

CASE STUDY: BUNNELL STREET ARTS CENTER



Bunnell Street Arts Center is located by a place called Bishop's Beach, situated on the borderland of the Kenai River's Dena'ina and the Sugpiaq, across Kachemak Bay.

In 2013, Bunnell Street Arts Center in Homer, Alaska, received a \$150,000 grant from ArtPlace America to develop an artists' residency in its neighborhood, Old Town. While the language of creative placemaking is new, Bunnell Street Arts Center had long employed arts-and-culture for community development. Bunnell spent a year engaged in neighborhood meetings and advocacy to foment community engagement and complete ArtPlace's rigorous application process. Bunnell's overarching aim with the project was to promote neighborhood stewardship through the arts. In their creative placemaking proposal, Bunnell specifically sought to address two of Homer's Old Town

neighborhood's challenges through the Old Town Initiative: transportation issues and a lack of both functionality and visual vibrancy to the neighborhood's wayfinding. Old Town neighbors had been clear that traffic calming and better walkability were top priorities, with or without outside funding.

Bunnell premised that an artist-in-residence program and public art initiatives could activate the neighborhood, offer artist-led activities to spur community engagement, and inspire a holistic approach to neighborhood change. With initial funding secured, what began as a project to address environmental and transportation systems blossomed into a neighborhood- and city-wide movement rooted in creative solutions, dynamic partnerships, and pride-of-place community ownership.

Bunnell Street Arts Center's creative placemaking continues today, while the following case study follows the ArtPlace-supported Old Town initiative, as chronicled by Asia Freeman, Bunnell's Artistic/Executive Director, and Brianna Allen, Old Town Coordinator, in 2013-2014; and edited by Caitlin Strokosch.

Bunnell Street Arts Center began in 1989 when a small group of artists collectively expressed the vision and energy to start a gallery. Driven by a need for warm studio space and the promise of art sales, these folks saw potential in the historic, albeit dilapidated, Inlet Trading Post. Down by the shore of Bishop's Beach overlooking spectacular Kachemak Bay and the Kenai Mountain Range, the setting commanded appreciation and idealism. Claiming the first floor of the old building, the original "Great Company Gallery" required substantial renovations, resuscitating the beloved old building into an inviting gallery space. In time the group of artists changed, but consistent to the place was collaboration among its creatives and a generous spirit, particularly in one of the founding artists, Kurt Marquardt, who purchased the building and let the gallery make small contributions in the form of rent for years. The mission continued to evolve and shifted its focus to original fine art and monthly exhibitions of local artists, becoming the Bunnell Street Gallery. As the newly independent nonprofit deepened its mission toward community engagement and education, and away from commercial art sales, the organization expanded its programming to include concerts and performances suited to the intimate salon setting of the gallery. Today it is the Bunnell Street Arts Center, and like its trading post roots it serves as an important gathering place still.

The gallery currently hosts exhibitions, workshops, performances, artist residencies, and community events. The site also includes the People's Garden. In the community, Bunnell is an organizer and activist for countless projects that center arts and culture in Homer. Bunnell also provides arts intensives in Kenai Peninsula schools.

JULY 2013

As news of ArtPlace's award for the Old Town Artist in Residency Program sweeps through the community, Bunnell's leadership is reinvigorated by this affirmation of the organization's perseverance and the project's vision. Although "creative placemaking" is a new term in Homer, its qualities are intrinsic to the town's identity. Homer is a community comprised of what are locally referred to as "cosmic agents" – creative, innovative pioneers. ArtPlace support has turned Homer's cosmic agents' hopes and dreams into a plan and a timeline, and is already sparking the interest of others who want to be involved in positive change.

The first steps are to issue two distinct requests-for-proposals for the Old Town Artist in Residence Program. One RFP invites artists to propose creative projects that might activate the arts center's space and surrounding outdoor sites, including the Old Town People's Garden, Beluga Slough, and Bishop's Beach Park. The other RFP invites neighbors to envision creative placemaking on their property. Bunnell's hope is that connecting artists' and neighbors' investments within a bigger plan for Old Town's vibrancy will bring into alignment Bunnell's long-term mission of nurturing innovative contemporary arts for diverse audiences within a plan for neighborhood revitalization.

A neighborhood maps itself

Bunnell Street Arts Center's exhibition space is transformed into the "Old Town Work in Progress" exhibition, displaying maps, drawings, and collaborative lists representing neighbors' dreams and remedies for Old Town's future. The exhibition showcases the neighborhood's collaborative skills, demonstrates the focus and commitment of the various stakeholders, and invites viewers to absorb the possibilities and – more importantly – participate in new conversations surrounding revitalization. Setting the tone is critical at this early stage, as Bunnell opens the process to the community and shares the organization's intentions for transparent, engaged work.



