, there was a day school in the place where the Netsilik Inuit in the film lived, and people had heat and appliances, radios and televisions in their houses, and owned gas-powered snowmobiles. They continued to hunt seals but with snowmobiles, not dogsleds.

**CD:** There's so many things I want to follow up on, including the aspect of reenactment and this idea of the ethnographic present. But first, let's return to the material structure of your film baskets so we can use this as a lens through which to explore these ideas. As you emphasized, it is important for you to retain the sprocket holes on the film as this is indicative of the medium and what enables the images to be projected. Over the years, you have woven baskets with a variety of film formats including Super 8, Single-8, 16mm, 35mm and audio fullcoat. In addition to film reels, you also weave with multicolored film leader, end pieces of film that are color-coded to indicate different reels and other projection cues. With that said, could you discuss

some of your material choices for the basket, *Will the Hunger to Make Money from Oil Melt the Sea Ice and Flood the Coastal Cities of the World?* (See Figure 2).

**GT:** I chose this transparent green film leader, because it reminds me of the color of U.S. money, and I used gold braid because, in many places, money is based on gold and silver. The green is also a reference to land, and that after the ice melts, little islands on the sea can appear and green things can grow. The white leader represents the ice. The only place you can see the images of the film are on the top and bottom of the basket because the rest of it is woven behind the green leader. You can kind of see it, but it's really hard to see behind the green leader that is woven in porcupine stitch. There are all these layers of irony that lead me to choose the porcupine stitch in this series of baskets. For instance, the dominant culture romanticizes the traditional lifestyle while at the same time destroys the traditional lifestyle. I think this irony is such a prickly thing when you're looking at culture and cultural history.

**CD:** In this basket, there seems to be a certain refusal to show the imagery since it is woven underneath the porcupine stitches. Is your intention to make the imagery illegible?

**GT:** I chose to hide the images of people hunting and living on the ice (that viewers can only see in fragments on the top and bottom of the basket) and to bury them under the green porcupine stitch on the sides of the basket, because I think that the way greed destroys traditional culture is a prickly affair (see Figure 3).

**CD:** Even though you at times conceal the images, viewers often want to know more about the specific imagery in each basket. I wonder if you could describe what's happening in the film imagery so we can start to unpack more of the complexity of your work.

**GT:** The images show Inuit peoples hunting for marine mammals and eating seals in the Arctic. The Native peoples in the documentary film were chosen because they knew how to hunt and live in the traditional way, in the way their grandparents did. They were able to take the filmmakers out on the ice, build an igloo, and use dog sleds to go out on the ice instead of using modern technologies like gas-driven snowmobiles.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the 1960s, the Inuit, Yupik, Inupiat, and other peoples in the Arctic could still go and hunt seals through holes in the ice, pull them up, and bring them back to an igloo. They knew how to enjoy eating seal meat raw and drinking the blood, which I think is something that shocks people from settler culture who don't live in the Arctic. Eating fresh meat raw, and preserving it by freezing or drying it, are practices that make up parts of a traditional lifestyle that was still possible to film in the 1960s. But as stated, already things were beginning to change.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In a phone conversation with the artist, Tremblay explained: "While the first snowmobiles were invented in 1922, they were not commonly used among Native peoples in the Arctic until the 1960s. In that period, many peoples still used dog sleds and kept dog teams."

<sup>4</sup> For more context on the modern changes and adaptations the film omits, Tremblay recommends artist Joseph E. Senungetuk's 1971 book, *Give or Take a Century: An Eskimo Chronicle*, which discusses his early life experiences.

**CD:** What does it mean for you as an artist to make a basket in the 21st century that re-contextualizes a documentary made in 1967 about life in the Arctic, a film that, in and of itself, constructs an interesting temporal dynamic?

