

## COLIN BROWNE / “We’re still here . . .”: The Alutiiq Masks of Perry Eaton

*The following interview with Alaskan artist Perry Eaton was conducted over three sessions, the first in Fair Harbour, Washington, on June 13th, 2012, the second in Anchorage, Alaska, on September 9th, 2012, and the third via Skype on March 30th, 2013. We began by speaking about one of Perry’s masks called “Yellow Singer,” carved from yellow cedar in 2004. “Yellow Singer” is a stylized bird with a mouth that looks as if it’s whistling and a halo of beautiful feathers. In shape, “Yellow Singer” echoes one of the masks acquired on Kodiak Island by French linguist and ethnographer Alphonse Pinart in 1871. These masks were transported back to France and eventually deposited by Pinart in the Chateau Musée in Boulogne-sur-Mer, France, where they are now on display. From May-September 2013, Perry Eaton’s most recent masks will be exhibited at the Galerie Orenda in Paris, along with the works of Iñupiat artists Larry Ahvakana and Sonya Kelliher-Combs.*

COLIN BROWNE: “Yellow Singer” has a very beautiful, quizzical look on his face, which, I confess, makes me see him as a poet.

PERRY EATON: I think I can understand that. “Yellow Singer” is a type of mask made to be danced, with a whistle that sends sound between the worlds.

CB: Please say more.

PE: I can only tell you so much. I’d heard the stories about the wooden whistle that you hold in your mouth when you dance, but I didn’t appreciate how important the sound quality was. When you look at the masks in the Chateau Musée, in the Pinart collection, and when you turn them over, the back of the mask can reveal as much as the front. The insides of the round-holed singing masks are finished very smoothly in the mouth area, which suggests that the audio tone was very important. I think in a way these were tuned instruments, and the whistle used was a very controlled sound, but we’ve never found one so we don’t know. We’ve gone through the literature. You’ll read two hundred pages to glean a line.

There'll be one line that'll give you a clue. You accumulate these single lines; you start to put them together and you get images.

CB: Was the sound made by the dancer?

PE: Yes, and I believe that they were danced in multiples, much like a chorus or a choir, and that they produced different sounds. One of the masks in the Pinart collection has a rather large mouth, maybe the largest of the round-mouthed masks in the collection. It had caribou hair inserted in two little bunches opposite each other in the mouth opening, way in front, right in the centre section of the mouth, and it acted like a mute. The sound quality was very important. It was not an accidental thing. I believe that the pitch and the tone had real meaning. It had communication qualities that might even have spoken to issues.

There's a modern whistle made in a couple of the villages that goes back a long way, and they make it out of a string and a piece of wood. It's a vibrating whistle. There's still a whistle used in the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq village of Nanwalek (English Bay), in the *Maskalatag*, which is the New Year's mask dance. The whistle would have been behind the mask; you would have only heard the sound. No one's ever found one, but the legend and the oral tradition of the wooden whistle is absolute, plus you have the Russian documentation.

CB: So much has been lost.

PE: The missionary period in Alaska was particularly brutal. And the Alutiiq, or Sugpiaq, which is our traditional name, weathered a double assimilation. We had the Russian assimilation and Christianization. The language and belief system gets attacked during the Russian period, and then along comes America in 1867, so you've got to learn a whole new language and a new set of values, a new system, a new pecking order. But for the Americans, the one thing we weren't was heathens. So we missed out on a little bit of the American missionary brutality by hiding in our Orthodoxy. To the Americans we'd become Russians, you know, "misguided Christians." But, at the same time, we suppressed our Nativeness because that had become a frightful stigma.

CB: Were you born in Kodiak?

PE: I was born in Kodiak on May 30, 1945. My grandfather Perry Eaton, who I'm named after, had come into the country in 1902 after the Spanish-American war and had helped found Valdez. But there were very few ladies in Valdez, and so one of the guys from Kodiak—they were working on the Kennacott-Cordova Bridge together—said, "Come on down to Kodiak! We've got girls! I'll introduce ya!" And he did! The guy's name was Anton Larsen, and he introduced my grandfather to his sister-in-law, Gertrude Squartoff from Ouzinkie, and my grandfather married her. Ouzinkie is a small village on Spruce Island just a few miles north of the town of Kodiak. My grandmother grew up there, but by 1915 she was living in town.

We lived in Kodiak until the 1950s, and then we were looking at boarding school or whatever, and my older brother had drowned—he had actually disappeared—at five-thirty one night during the war, off the beach. He was playing, and he probably stumbled off the reef or something and was never found. That left a mark on Mom. So in 1951 we moved to Seattle. I did K through 12 in the Seattle area, but I'd go home every summer. I grew up on the fishing boats. Started commercial fishing when I was ten years old, like all the other local boys. And I was in and out of Ouzinkie village; I never really lived there, but I knew who I was and where I fit in.

CB: I wonder if you could explain what that means.

PE: You really lived in boxes. There was a Native box, there was a Russian box, and there was a white or American box. And racial discrimination was pretty strong at that time. One of the ways the chain was broken was when a Native woman married a white man. The kids were considered white. There was real pressure for Native women to marry white, even in the late 50s. It was definitely a stigma to be Native at that time. You didn't do things that labelled you. Even with my grandmother. I'd use local terminology and Native words for things—and she'd tap the table: "No, no, no, no. That's a long time ago, a long time ago. That's not us today." She didn't want to hear it. She had crossed that line and it was a terrible thing for her generation.