Getting the City on board

Participation, support, and enthusiasm from the public sector will prove to be essential to the project's success. Using the recent news of the ArtPlace award, Bunnell Street Arts Center make an exciting presentation to Homer's City Council, illustrating the notion of creative placemaking and how it might be an effective strategy in Old Town. The project's leadership team has ten minutes to present twelve specific, collaborative actions that all address necessary

Old Town pedestrian infrastructure investments, and requests \$75,300 of City funding to support the efforts. The team makes the case that, by engaging in this commitment, the City has a unique opportunity to take part in a once-in-a-town's-lifetime project, partnering with non-profits, for-profits, and private citizens in developing sustainable changes for Old Town. Two council members sign on as sponsors immediately! And City Council agrees to move all twelve requests forward for public hearings.

Planting the first seeds

It's important at this stage to have some early commitments so community members see what an impact even small investments can have. "What Homer's Old Town initiative is really doing for the community is giving people the opportunity to be a part of something bigger," says Bunnell's executive director Asia Freeman. These first commitments come in the form of fat flower blossoms and a bike rack. On a mission of peony proliferation, with her straw hat and shiny floral shoes, Major General Rita Jo Shoultz marches into Bunnell and maps out an irresistible beautification plan, generously donating one-hundred peony bushes to be planted alongside Bunnell Street Arts Center. Her get-to-it-ness is thrilling and Homer gardeners are eager to dig into the rich Alaskan soil. Around the same time as peonies come to Bunnell, the Homer Cycling Club commits to donating two bike racks to Old Town. After the local paper picks up the news and there is an outpouring of excitement from neighbors, the Cycling Club orders nine more bike racks to be installed along the town's walking trails. Already the promise of collaboration and the power of small actions are rippling through this little Cosmic Hamlet by the Sea.

AUGUST 2013

The HART of the City

On July 22, the Homer City Council votes unanimously in favor of Bunnell's proposal! Ordinance 13-24, "Amending the FY2013 Capital Budget by Appropriating \$98,500 From the Homer Accelerated Roads and Trails (HART) Program Fund for Road Improvements, Trail Construction, and Pedestrian Safety and Walkability Enhancements in Old Town", cements a

partnership of monumental importance to successful creative placemaking efforts in Old Town, Homer. The investment represents a 65% match for the project, far surpassing what Bunnell originally budgeted from the City. Public investment is crucial to the success of this project, insuring walkability and safety which are necessary to stage art and street events. The funding also serves as acknowledgment of the potential of this grassroots project and the promise of communal stewardship.

Creative matchmaking

Summer is a crazy time for Alaskans, harvesting madly, working long hours, and trying to seize every minute of golden sunshine. Homer's restaurants are overflowing with foodies; bikers and pedestrians are roaming the streets and parks. Fireweed is in bloom, berries are ripe, salmon are spawning, and after a bitterly long winter, big sunny days have rekindled locals' deep love for Alaska once again. It's a time of possibility.

One sign of the seemingly infinite possibility of the Old Town initiative comes in the form of new neighbors. A 6,400-square-foot building that has been on the market for years has finally been purchased. The owners are committed to supporting like-minded businesses, and are renovating the significant property inside and out.

Now that the Old Town initiative's RFPs are in play, ideas are pouring in from artists. Neighbors, too, are making commitments, investments, and donations, as they submit site proposals for artists' projects. Asia Freeman says, "I feel like a matchmaker! One enthusiastic neighbor would like to offer her long fence as a mural site. As we hoped, we received a letter of intent from an accomplished muralist with a proposal for that very fence. Meanwhile, the Visitors Center is installing interpretive signage along their existing nature trail in Old Town and would love to have an artist boost the aesthetic impact with lyrically interpretive text for the signs. Like clockwork, a poet submitted her official LOI to do just that for the trail. The more partnerships we activate, the more momentum builds around the project's heart."

"Give people the opportunity to give. This ambitious project, slowed by seasonal neighbors and government bureaucracy, has at times afflicted me with worry and faltering hope. But now, it seems that everyone wants a piece of the pie! Given the right project, vision, and team, people are inspired to participate and push it further."

SEPTEMBER 2013

A poet, a painter, and a plan take root

The first two artist projects are underway! One of the community's proposals asks for an artist to enliven standard scientific and educational interpretive signage with lyric text, along the Islands and Ocean's Beluga Slough Trail. The project, called Poetry on the Trail, is a collaborative partnership forged by Bunnell Street Arts Center with the Alaska Islands and



Poet Wendy Erd reads her poetry along the Island and Ocean's Beluga Slough Trail, and leaves temporary verses for visitors to find.