**GT:** When making this basket, I was thinking about what happened in the Inuit culture between 1967 and the period in 2018 when I was weaving it. I felt a desperate need to comment on the way the film footage I used created a fiction that makes it seem like Indigenous culture doesn't change. At the same time if one studies what is actually happening, it is obvious that all cultures in the whole world have always been changing, and in the 21st century there is incredible change, so much change that in the next 50 years, it may be utterly impossible to do what the Inuit ancestors did to maintain a healthy Arctic ecosystem because there won't be enough sea ice on which it is possible for the Inuit to hunt. In my mind, that is the sort of trajectory that the basket explores. Indeed, if the temperature continues to rise, humans who are not living in harmony with the natural world, and many other species of plants and animals who are innocent of harming things, may become extinct.

Because of global warming, the sea ice in the Arctic is melting rapidly. When I look at this film made in 1967, it makes me reflect on the fact that while it may have been possible for people to safely use dogsleds and to hunt seals through holes in the ice in the 1960s, it was not as safe to do so in 2018 after the ice started to melt and break apart. Indeed, as the sea ice breaks up and melts, it becomes impossible for both humans and polar bears. Because the film doesn't show you the incursions of things from Canadian and U.S. culture, the footage used in the basket gives viewers an inaccurate view of Inuit reality in 1967 because it doesn't show the lives of Inuit peoples. When I looked at the film at the time I made the basket in 2018, I was aware that the traditional way of life pictured in the film wasn't safe any longer. It was becoming dangerous to live a way of life that was practiced in the Arctic from time immemorial until the middle of the 20th century, not just because of global warming and sea ice melt, but also because it was no longer safe to eat the diet that Inuit peoples have always eaten. In 2018, many of the sea mammals and fish in a Netsilik Inuit traditional diet have been polluted by chemicals that will cause cancer and other diseases that will kill people in Indigenous communities. The drilling of oil in the Arctic is endangering people and making the life of so many species tenuous.

Clearly the effects of colonization and the practices of settler culture have endangered traditional Indigenous cultures in very complicated ways. People who continue to use this film made in educational settings are teaching people to understand what is happening out of cultural context. As a consequence, many are not clear about the deadly effects of what is actually happening to an ecosystem and the people who have maintained it for centuries.

**CD:** How do your baskets reconstruct problematic film narratives?

**GT:** I deconstruct and reconstruct celluloid film by cutting it apart and weaving it into a conceptual object influenced by the form of the traditional ash splint and sweetgrass basketry

of my peoples as a way to comment on the contemporary culture in North America and the mythology and ecological destruction it creates. There is the irony of using film and images from the dominant culture, which is making the traditional materials that we use extinct, yet these film images are the same materials that the dominant culture uses to define us. The dominant culture romanticizes the traditional lifestyle, and at the same time, destroys it.

**CD:** The basket entitled, *When the Ethnographic Present Ceases to Exist, Does the Red Leader Get Very Thin?*, is unique in that the film footage, rather than the leader, is used to weave the porcupine stitch (which forms points). Not only do the black and red film leaders create a striking visual design, but the images on the 16mm film strip are easily visible on the lid of the basket.

**GT:** I found 8mm leader to use with 16mm film. When I wove the red leader behind the film, it gave a kind of red glow to the image. And then, in between the red and black checkerboard weave, one can see the images on the point. If one holds the basket up to the light, one can see the images on the basket. About half of the pieces of film I cut are light in color and are shot out on the sea ice and show the people hunting seals. The other half are dark and are shot in the igloo with people living and working together. Viewers can see both the inside and outside activities. I think it's pretty obvious on the lid that half of the piece has light-colored film and the other half has dark-colored film; the same is true for the bottom of the basket (**see Figure 4**).

**CD:** Yes, the strips on the lid alternate between interior and exterior scenes. The images on the lid show a person eating seal meat, including close-ups of their hands bringing food to their mouth. There are images of the hunter by the seal breathing hole in the ice, images of women in sealskin coats in the igloo making things, and images of people outside on the ice. The images on the bottom are varied: in one strip, a man is creating a fish trap of some sort out of bone; in the next strip, you see him leaving it near a seal hole on the ice. The film strips on the bottom that form the foundation of the basket are more difficult to decipher because they are more layered. Can you talk more about the construction techniques you use? How did you arrange these film strips to build a foundation for the basket?

**GT:** For round baskets, I build a cylindrical form to construct the basket. I arrange the pieces of film footage around that form and then I twine the bottom with braid to connect them before weaving up the sides.