My great-grandmother Anisia Squartoff, who passed in 1969, didn't leave our village, Ouzinkie, for over forty years, and it's only forty minutes away from



Kodiak by skiff, twelve minutes by air. She didn't speak good English and she was ostracized and ridiculed when she went to town. Five feet tall. Little Native woman. She was the midwife in the village, a pillar of the church, and very well respected. She became a very powerful elder. She just didn't have to take that, so she just stayed in her own world.

CB: Were you embarrassed yourself?

PE: Oh, yes. If you were somebody who came into Kodiak in the 1940s, after the war, and you met my father, you would not associate him with being a Native. So you dealt with him and he dealt with people on an equal basis. In the village it was different; he had a foot in each world. But nobody in the village would embarrass him in front of an outsider. You wouldn't disclose. Those lines were so distinct when we were growing up, and you crossed them and re-crossed them. You grew up with two sets of values. And you're in your twenties and thirties before things begin to sink in and you begin to realize that there is one world, and then there is another world. I'm privileged to have lived long enough to be able to look back and to have a conversation like this. I can think of half a dozen of my relatives and friends who grew up during that period who never really understood the dynamics of what was going on around them.

CB: I'd like to go back to the Russian ancestry. At that time, say, if your family had relatives in Russia . . .

PE: . . . nobody knew. During the early part my life the Cold War eliminated any chance of linking with Russia. The guys in Gamble on St. Lawrence Island, they can see their cousins across the channel but didn't get to visit them for seventy years. They're right there, and you know their names, but we in Kodiak were once removed. The Russians who were left in Russian America were mostly Creole, mostly mixed blood.

CB: That was the term, Creole?

PE: Creole, or Colonial Citizens, which you often see, means mixed blood. It was sort of an elite status under the Russian system. If your father was Russian and your mother was Native, it didn't matter whether she was Tlingit or Suqpiq,

you were a Colonial Citizen; therefore, you had rights. You got to vote, you got to go to school, and you could go back to Russia to be trained. By the 1860s almost all the middle and upper management of the Russian-American Company was Creole. Which makes perfectly good sense. You work fifteen years, you retire, you get a land grant, and you're a loyal citizen. You're an equal. You are treated totally differently than the Natives. Then, in 1867, when Russia sells Alaska to the United States, you go from the status of being an elite citizen to being a half-breed in American society with no rights whatsoever. So if you could find a place to hide, like Orthodoxy, you'd embrace that in a heartbeat. Kodiak is really the crossroad where we got this double assimilation.

CB: Some Natives or Creoles became priests, didn't they? And some became saints?

PE: I think there's one Native saint. Peter. He was an Aleut who was killed by the Jesuits in California. Christians are hard on each other! This brotherly love crap just goes so far!

CB: Am I right to say that you went to art school?

PE: I was not a very good student. I was one of those oddball kids who dominated the art room. I went to a small college in Aberdeen, Washington—Grays Harbour College. There was an art professor there who was a big influence on me, Richard Lambert. As an artist he was heavily into collage and that took me into a new depth that I hadn't encountered before. I did all my work outside of class. I painted a lot, won a couple of awards including Painter of the Year for the college.

I spent a year there, then got married and Ardene and I moved up to Seattle. I went to work for Boeing and served a sort of accelerated apprenticeship as an experimental machinist in the wind tunnel. I had a wonderful formal training in symmetry, shape, and precision that has influenced my work through the years. I spent about three years at Boeing and decided that I was not a factory worker and ended up working for Seattle First National Bank as a trainee. I did really well, spent about four years with them, and had something I could come home with. So in 1970 I wrote a letter to a banker here in Anchorage. And of course the Native land claims were getting ready to be settled, and my father was the head of the

Kodiak Area Native Association and kept tapping me on the shoulder and saying, "It's time to come home, it's time to come home." So I did.

CB: So you moved to Anchorage and became involved in the resolution of land claims and the creation of the Native corporations. You're twenty-six, and complex questions of culture are coming to the fore.

PE: Kodiak was *the* most assimilated community in Alaska in 1970. We'd had a Native mayor, but nobody knew he was Native, or nobody acknowledged his Nateness. Today it would be different. But back then you had this sort of assimilation where the Native community had backed off from being Native. There's a large contingency today that will argue that, but I'll tell you it was absolutely true. And much of the suppression that the thirty-something generation likes to throw on the non-Native community actually was self-inflicted. I wasn't taught the language and it was my family that made that decision, not somebody telling them they had to do that. In 1971, you had about forty fluent speakers left on the island, you had probably four hundred who were semi-speakers, and the rest knew place names, food names, animals, you know, the nouns that survive over time. For me, being a visual person, there was nothing artistic. And I don't mean just a few things; I mean *nothing*. There were some stone lamps, there were some spear points that you found occasionally; there was nothing that you could call art. There was one woman who did Aleut grass weaving. It was not even identified on the island as island weaving. And I never thought anything of it.

The land claims settlement brought the nine ethnic groups together, and we would gather annually for a big convention. And here would come the Iñupiat, the Tlingit, the Haida with their drumming and their dancers. We were about two or three years into it and I scratched my head and said, "Now hold it. If we were a culture we must have had art." So I started looking. I would find a textbook that would have one or two of the Pinart masks in it from the Lot-Falck work in 1957. There would be references, and black and white straight-ons, nothing you could emotionally attach yourself to. The materials were presented in a scientific or thoughtfully anthropological way, as if from a time long past. There were no profiles; you couldn't see anything of real artistic value.