Oceans Visitor Center, the City of Homer, and US Fish and Wildlife. Homer poet Wendy Erd takes a creative approach to the Poetry on the Trail project, inhabiting the slough for days to scribe for the many voices there – plant, animal, water, and mud dwellers alike. In a community workshop called “Writing on the Edge of Place,” Erd guides neighbors to find their own inspiration from the slough, and the participants nestle their careful words within the landscape for others to discover around Bishop’s Beach. Erd’s own newly written poems are captivating. As a prelude to how visitors might experience the trail’s signage once the new texts are installed in the spring, Erd leads representatives from Bunnell Street Arts Center, the City of Homer, Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, and the Kachemak Bay Research Reserve along the trail, reciting her site-specific poems as they walk together.

The other inaugural project is a stunning mural, to be installed on a fence at Old Town's busy Main and Bunnell intersection, which fronts Bunnell Street Arts Center. Homer landscape painter Dan Coe depicts the full lifecycle of Alaska’s iconic fireweed fields in this 17' x 5' mural, designed to be removable to protect it from weather during the harshest Alaskan months. “While sitting on the porch at Bunnell,” says Freeman, “you can watch how the colors of the fireweed literally slow traffic and see visiting families posing for photos against the mural. If you watch a little longer, you might begin sensing that the cars are actually the ones out of place. The mural is our first step in challenging and redefining our public space.”

Translating between art and bureaucracy

The City of Homer’s \$98,500 investment is earmarked for paving, traffic calming, and pedestrian signs, and even these seemingly mundane municipal tasks highlight the project’s potential for coalition building. Bunnell Street Arts Center plays a mediating role in ensuring the creative process of artists is honored and regulatory requirements are met. For example, Bunnell recently hosted a meeting with the City manager, the director of Public Works, and the Chief of Police to strategize together on pedestrian safety improvements. Bunnell’s leaders know they are in a unique position to make space for the varied interests and perspectives at play in this holistic approach to neighborhood placemaking. Sometimes this means creating an environment where all voices can participate; other times it means standing in as a representative for one group or another so that not every partner has to be involved in every step. “Bureaucratic processes can

seem arduous, especially to creative visionaries,” says Freeman. “Bureaucrats might see artists as flighty and ungrounded in practicalities, while artists might see bureaucrats as static and out of touch. But because of this opportunity to work together, things are changing. I commend the City of Homer for being an exceptionally supportive partner in this program’s vision to galvanize our Old Town community through creative placemaking and communal stewardship.”

Indeed, the success of these public/private collaborations is starting to ripple throughout Homer, not just in Old Town. For example, Bunnell’s Assistant Director Adele Person, who has been an integral part of Old Town’s pedestrian priority, has brought new ideas to her own neighborhood by organizing “Halloween One Way”, a safer trick-or-treating walking plan.



Artist Dan Coe’s fireweed mural.

Old Town puts the “public” in public art

Homer’s Public Art Committee passes a unanimous resolution to offer city land as a potential public art site for Old Town’s Artist in Residence Program. Not to be outdone, two days later Homer’s Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission enthusiastically supports new artful park signage for Bishop’s Beach Park. Further, the Commission agrees to display this artful signage in *all* of Homer’s parks, in collaboration with the Public Arts Committee. Bunnell posts a call for local artists to propose designs for the signage and presents a proposal to the two agencies, who are excited (and perhaps a bit relieved) that such a high-quality, affordable, artful, and local option is available. Now the uniform signage project is considering using the Bishop’s Beach sign as a model for the rest of the keystone parks in Homer.

The Parks and Recreation Commission also passes a resolution to install a hand-painted “Welcome to Old Town” public sign outside the Chamber of Commerce. The new welcome sign was initiated by the Chamber as part of the Old Town AIR Program, and New York City artist-in-residence Mike Houston is selected to make this a reality. Houston proposes iconic imagery that will resonate with locals and visitors alike: “An old horse-drawn wagon carrying coal, fox furs, and barrels of herring. A dock, with salmon or herring fleet docked in distance, glacier and mountains behind.”

The Old Town AIR Program has also rallied the neighborhood around public art, proposing Bishop’s Beach Park as a potential sculpture site. The site is beloved by locals, tourists, and wildlife, but in dire need of some pizzazz. Bunnell has brought Homer’s Public Art Committee, the Parks and Recreation Commission, the Planning Commission, and Public Works together to move the plans forward. The Homer Public Works Department will install and service future Old Town Public Art (if it is a permanent sculpture) as well as the two hand-painted gateway signs.



New York City artist Mike Houston's initial rendering for the "Welcome to Old Town" sign.

"We've bridged the divide between due civic process and expansive creative vision," says Freeman.

OCTOBER 2013

The local goes national

So far this initiative has been largely driven by local voices; now comes the time to see how national artists might shape Old Town. Bunnell Street Arts Center is ready to post an open call for both the Old Town Artist in Residence Program and the Old Town Public Art Program, working with CaFE (Call for Entry) – a widely-used site for artist calls, and the Alliance of

Artists Communities – the national association of artist residency programs. While these national RFPs begin to circulate, local Homer-based artists interested in creating outdoor installations have still more opportunities for public art and artistic amenities (benches, gardens, etc.) that continue to propel the project's work forward.