**CD:** In previous correspondence, you mentioned the basket, *If the Ice Melts and the Grass Grows on Small Islands in the Sea, Will Images of the Inuit World Become Fragments Lost in History?*, is in part inspired by noted Passamaquoddy artist Jeremy Frey (**see Figure 5**). His sea urchin baskets use a really tight stitch and include spaces in between the porcupine stitches to create interesting forms.

**GT:** I did that in several of the baskets—in a suite of baskets for my 2018 exhibit at Froelick Gallery, and I made a couple in an earlier suite of baskets.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes I use porcupine stitches, and other times, if you have something that looks like a porcupine stitch on the top and bottom of a row, then it makes something called a bird-mouth stitch because it looks like an open beak. There are different kinds of stitches; this one doesn't have a bird-mouth stitch on it, but some of the baskets that I've woven are similar to bird-mouth stitches. Different baskets have different combinations of stitches like strawberry stitch, but in most of these, I just used a porcupine stitch. This one I did because by using skinny white 8mm film leader, I could create fragments of the film frame on the 16mm film, so that it cuts off and frames the image differently, which I thought was fun to do (see Figure 6-7).

**CD:** There is intention behind the colors you use as well. Here, blue and green indicate water and land, referring to what can happen when the ice melts.

**GT:** And the white leader framing those little slits of film represents what happens before things melt. Whereas the green and blue are covering the little slits of film, so you don't get to see the little slits of film after the ice melts. In this way, the weave structure is blocking the images that were created before the ice started to melt.

**CD:** Oftentimes, like in this work, you use gold and silver metallic ribbon to weave a decorative outer edge on the basket's lid. Can you comment on the significance of this?

**GT:** It refers to greed and the profit motive, and the desire people had to come to the Americas, because to them, it was gold mountain. It was someplace you could get rich where there were all of these incredible resources that had not been used up, and so people could make a small fortune extracting gold, silver and gems and cutting the forests to make money.

**CD:** In your artist statement, you say it is essential to deconstruct stereotypes of Natives as primitive and exotic—or “frozen” in a mythologized past—and that this work is necessary for environmental justice. In your view, why is the struggle for Indigenous rights connected to environmental justice?

**GT:** Native lifestyles are dependent on place. Traditional lifestyles depend on maintaining and sustaining the environment. When you can't practice traditional economies, and the dominant culture destroys the land that you've always used, or you're denied access to places where you've always hunted and gathered materials and medicine—it's horrifying. It's horrifying to be robbed of the wealth of your territory and everything that goes with it. That is why you see Native peoples throughout the Americas fight for the environment. Global warming will affect so many things we do.

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<sup>5</sup> Gail Tremblay's 2018 solo exhibition, *Re-Imagining Film Images of American Indians*, was presented at Froelick Gallery in Portland, Oregon.

The materials for making traditional ash splint basketry, for example, are endangered. The emerald ash borer (an invasive beetle indigenous to Asia) is destroying ash trees in the northeastern region of the United States. When black or brown ash is a person's major basket material, what do you do if it ceases to exist? It is a question I have heard friends, including Jeremy Frey, the master Passamaquoddy basket maker, ask. How do you prevent the ash borer from destroying everything? And the ash borer ends up in your territory because it's warmer than it was. When it doesn't freeze hard in the winter anymore, the ash borer isn't being killed anymore. That disrupts the ecology, and in turn, limits access to traditional resources. We're losing access to materials that we have used for thousands of years. It's a complicated history that many non-Native people who don't have close relationships with the natural world where they live don't think about.

I use films to comment on these layers of complexity. In some places, whites now own land where materials we need to gather are located, lands where Native peoples have always gathered since time immemorial. Now, in some cases, we can only gather in national parks and on public lands, or in places where you have to get permission to get food, medicine, art materials, and all the things related to carrying on traditional culture. It's very complicated. It's difficult when things are becoming extinct. Territories are being drowned. Whole areas of coastal regions where Natives have lived since time immemorial are becoming uninhabitable. For instance, Indigenous peoples based in coastal northwestern Washington are trading their land on the coast where they have always lived for higher territory inland because the land is beginning to flood. The Everglades in Florida will be underwater if the ice continues to melt. The Seminoles and Miccosukees will have to go somewhere else. Because of all this, many Native peoples can no longer eat traditional foods, so one must rely on government rationed foods, which are very heavy in sugar and salt. This is why Natives are 40% more likely to develop diabetes and heart disease today, for example.