The real breakthrough for me came when I was running a company called Community Enterprise Development Corporation, an offshoot of President Johnson's War on Poverty. We'd bought the chain of Alaska Commercial Company stores, which really was the old Russian-American Company. We had a store in Dutch Harbour and when the borders began to open up with Russia, with *perestroika*, there was a group out of Vladivostok, a fishing fleet that would stop in to buy supplies. It was a bit of a charade. The Captain and the Commissar would come into the store. The Captain had a list of the supplies he wanted, and the Commissar would see that everything was on the up-and-up. Well, the first thing we learned was that you needed to get the Captain away from the Commissar. So we'd separate them through some method, coffee, or whatever, go look at the church, and then the Captain would quietly tell you what they really wanted. The official list would be potatoes, rice, flour and sugar, the staples, and what they really wanted was mayonnaise, mustard, Tabasco sauce. They wanted the good stuff. And so we would make these pallets up where all the staples would form the walls on the pallet and the good stuff would be in the centre.

This went on for maybe a year, and then one day one of the captains showed up with a roll of currency: US dollars, every denomination you could imagine. The crew had known they were coming and they'd gone through the community collecting this foreign currency, and they wanted blue jeans! And so it started. Blue jeans, electronics—you never knew exactly what they wanted—and we got a reputation. And then in 1988 the wall did actually come down and the Russians came to Anchorage. They wanted to meet the head of the Corporation, and I ended up going to Russia and landed in a whole other phase of my life. The first thing I did was head for Leningrad to take a look at the museum. And sure as heck, I got to the *Kunstkamera* . . . and there was our stuff. And that's where the masks were.

CB: So in you go, and . . .

PE: There they are. Four fully intact feathered pieces, the only four in the world to have survived.

CB: What did that feel like?

PE: There are no words for it. You can't begin to describe it. It's like the first time I saw the Pinart collection . . . it's . . . you're looking at your family. There are no words . . . you just . . . this is stuff that has been denied you all your life. And it's not that old—1840s, 1870s. The Russians had sent this guy, I. G. Voznesenskii, to Alaska for the sole purpose of collecting material for their museums, from 1832 to 1844. He's not an anthropologist, he's not a scientist; he's got these lists. And the museums want this stuff. His job is to go get it. He's pretty cool, and he has a personal ethic that is just amazing. He won't collect anything out of context. There's a wonderful story about him in Old Harbor. He's in the village, and he's there for several days, and one morning there are eight hunters getting ready to leave. They're all loaded up and everything and their kayaks are all ready to go, and he walks down the beach and he says, "You." He takes the entire kayak as it's ready to go hunting at that moment, and sends the guy home to change clothes. In context. Very, very, very important. And he's the one who collected those masks; he did it in 1842 in the village of Lesnoi on Woody Island, just adjacent to Kodiak. He got them after the dance one night.

CB: Would he have purchased them?

PE: I'm sure he acquired them some legitimate way. Interestingly, on Kodiak there's no legends or stories about theft. Usually when somebody robs a grave or something it stays in the oral tradition and it's there. But there's nothing about Pinart stealing the masks or anything like that. There's nothing about Voznesenskii. Everything appears legit. Voznesenskii collected the masks, he recorded the songs. Each mask has a name and he recorded the names. Images of these masks were later published in some magazines in the traditional way, photographed full on, straight on, and in the same wooden cases they'd been in for a hundred years.

So I'm looking at these masks in Russia, and I say to myself, "If he collected them the night they were danced, they'll still have the harnesses on the back." Nobody had ever photographed the masks from the back! And so I broached the subject with the museum people and sure enough, a year later they took the photographs and it's all there. The whole thing, how it's tied, a whole bunch of little sinew strings and stuff. They've got a wooden bite plate, and the mask—when you



see the mask it would appear that it fits over the face like a Hallowe'en mask, but it was actually in front of the face, and it's held with a bite plate and then tied on so it actually was out here in front of the dancer, which nobody knew. We think a lot of the Pinart masks looked like that. They would have had a piece of material or burlap or hide or something that would have hooded the whole thing. We still make that hood, and some of the Pinart masks have a groove where they would actually tie on that back piece. But I'm pretty comfortable in believing that that groove was for a lot of botanical materials, things of the season and that sort of stuff because nothing survived. Grasses, ferns, and the greenery. And movement was really important in the mask dances, in the feather pieces, the weighted feather pieces. They went to extremes to make sure things moved.

When I was a kid, of course, there was absolutely no art visible or available. I had very little knowledge of Suqpiq art. I didn't focus on it until about 1997. We had an artist named Helen Simeonoff, a wonderful woman, a water colourist. Like all of us she struggled with the identity issue all her life. She'd heard a dissertation on the Alphonse Pinart collection written and presented in 1996 by a French-Canadian woman, Dominique Desson, who had come to Kodiak and lectured on her research, and Helen was totally mesmerized. Everybody else was kind of indifferent. Helen saved up her money—she was sort of a hand-to-mouth individual—and she went to France in 1998 or 1999.

I'd heard stories. We were re-hanging a seine in 1959—it was a disastrous salmon season, there were quite a few Chum or dog salmon around but they kept going under our net, so we kept making it deeper. We ended up re-hanging that seine three times. We were stripping the gear on the dock in town, and Charlie Christofferson, our web boss, was there. With his hands flying, Charlie looks over at the old man and says, "You know, they danced in Karluk." Karluk's a traditional village on the west side of Kodiak. What he meant was, they did what was known as "the Devil's dance"—there are the missionaries again—because of the salmon run. It's a little like the rain dance. They're talking to the spirits. And the old man, he's hanging gear and he looks at Charlie and he says, "Did they wear masks, or did they just use the soot on the face?" And before Charlie could answer there's this old woman, Mrs. Joe Heitman, sitting on the bull rail of the dock. She'd brought down some sandwiches and stuff, and before Charlie can even answer,

Mrs. Heitman says, “No, no, there’s no masks on the island. They took ‘em all away. That stuff’s not here.” And she’s proud of it. And Dad says, “Yep, way back, a long time ago. They took ‘em all away.”

The assumption of course was that the Russians took them, but it turns out that Pinart spoke perfect Russian. He was a linguist. Nobody on the island ever recorded the fact that he was French because he spoke Russian. So everybody had assumed that the masks we’d heard about in Russia were the masks Pinart took away. Well, Mrs. Heitman was born in 1885 in Afognak, just thirteen years after Pinart left Afognak, so she grew up at the kitchen table with the story of how they went to the south end and got the masks. And there it is. But there was not enough context for her to know the full story.

And I’d also heard about a collection of masks in France. Nobody knew exactly where it was, but we’d heard these rumours and stories. We found out, of course, that they were at the Chateau Musée in Boulogne-sur-Mer. When Helen went they were all jumbled into a case made out of plywood about the size of a very large table, and some of the masks were suspended on fishing string, and they were stacked almost on one another. Well, Helen goes to look and she’s stunned, and she has her little Instamatic and she takes a bunch of pictures. And about three months after she got back one of my buddies said, “You know, Helen Simeonoff has some pictures from France.” I went over to her house and she had them in this three-ringed binder, these not so great photos. They looked terrible. I had made one mask prior to that, a plank mask. Traditional. I’d seen the Russian ones and this was something I sort of concocted because I really didn’t have any form to go on or anything. I still have it.

When I saw these photographs of course I went crazy. I asked her if I could borrow the binder, and she really anguished over that request. She really didn’t want to let it go. But she knew I was a serious artist and so she let me take it home. I did a bunch of drawings and I got it back to her in a couple of days. Three months later I got on an aeroplane. I had to go. That was in 2000.

CB: What was it like when you walked into the Chateau Musée?

PE: Speechless. I was stunned beyond belief by what I saw. I’d been to the Kunstkamera, but to see that many masks in front of my eyes—there was Kodiak

Island! I mean, it was right there. And then the varying sizes. In the photographic journals a mask that is six inches takes up as much space as a mask that is twenty-three inches. You have no idea. And they're all flat. Of course I was just stunned. I couldn't believe how much variation there was, and how much depth was in the masks. They're not flat pie plates. And twenty minutes after looking at them, as an artist, I can see that there are three distinct sets of masks.

CB: Did you have the feeling, in seeing those forms, that there was some kind of unconscious form in you that suddenly discovered or triggered itself?

PE: That's an interesting question, and the answer is, "Of course," but I've never thought of it because it's so natural. Sure. There are birds, singing masks, some spirits—they're tools for transformation—but they have their own life and their own individuality and their own collectiveness. I've studied that collection now for over twelve years. I've felt a bond that I suppose can't really be described. Shortly after I saw the collection it was moved to Paris for a show in the old Museum of Man. By then I'd done enough work with the collection through Dr. Sven Haakanson to point out the three different groups of masks, and they'd grouped them, the three, based on my observations. I wanted to photograph them because they'd never been separated to that degree. I asked, and they said, "OK, come back at five o'clock." So I went back at five o'clock, and they took me up—it was upstairs in a separate room—and they brought me in and said, "OK, you're going to be locked in here until seven, until the janitor can let you out." So I was alone with this collection for two, two and a half hours, and that was intense.

CB: Can you say more?

PE: You know, it was a case of where I could hear them sing. And I could feel them dance, you know, we talked . . . it was a unique moment . . . yeah . . . that collection has really been a pivotal piece of my art and my life.

CB: During the 2011 Surrealist exhibition in Vancouver I spoke with a man while looking at the Yup'ik masks purchased by Robert Lebel in the 1940s. He told me that he'd once described a mask to an elder, praising its visual complexity. After he'd finished, the elder leaned in and said, "Yes, but what did you hear?" Is that the right question?



PE: Yes, that's the right question. We can't forget that these objects are first and foremost utilitarian in nature. I've never made a mask that couldn't be danced. All of them can be danced. I don't put the harness in all of them, but there is one mask that I make, the plank or chief's mask—and we're bringing it back as a cultural rite of passage—that is a closure of life. We dance this mask, and then we burn it, which we did in honour of Alphonse Pinart in Boulogne and Helen Simeonoff in Kodiak in September 2012.

CB: For their release?

PE: Exactly. For their spirits to start their new travels. We're the only group on the coast or in North America that does this mask. It's basically a human effigy with a large plank, or board—it almost looks like a tombstone—and it's only made on Kodiak Island. The form is perfect for me, because you've got the effigy into which you can put spirit and emotion, and you've got a story board that you can do anything you want with. You can get extremely contemporary or you can be very traditional. You can do all symbols. You can do colour, you can do half a dozen variations and come up with some unique presence, and still be correct. The one very large plank mask that survives in the Pinart collection was never finished, but in my opinion—and I'm certainly not an expert—if it had been completed and danced it would have been burned.

CB: Not all masks were burned, though.