"Freezing" Indigenous peoples who pass down knowledge about how to live in harmony with the natural world into an ethnographic past that doesn't change, allows people who steal Indigenous land and resources to define Indigenous lifestyles as "primitive" and to see themselves as civilized, inventive, and sophisticated. Settler culture frames the exploitation of the Earth as an inevitable part of progress, and they try to get Indigenous peoples to see them as superior. This has allowed settler culture to fail to question the ways they destroy the planet. Non-Indigenous people in industrial societies do not reflect or value Indigenous strategies for sustaining culture, and that has in the end, endangered their own descendants and made it difficult for future generations of all people to survive. At this point, since we are all living in this chaotic moment where things are so desperately out of balance, we need to figure out how to work together to use both old and new strategies to change the way we live to protect the Earth.

**CD:** Could you talk about the imagery used in the basket entitled, *Romancing the "Primitive": The Ethnographic Filmmaker Celebrates Sewing Clothes and Eating Seals (Life In and Out of Igloos Before the Ice Began to Melt)*? (See Figure 8-9).

**GT:** The film imagery used in this basket shows a small Inuit community eating raw seal meat and drinking fresh seal blood. It shows women sewing things and making clothing and children's toys using seal skin and other materials from the seal. The women are also shown making traditional parkas and garments. The people in that area piece different colors and kinds of fur together to make these incredible clothes, and you get to see that in the footage. At the same time, at that moment in history, people were also getting clothes from the department store and making things with imported materials. It was possible in Native villages to buy things that came from the lower 48 [states], and it was also possible to buy cotton cloth and materials that Inuit peoples never made and didn't have access to. But again, the film doesn't show these things.

**CD:** For the most part, 16mm film is woven underneath a dark red translucent film leader. In two rows of the basket, located just above and below the center of the basket, the 16mm film is woven with white film leader, which helps to frame and backlight the negative. Red metallic braid is used on the outer edge of the basket's lid. It is wrapped around the white circular band just below the top two rows of porcupine stitches. Could you talk more about the material construction and the deep, brilliant red overlaying the film strip?

**GT:** I chose red leader and metallic yarn because at times the people in the footage are drinking seal blood and eating raw seal, which is very red. I chose the red to highlight a practice that a lot of non-Native people find very difficult to even watch. I also chose footage of them preparing seal skins for making clothes. The process of skinning animals and cleaning the inside of the hide so that you can make it ready to sew, shows how the materials you use to make your clothes can be a by-product of what you eat. In the U.S., most people don't think about the way they have invented industrial processes for using hides to make shoes, belts, and even to make furniture. Neither do large numbers of people kill and clean the animals they eat, nor do they make sure all the parts are used. Euro-American students often express negative things about these scenes and don't understand how reverent the Indigenous people are of animals who die for them so they can survive.

I have a sense of that reverence we feel when we kill and prepare deer and moose we have killed. We also prepare the hide and gather all the parts we use. I've had students who come from Euro-American culture, and their only reference to killing and eating animals is buying packages wrapped in plastic in the grocery store. When non-Native people watch when I actually prepare a large moose or prepare a hide, they're kind of grossed out by how bloody or messy things are, and yet, it's a perfectly natural activity. When I think of eating a moose, for example—since I'm not a seal eater—I feel grateful that the moose is such an amazing creature. It has the most tender, delicious meat because moose love to swim and eat little water plants from the bottom lakes and ponds, so their meat is incredibly tender and tasty and has a wonderful flavor. I just loved eating moose in the Eastern woodlands where I grew up.