PE: No. I've kind of got a hunch. I've spoken of the three groups in the Pinart collection; there's what I call the Old Men, which are the ones that actually came from the cave, and there's a group of reproductions that were done specifically for Pinart in Kodiak. Pinart, we need to remember, was a linguist. He had the theory that you could track the eastern migration of people by virtue of language and belief systems. So he was out collecting the stories to support his hypothesis. He didn't care so much about the masks, he wanted the stories, and in Kodiak we pass our mythology through a stage play, like a passion play, or a mystery play. The people at a ceremony wouldn't narrate the stories, they would act them and dance them. But they couldn't do the dances without the tools. Yet when Pinart brought them the old masks to dance, no one would wear them because they had too much

power around them, so they made new ones for him. These are the smaller ones in the collection that are about six to eight inches. I think they were made by two different artists. Maybe three, probably in the village of Eagle Harbour. They're all basically the same size, and they've got the hoops. Those are the ones that were danced in 1872 for Pinart, and he was then able to see and record the story in the dance. Each one of those little ones was matched to an Old Man. Then there is the third group of masks that are all big, brightly coloured, and solid. They're not carved out at the back, they have no holes for hoops, nothing, and they all happen to be made out of white oak.

CB: They're from Europe!

PE: Sure. I think they're his trunk show for his lectures. The others are too fragile to pack around. So he has another set made. If you go back to the Old Men and study them, they were all taken out of one cave. And the cave probably was a repository. These masks were used by the whaling fraternities. We were a whaling culture prior to the Russians, and we hunted the finback whale. We did it with a poison lance. It's well documented. There are a number of pieces on that. By the way, have you ever been next to a whale when it came out of the water?

CB: I've been within about a foot of an orca coming up beside a 9-foot clinker-built rowboat.

PE: Yeah, that's a good feeling! Multiply that by ten, and you've got a finback. Can you imagine what it would take to paddle a kayak—you know, a few sticks and a little hide—paddle it out there and poke that thing with a sharp stick? I've been up next to one and it's like a freight car coming out of the water. So what they did was they had fraternities. And the elders, the wisdom keepers, would be members of the fraternity guiding the hunters with their knowledge. The finbacks would come into the bays in the early spring and summer to feed, then back in the late fall. They'd come in in groups of six to twelve and there might be three pods within a mile of one another. They'd kind of hang around till they depleted the feed in that area. It might take them a week, two weeks. And so the fraternity would pick out the pod, and they'd pick out the whale in the pod, and they would determine the weak side, because you want to approach on the weak side.

They'd be in the kayaks and up on the bluffs and they'd be watching and studying over time. You have to strike the whale at the right stage of the tide because when it beaches you want the tides to be falling. You don't want to be fighting the tide when you're trying to carve up the whale. They knew the flow patterns and the tide patterns and the drift patterns well enough to know that if they struck a particular whale in a particular location, it would take three days to die, and they could tell you just about where it was going to wash up. You've got to strike the right whale at the right time and you have to get and be ready to do that, because the Super Bowl only comes around once a year. So you have the fraternities to manage the adrenalin, then you go and prepare. You'd fast and do all the stuff the elders told you to do. You'd talk to the spirits and when you got ready—I mean, the day was prescribed, the moment was prescribed—you went down to the beach, and one guy in a kayak went out there and lanced that whale.

CB: All the power of the group is in that lance.

PE: And it would take that to give you the confidence. It must have been stunning. Plus the reward's pretty big. You just won the Super Bowl, you've got the winningest hockey shot! It's everything all rolled up in one. And the masks were the tools that allowed you to talk between the worlds, that got the ancestors involved, sent the messages back and forth. These masks are the tools of transformation. If you had a really successful hunt and you used this group of masks, and it was successful, you're going to keep them as an integrated part of the hunt. You're going to move that forward, and that's why I think these masks were in the caves. Even after the Russians broke the old belief system you would not just throw them out.

And there's a group of masks there among the Old Men in the Pinart collection that have bothered me from the very beginning. There's one mask that nobody would touch. It's the one that has a hydrocephalic, bulbous forehead. Hydrocephalus is caused when you get an injury above the ears; it doesn't drain. And your head swells. I believe this is a warrior or a hunter who has been injured. And if you look at the masks, it appears to have been made quickly; it's not finished as well as the other masks, which might mean it was made on relatively short order. And it has two marks coming off the nose, a little carving right across the face. I looked at it for a long time. There's another mask in this collection that



also has this mark. It has thirteen knots in the wood. My impression has always been that wood was so precious that they more or less had to use that piece. Very hard to carve. But now I think it was by design. I turned both masks over and put them side-by-side. They were made by the same person. And the reason you can tell is that they are hollowed out the same way. When you turn these two masks back over the only thing in common is the line across the face. So, I looked at the rest of the masks, and there's another one with the line. You know the mask with the winking eye? It has the line. And it has a crooked mouth and it looks like the guy's winking. That mask is about an afflicted or injured eye. There's also a mask in Madrid that's out of Chugach—Alutiiq region—and it has what's called a weepy eye and it actually is marked with a pus ring draining down the face. So now I've got three masks made by the same person. Let's go back to the one with the thirteen knots. One of the major afflictions for the people was boils, salt boils. So I'm thinking: I've got hydrocephalus, I've got some skin problems, I've got a sick eye, and they're all carved by the same guy. And they all have this mark. And it looks like an Alutiiq female tattoo to me. So I'm scratching my head and wondering, "Were these carved by a woman?" We had female shamans. And we had transsexuals. You could be a boy and your family could raise you as a girl. And because of that transformation you often were a shaman.

CB: These affliction masks must have been medicine-related.

PE: Absolutely. But the question about who made them is interesting. This female tattoo, if that is what it is, is really strange. If a transsexual made them, they would have considered them to have been made by a woman because all the beliefs and taboos affecting gender would have applied to that individual. He would have to be a female who carved masks, which opens a whole new question.

There's an articulated mask in the collection also. It's a mask that's quite highly decomposed and looks like the classic Christian devil. It's got some lines that sweep back from the eyes and it's got an open mouth, and in the centre of its open mouth it has a little slit. It's a bird. It's the only bird among all the masks with an open mouth. All the other birds have a closed mouth and their beaks are connected at the tip. Now, if you're going to use a messenger, especially like a bird, you don't want it gossiping along the way. So you tie the beak. And here's a mask

with an open beak. I looked at this mask for the longest time and I didn't even see the bird at first.

One day, after about two years of studying it, the book is lying open to the picture of this mask and a piece of paper is lying across the top, totally by accident; all I can see is the beak. And it becomes really apparent that it actually is a beak. I just did a double take and looked back, and yes, it's like a heron. You know how the heron line comes back and it's got that beak—but, if it's got an open beak, why does it have a slit? That doesn't make sense, unless you need a rectangular piece so that something can slide. I noticed two holes right under the beak. The anthropologist told us they were for the labrets. No, no. They're for the control strings or rods. You turn the mask over and you can see inside where it had this articulated piece. The tongue moved in this mask. But it took me almost five years to see that.

We see a lot of bird themes in our masks. Kodiak is located in the Gulf of Alaska, and it's a byway to the flyways. Many, many birds come and rest on the island on their migratory trips. They might only be seen for a week or a day, or maybe only observed every other year, some rare species. But it's easy to understand why they became messengers. We knew that they travelled between worlds so it was logical to instil our messages with these travellers. As a method of transforming the individual into the messenger during the ceremony of instilling that message, the mask was important. We really believed in the ancestors, in that continued wisdom, in the ability to tap into their spirit as they passed on and accumulated more knowledge, and in trying to communicate with the other worlds to bring that knowledge back and utilise it.

CB: Can you speak more about the functional aspect?

PE: We have several really strong dance groups. They've concentrated more on choreography over the last decade, and appropriate attire, costume, for lack of a better term, has now become something of an issue. They're trying to differentiate themselves, and masks are one of the prime methods. So while the dance groups today are mostly entertainment, both in the Native and the non-Native community, there is also a ceremonial aspect, particularly in the Celebration of Life with the plank mask on Kodiak. I recently held a workshop in Kodiak and we did five plank masks. One of the young boys—he has decided all by himself, no

prodding from anybody—is going to dance it this summer in honour of his great-grandmother, with a full ceremony. So that speaks volumes. I'll do a workshop in September in Old Harbor, which is a pivotal village. It's a south end village, and so I'm hopeful, you know. It's a little bit, but it's starting to really be something.

The mask is really paraphernalia for another art form. And I like that. I'm very excited when I see my masks danced. And I'm always very critical of them both as an artist and then of how the performing artist is using them in their artistic expression. Are they doing enough to bring the spirit forward? Not long ago when two duck masks were danced I found myself wanting to see more of the duck character come out, the comical character of the duck, but each art form has its own presentation, and respecting that is, I think, part of it.

CB: I'm thinking about how your forms have an aerodynamic quality. They operate in time, in the transit between one place and another, one time and another, and in a time of extraordinary transition in Kodiak and Alaska.

PE: I like my art to challenge people, to challenge the status quo. I like people to say, "What is this about?" That dance we did in France for Pinart, where we burned the mask, delighted me from the standpoint that French culture places such a high value on physical art that, in their words, "to destroy a piece of beauty" really upset many of them. And the debate around our conviction that the utilitarian function supersedes the urge to preserve I found quite enjoyable. There was much eye rolling and shaking of the head. It forced the question of cultural value, and many came to realize that the French value of art is not the absolute end. When they got to the end of the ceremony they realized that burning was the only thing that could happen to that piece of art. I'd gotten them to think about that one. And that's the exciting moment for a work of art. And of course the masks are creating a lot of discussion within the Sugpiaq culture also.

When we brought the dance back, almost twenty years ago now, we had the same issues. And of course we did not dance with masks. People said, "We didn't do that in our generation. I don't recognize that." And of course the dance had skipped two generations, so the elders were saying "I don't know what they're doing." Then as it came back, people would do a little more historic review, and go, "Oh yeah, I guess we did do that." And today some of our stronger advocates of the



dance were the most sceptical ones when it started. I think bringing the memorial masks, the celebration of life mask, back has really challenged some of the Sugpiaq people about their own identity. Of course, Orthodoxy is very, very strong, but Orthodoxy as a religion has many icons and images and objects so there's not a big leap there. But some of the more fundamental Christian beliefs are struggling with it. If anything challenges the ceremony it will be the Christian values.

I've been talking to a couple of other mask makers and we want to introduce the mask back into the dance. And that's really up to the mask makers. Some of it has to do with economics. You can make a very nice dance mask, but before you can get it onto a dancer somebody's there with a chequebook who wants to preserve it forever. The temptation to sell a mask for \$3,000 or \$4,000 is very hard to pass up. So most of the art now is going into the commercial market. I've been maybe the foremost in breaking that rule, but I have the privilege of being in a position to be able to do that. I'm teaching and I have some protégés I'm working with, and one of the things I'm saying is that maybe the fifth mask or the tenth mask one makes should go to the dance groups. We need to get the stories told as they were told, in costume, and people are starting to listen. You will see more, definitely.