It is also a wonderful art supply store—we use the sinews to make thread for sewing. Only the tips of the moose hair are dark brown; the bottoms are white. Like porcupine quills, one can dye moose hair to get this incredible shiny eight-inch long thread for embroidery work. So, we

have moose hair embroidery on our moccasins. Moose skin, when it's prepared and tanned, is really tough and wears well, so one can make moccasins that are comfortable and will protect one's feet when one is walking over rocks and prickly plants. Moose leg bones, because the moose is large and heavy, are very dense and amazing. As a result, moose bones are wonderful to carve and to make necklaces and other things. All of the parts of the moose get used in different ways. I mean, we even take the very small hooves on the backs of moose and deer legs—the little short ones—and hang them from an anklet that men, traditionally, tie around their ankles. When people dance, they make a wonderful clacking noise that adds to the rhythm of the drum. That's why Indigenous peoples in the U.S. and southern Canada used to wear before we traded with Europeans for metal bells. Nowadays, people often put bells on their ankles when they dance at pow wows, but in the longhouse, there are still people who hang these small deer hooves from anklets when they dance. It becomes part of the cultural life of the people and we are grateful to the animals we kill for all the gifts they give us and the way they help us to survive and fill our lives with beauty. Traditionally, you have this whole kind of relationship between what you eat and what you use to make your art that's really interesting.

**CD:** [That is fascinating.](#)

**GT:** My friend, Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie, who is an amazing Native filmmaker and photographer, made a film about Navajo slaughtering sheep so they could make dinner and use the hides and wool from the sheep to make different things. Non-native people who had never seen any animal killed and cleaned nor watched Native peoples prepare art materials from animals, reported feeling sick to their stomachs because they weren't used to seeing blood. So, there is this level of what is acceptable in different cultural contexts.

Of course, industrial slaughtering practices are very different than traditional Indigenous hunting practices, which prepare and thank the animal for dying and has ceremonies to make sure the animals will survive. Traditional hunters work hard to waste nothing. Animals are sacred and support people's lives and the production of traditional art and culture. For those reasons, Indigenous peoples must care for and support the continued existence of the animals and their habitat.

For example, when Indigenous peoples hunt birds, they not only eat them, but they use their feathers as well. In some places, they can use bird skins and bones from certain birds. In the Arctic, they'll make clothing out of bird skins, and I remember seeing them in an exhibit of art from various cultures in the Arctic. I have also prepared fish skins for use as well as stomach linings for making things. So, you have all these materials that are made out of things that are part of the whole process of hunting and gathering.

To this day, Lakota peoples, when they slaughter one of the tribal buffalo to cook for pow wow, not only cook the meat, but they will also give the hide to a person who can prepare it and paint a Winter Count blanket—a sort of pictorial history book—on the inside of the hide. They will give other people the horns to make these incredible spoons with bird heads, where the beak and the head of bird will rest on the outside of the container so the spoon doesn't fall into

the soup. In that way, they have people who know how to design and make such objects, and they make and teach others to make all these traditional beautiful things from the parts of bison. When people upset the balance in any ecosystem maintained by traditional Indigenous peoples, it is then difficult for Natives to find traditional materials— then Native artists have to create a whole new way of making art. I think about these things when I'm making these contemporary objects.

**CD:** Let's circle back to *Romancing the "Primitive": The Ethnographic Filmmaker Celebrates Sewing Clothes and Eating Seals (Life in and out of Igloos Before the Ice Began to Melt)*. The title emphasizes the filmmaker's celebration and fascination with the traditional lifestyle, yet also calls attention to an ironic discomfort towards traditional foods and the processes of preparing foods and materials illustrating settler culture's jarring disconnect to the environment.

**GT:** This dynamic is also part of what allows people in industrial cultures to create too many things. Because so many in industrial cultures have other people who take care of all of the production of their food and their clothing and the things they need, they have time to invent other things, so you get this situation where people are inventing new objects and technologies very quickly. In earlier times, when there weren't so many conveniences, people had to wash their own clothes with a washboard—I mean, just the act of living and producing your food, building your house, weaving cloth, and preparing materials for everything took all of your time, so we didn't invent as many things as fast.