CB: We should just talk a little bit about your process. How do you begin?

PE: To any art, there are mechanics. I know that if I start the process something will come out the other end. So there are times when I will just pick up a piece of wood and just let it happen. I keep lots of wood on supply, and lots of different kinds of woods; different moods demand different things. I always keep all my tools ready to go. When it's time you don't have time to stop and sharpen a tool. And then the work will progress systematically. The selection of the actual piece of wood can take up to a day, just selecting the piece of wood. Once I have the piece of wood I sort of make peace with it. I always use a pattern, because symmetry is a hallmark of the work and a pattern lets you have more control. I cut out a front view, and I'll start putting the profile shape in and evolve into the detail. The mouth is usually the last thing that I carve, and then I hollow the mask and get it to the right weight. Weight is important, and I like my masks to be under two pounds, so I hollow it out and then I put in the eyes and the nose and if the

mouth is going to be open I'll put the mouth in last. It's interesting, and I don't know that it's ritual as much as it is just logical procedure. I will not start a project without having solved all the mechanics before hand. What kind of hoop am I going to use? How is that hoop going to be attached? What are the amenities? How will it work? Painting and feathers are the last things. And then, of course, if there's a harness or something, that goes in at the very, very, end.

CB: The other day you mentioned that you were thinking that you wanted more movement.

PE: The four fully adorned masks in Russia are designed to have a great deal of movement in feathers and appendages, even with the eagle feathers that are attached to the masks. If you take an eagle feather and you just drill a hole and poke the end into the hoop, it's very stiff. So to give it movement they would drill a little tiny hole and use a cormorant feather from the inside out, clip the end of the eagle feather and slip it over the cormorant feather so that it would move up and down when it was danced. Baleen, which comes from the mouths of whales, is very flexible, and so weighted pieces of wood would be on the end of thin strips of baleen, and when the mask danced you'd have a lot of movement in the mask itself.

On the mask we danced last fall in honour of the artist Helen Simeonoff, her moons and her suns were on the ends of feathers, and they moved a little bit. But as the maker and a critic of the mask, they didn't move enough to suit me. An extra inch on the feather would have made a difference. Or a little more weight. You can add weights by attaching beads to the ends of the feathers. Our old masks were adorned with hanging feathers, feathers that had been whipped on the end and tied so that there was a piece of string or sinew as much as six inches down so that when the mask danced it had a lot of lateral movement though the feathers. It's important because, for me, it signifies life. It gives the mask that spirit of life through movement.

In the dance the masks take on an interesting form; the eyebrow cut around the nose and the recessing of the eyes is very dramatic. This is because they were lit from the fire, from the bottom up. Of course, western eyes see things with light from the top down. When you turn out all the lights and you photograph these

masks with bottom light you begin to understand the presentation. That top line, the circle of the face, the forehead and the top of the hair, were not visible in the dark. Masks were danced inside a building called a *qasgiq*, or men's house, or community hall, and the only source of light was the fire in the centre. So they are formed and shaped by that utility. I try to capture that.

CB: In firelight . . .

PE: . . . it would be shadows, ghosts, and spirits. It would be pretty powerful. I always think of a seven-year-old coming in for his first dance, and the dancers in the dark corner, and the drums, six, seven, eight drums, a 60-inch by 60-inch low ceiling, those drums would start, and *wham!* You're a believer! You believe!

CB: And the hoop? What is its significance?

PE: The hoop is made of wood. I bend mine with steam and bend them on a form so that they will be symmetrical. The hoop is the aura around the spirit, not unlike a halo. The concept of a halo is not necessarily Christian. The idea that a spirit has an aura: I think every human has felt that. You know, you feel that there are moments in life when there are things that have this aura about them; the hoop is really that aura of the spirit in our masks. With Yup'ik masks, a full-circle hoop is the aura of a contained spirit. If the hoop is open on the bottom it's a travelling spirit, it's a spirit that's making a journey.

CB: When you're making a mask, there are layers of intention, aren't there?

PE: Oh, yes, it sometimes causes me to pause. I know this sounds strange, but I have a relationship with the work, and some of the work is very much alive—I mean, we actually talk. It sounds strange but there's communication that goes on. With me it's usually light-hearted, and a mask will occasionally bite me. I won't be paying enough attention or showing enough respect and a tool will slip or whatever; it's interesting to say the least. So I'm constantly conscious of this relationship, a respectful relationship. The progression of a mask usually moves along as anticipated. I've had one piece that sort of morphed from where I was into something of its own, but normally it's this communication bringing forth what's almost ordained. It's almost as though the piece of wood for this mask started



with the tree, and it knew where it was going. I feel as though I'm closing the final loop. The final link is the creation of the mask. I don't know how to describe it. It's very hard to put in words, but it's that way. The masks have a spiritual quality, and when I produce a mask I'm really saying, "This is part of who I am, and what I am, and where I came from." So in a way I'm presenting you with a piece of me, and my history. And when you take it you accept that. It's a form of acceptance. When I think of a particular mask, like "Yellow Singer," I cannot think of the mask without the association to you. The mask doesn't exist without your association. So I guess knowing where it is is important because it completes the piece of work. It's why the work was produced, to make a link.

CB: Earlier we spoke about messages and a mask's functionality.

PE: Being a messenger is the function of that transformation tool. Oh yes, very much so. One thing that's difficult for me is that my work is so influenced by the Pinart collection. In all probability, a huge, diverse array of transformation tools in the form of masks existed and were once used within the culture. I believe we're looking at just a small slice. Unfortunately, that's what we have, and that's what's influenced me, and so I often struggle with this idea of how tight my exposure must be. I often wonder and speculate on what the rest of the world looked like!