When one thinks about painting, it used to be that a painter had to grind the pigments, mix them with oil or something else to bind the pigment, create the paint, and do this and do that. Any painting that's done in the Americas before contact with colonizers was created by a person who knew how to make paint, who had to create the thing you painted on, whether it was a paper or a hide or a woven piece of cloth, they had to be able to create it, and they did. Then suddenly you can go to the store and buy it all. In some ways, painting becomes separated from the process of living and dependent on making enough money to buy the materials you use.

It used to be that people did all of this stuff to preserve food in the summer. They would grow and preserve food, and then in the winter, they would sit around the fire and make things. Because at the same time they were preserving the food, they were gathering and preparing materials from plants and animals to make everything they needed, and then all winter they would make things with these materials. So, you had this situation where people worked out a way of living where they created their whole universe.

Many Indigenous peoples work hard to maintain their traditions. For example, Indian peoples in Mexico and Central and South America, oftentimes make things that they've made for generations. They weave cotton and make huipils, women's traditional dress. They will gather cochineal bugs in order to make red dye, grow and spin cotton, weave, and then dye it. They will also dye threads and embroider with them. But a modern weaver expects somebody to sell those materials at the weaving store. They don't have to go out and hunt the cactus for

cochineal and make the dye, so you've got a situation which separates people from knowing about the cost and the environmental relationship of everything Native peoples traditionally made. Many Indigenous artists today must buy materials as they often no longer have access to traditional materials their ancestors used. We used to pray and leave gifts when we gathered materials directly from the natural world, and often we would create designs that referred to traditional stories and beliefs. I know artists who still do this as part of their artistic practice, and when I am making certain objects for use in my community, I do this myself. Other times, I try to think about issues people in the 21st century need to think about if they are going to live in harmony with the circle of things that supports life, and I try to put objects, poems, writing, and ideas into the world that will help people think about how to live in harmony and make life possible on this planet.

In some ways, I'm making reference to that in a sideways kind of way when I make a basket like this. I use the title to indicate things I'm thinking about, and I'm always thinking about this stuff. I'm always trying to think about it when I'm using castoff objects from another culture and making comments about the concept of how people from one culture see another culture in a different way. That's why I'm using the film—I'm basically recycling.

**CD:** In your view, what does it mean for you to use Mi'kmaq and Onondaga methods to construct a basket using materials that reference Inuit culture?

**GT:** I am a Native person using my own tribal lens to comment on what I see happening at this moment in the world where I live. I see the way settlers and their descendants in the U.S. and Canada live, and I listen and watch while they do things and comment on things. I study the things they do and make, and how those things affect the Earth who makes our lives possible. I see the people who are exploiting and destroying the Earth, I see the greedy and the violent people who make war and don't know how to share and care for things, and I see the people struggling to care for things and save the planet. I see people trying to learn new things who realize they have no idea how to live in harmony with the natural world, and who feel very uncomfortable with changes that might become necessary or even inevitable if humans want an environment where they can survive. I see and think about so many things, and I try to figure out from the things I see what I should say about the situation we are all in because people have been acting without much thought. I think we all need to learn from one another and share and critique our ideas until we can think together and figure out how to share and care for the Earth and make things better.

At the same time, I think it is important for me to create art from my own cultural perspective and to speak with a voice informed by my ancestors. I live in a world with all kinds of people and I learn from interacting with them and caring about them. I want people who are being destructive to figure out how to live better and more generous lives, and I believe we should see all humans as deserving equality and a chance to create a better and less destructive world. I worry that too many humans haven't figured out how to care for one another and how to make the world healthy for one another and all of the plants and animals in it. I always know I need to learn something from everyone I see. In the end, I think it means that as someone

whose Mi'kmaq and Onondaga ancestors taught to value everything on the Earth, that I must be responsible to think about the best things I can do to help others to think about difficult things we need to do together and what we need to know about what we have been taught, and to help others understand that we need to share.

I think my art practice shows that this work can be done without forgetting who I am and where I come from. I don't want to appropriate other art styles, but I do want to speak about the things I see and do in a way that feels culturally relevant to me. My Inuit, Yupik and Inupiat friends have taught me things. The images Europeans have made of the Inuit peoples in this film have given me a lot to think about, and I hope that the relationships I see between other Indigenous cultures and my own is useful to people from those cultures and to others who see my work.

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*(Note: This interview was compiled from transcribed telephone conversations and written correspondence, conducted over the course of June through September 2020.)*



**Figure 2. Will the Hunger to Make Money from Oil Melt the Sea Ice and Flood the Coastal Cities of the World?**, 2018. 16mm film (*At the Winter Sea Ice Camp: Part 1*, 1967), translucent green and white film leader, gold braid, 9 x 7 x 7 in.



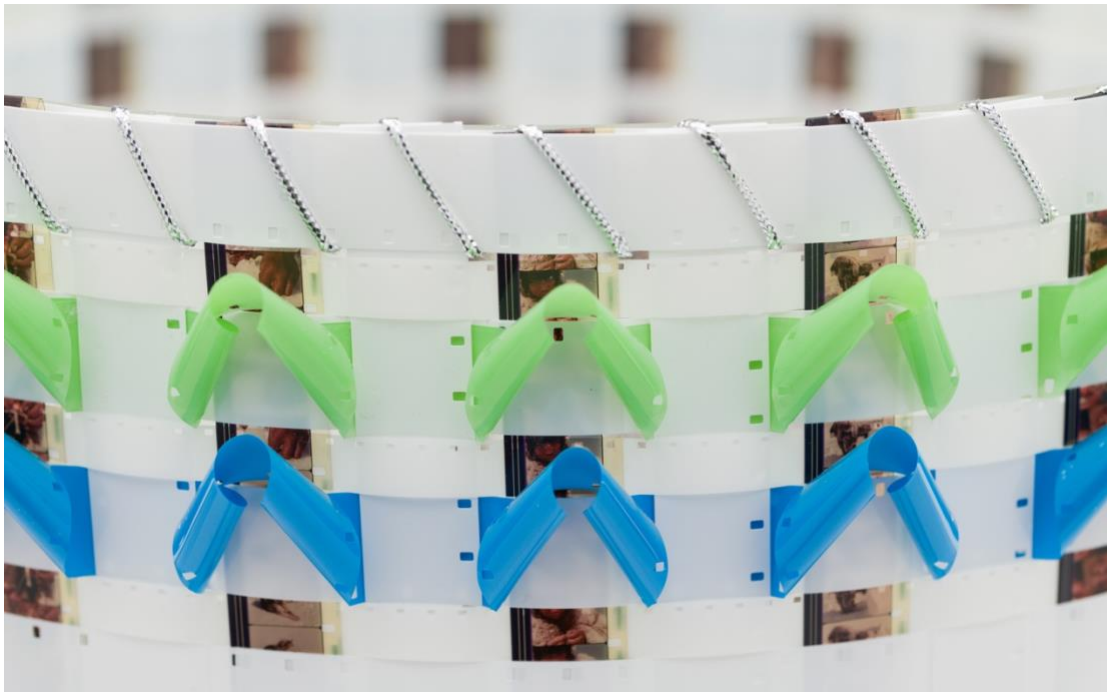
**Figure 3.** *Will the Hunger to Make Money from Oil Melt the Sea Ice and Flood the Coastal Cities of the World?*, 2018. Detail.



**Figure 4.** *When the Ethnographic Present Ceases to Exist, Does the Red Leader Get Very Thin?*, 2018. 16mm film (*At the Winter Sea Ice Camp: Part 2*, 1967), red film leader, silver braid, 9.5 x 7 x 7 in. Private Collection.