CB: Maybe your speculation takes form in the making of your new masks?

PE: The Paris show is all birds. All birds, and they're all very different. Each one is a composition, a stand-alone, and you can't look at one of the six—there are only five, there'll probably be a sixth—and see a progression or a direction or a similarity, and yet they're all Alutiiq birds. No question. As I create each piece there's a process, and then the minute the piece is done it's about the conversation the piece creates.

This particular collection of work is designed as a group. They're ideas and expressions that have sort of bounced around like a ping-pong ball over the years in my head, and now I've had an opportunity to bring them into being. Each mask is a character all unto itself. One is a piece that is very well planned and is completed. One is a work-in-progress and probably will be until I pack it. We argue. He and I go back and forth and I tell you, man, he and I have argued! But he

is very defined and very rigid and very nice and elegant and arrogant, and then there's a piece that's just warm and fuzzy like a kid's blanket. It feels good. It's a whole collection of emotion and presentation around the messengers, but now I'm beginning to think in terms of "the message." What do you instill, what do you entrust with this particular messenger? And I haven't landed that, but it's started to enter the process of thought. And I'm sure that when the old masks were made they were not generic messengers. I mean, when the woman goes to the church to pray she prays for certain people, certain sicknesses; I mean, there is a moment in time and a structure to the prayer. It was no different.

CB: Did the new masks take you somewhere you hadn't been before?

PE: I want to take the mask into something I call pure art, to move beyond the cultural spiritualities, to take the form and shape and actually work as a pure sculptor. I've been doing drawings. And interestingly, if I weren't doing the Paris show I would be doing this other stuff. I'm carrying both loads. I've got the Paris stuff here, and it's certainly influenced by some of this other stuff that I want to do, and two of the new masks clearly, as you will see, are movement in a new direction. Having my studio mate Alvin Amason to talk to has been fabulous. He's been very, very productive. He's like over-the-top fun, and being able to explore, to talk some of these things through, has been wonderful.

CB: In terms of Alutiiq traditions, perhaps you're a little like a messenger between the past and the future. And you've developed a strong relationship with the Chateau Musée in Boulogne.

PE: You know, I have nothing but the greatest respect for that Museum. They've given us access beyond and reasonable expectation. I thank my lucky stars every day that the Pinart masks weren't in the Louvre or in some other Paris museum because I'd have never gotten near them. We showed up right when there was a changing of the guard. A generational change. We came right in at that moment. And we did many visitations. We couldn't bring the masks to Kodiak in the beginning so we took the artists to the masks. We put together a group of ten and took them over. It was very moving.

The masks over the years had deteriorated quite a lot. Many of them had hoops and feathers when Pinart gave them to the Museum, and during the war the entire Museum collection was moved several times to keep it from the Germans—and it wasn't because of the masks; it was the paintings that the French wanted to protect. At that time the significance of the collection was not recognized. One of the things I've done recently is to start a contemporary collection of Alaska Native art within the Museum, something I was told couldn't be done in France. In Europe they have art and artifacts. You don't see them mixed. I convinced them that Boulogne should break the mould.

In 2002, I carved a guardian mask to be with the collection. I told the French it was a friendship mask, and in a way it was. But I wanted us to be in contact with the old masks, I wanted to let them know that we still cared, so I did a plank mask depicting two oceans and two continents and their people, and we danced it there in 2002. After the dance I presented it to the Museum and of course they were very excited. I was kind of hopeful that they'd hang it in the hallway somewhere, or somebody's office perhaps. I wanted to explain and demonstrate to the spirits of the old masks that they hadn't been forgotten: "You're still here, we're still here, and here's a guardian that's going to look over you from today onward." I went back to the Museum a year and a half later and they'd completely rebuilt the exhibit area. It had gone from these absolutely primitive—and I'm being kind—plywood boxes to a really elegant presentation. And the guardian, they had built an independent podium and put it inside a case. And it was prominently displayed with the old masks. I was kind of dumbfounded. I don't think anybody picked up on it. We were in a large group. I recovered myself quickly and then I started to smile. "Yep, OK, we're here, we're OK."

Later, when I was an artist-in-residence at the Museum, they commissioned a mask, so then they had two pieces; and then another artist gave them a piece, so they had three. And so at a public gathering I announced a personal commitment to donate one piece to the collection every year for five years. These pieces were taken before a national museum acquisitions committee and were approved for the permanent collection. Mission accomplished! Since then, Koniag, the Alutiiq Native Regional Corporation, has started making modest donations.



CB: It seems to me that after everything Europe unloaded onto this continent, this is a way of bringing the transformative spiritual and cultural intelligence of indigenous nations back into the European conversation.

PE: I think that many Europeans view their collections as being from dead cultures, and of course that's not true. Also, I think unfairly, Europe is under tremendous pressure—France in particular—to return all these objects that they collected during the colonial period. I don't subscribe to that at all. The world is so small. The access is absolutely there, and getting better all the time.

My goal is to get about twenty-five significant pieces into that Museum over the next six or seven years. And when my grandchildren go over and they look at them, they can see and sense the vitality and the continuity. I want to create awareness that the cultures are alive, that the people have not disappeared. They still live with an identity. How they express their identity is through their living art. If, in my lifetime—and I don't have a lot of time left—I can get that debate on the table in an intellectual discussion, I will have been successful.