**Figure 5. If the Ice Melts and the Grass Grows on Small Islands in the Sea, Will Images of the Inuit World Become Fragments Lost in History, 2018. 16mm film (*At the Winter Sea Ice Camp: Part 2*, 1967), green, blue and white film leader, silver and gold braid, 24 x 13.5 x 13.5 in.**



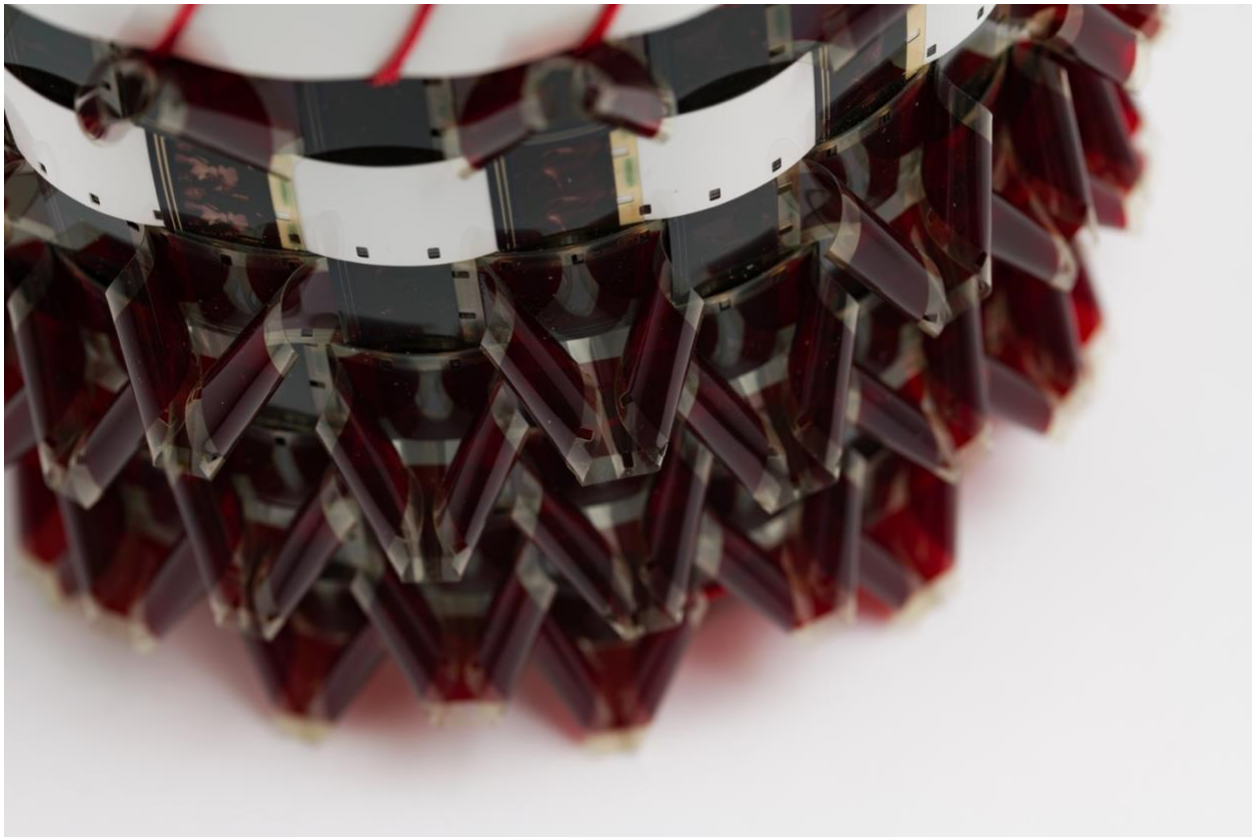
**Figure 6. If the Ice Melts and the Grass Grows on Small Islands in the Sea, Will Images of the Inuit World Become Fragments Lost in History, 2018. Detail.**



**Figure 7. If the Ice Melts and the Grass Grows on Small Islands in the Sea, Will Images of the Inuit World Become Fragments Lost in History, 2018. Detail 1.**



**Figure 8. Romancing the "Primitive": The Ethnographic Filmmaker Celebrates Sewing Clothes and Eating Seals (Life In and Out of Igloos Before the Ice Began to Melt), 2018.** 16mm film (*At the Winter Sea Ice Camp: Part 2, 1967*), red translucent film leader, red braid, 10 x 7 x 7 in.



**Figure 9. Romancing the "Primitive": The Ethnographic Filmmaker Celebrates Sewing Clothes and Eating Seals (Life In and Out of Igloos Before the Ice Began to Melt), 2018. Detail.**