Old Town Artist in Residence RFP:

Old Town AIR seeks visiting artists from Alaska and the U.S. to galvanize the community around Homer's Old Town neighborhood through the creation and presentation of artwork that activates the Arts Center's space and surrounding outdoor neighborhood sites. Old Town AIR presents opportunities through art to explore creative placemaking, shared values, and communal stewardship. Old Town AIR seeks artist-led projects featuring community engagement and neighborhood change through art such as murals, poetry, new media, landscape design, music, ephemeral art, dance, painting, theater, installation, creative writing, or sculpture at the arts center and neighborhood sites such as Bishop's Beach, Bishop's Beach Park, and neighborhood trails and roads. One-month residencies will be awarded by January 1, 2014 and scheduled for February-June, 2014.

Old Town Public Art RFP:

Bunnell Street Arts Center will award up to \$15,000 for a work of public art, either permanent or ephemeral. Homer, Alaska's Old Town is one block south of the Sterling Highway overlooking Kachemak Bay and the Kenai Mountains. Located in Old Town, Bishops Beach was an historic mooring for boats back in Homer's homesteading days. Today, people still comb the beach for coal to heat their homes. It is also a recreational nexus with a picnic shelter, grills, restroom facilities, and miles of beach. Bishops Beach is one of Alaska's most accessible beaches, adjacent to the Islands, Ocean Visitor Center, and

the Beluga Slough trailhead. Bishop's Beach is within easy walking distance to shops, restaurants, and art galleries in historic Old Town Homer.

DECEMBER 2013

From jitters to joy

Seasonal ebbs and flows are part of life in Alaska, and the Old Town initiative takes advantage of this time to make decisions and plan for the new year. As the cold, dark Kachemak winter settles around Old Town, neighbors are already visualizing the artistic additions the spring months will bring. When Bunnell posted the two national RFPs for artists-in-residence and public art projects, they had no idea what to expect and had a serious case of the jitters. Would the call be competitive enough? Would it even be intriguing to outsiders? Positioned alongside well-known institutions with huge budgets, would artists apply to a comparatively modest residency program in far-away Old Town, Homer, Alaska? Conversely, would they get overwhelmed with a flood of applicants? Surely the opportunity to live in one of the most beautiful landscapes, popular travel destinations, and best art towns in the nation made this program a gem!

"It's important that projects with this many partners remain malleable and accessible. The more varied our partners are, the more dynamic our Old Town AIR Program will be. Partners create their own sense of stewardship through collaboration."

The jitters continue until the open calls close on December 1st, with a thrilling sixty-five applicants for Public Art and eighty-two for Artist in Residence. The partners are excited by the caliber and diversity of applicants, and in particular how many artists demonstrate a priority for local participation and attention to Homer's environmental surroundings. Reviewing the possibilities contained in the proposals is one of the best parts of the project so far. The selection panels include representatives from the City of Homer – including the Public Works Department, the Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee, and the Public Arts Committee – as well as the Homer Chamber of Commerce and prominent local and state-wide artists. The effort expresses Bunnell's desire to manifest a shared vision that benefits and represents the entire community. "By inviting those new partners we are sharing the steering power," says Freeman. "This is the magic of collaborative processes. Sharing power means sharing in ownership, and we want our developments to be owned by all."

Advocacy work is never done

Bunnell Street Arts Center was a participant in the Southern Kachemak Peninsula's MAPP (Mobilizing Action through Planning and Partnership) initiative, and now Old Town AIR Program has been asked to enlist on the MAPP website as a community workgroup, defined as projects that successfully advocate for their causes by partnering within the community for collective impact. Bunnell hopes the recognition helps mobilize other healthy community efforts for developing partnerships.

One example of Bunnell's success in bringing partners together around a common cause comes as a result of dire news: the City of Homer drops funding for local arts and culture nonprofits from its 2014 Budget. Together, Bunnell, Homer Arts and Culture Alliance, and ReCreate Rec organize an effort to address City Council. In two hours of testimony from about thirty local organizations, arts leaders convince the City to reinstate funding and contribute \$35,000 to an area-wide, collaborative "Arts, Recreation and Culture" needs assessment. This project, known by local arts leaders as "Homer's ARC", represents a new way of working together for positive collective impact.

"As we take each new step forward, I'm thankful for the type of community Homer is –an open door for those who want to better it, filled with innovative thinkers and frontier doers that together create quite an ambitious community of people," says Freeman. "Our positive collaboration and quick results are largely due to minimizing our individual group differences and capitalizing on our shared community vision to nurture a creative identity unique to Homer. This project is owning what Homer's potential has always been."

JANUARY 2014



Hungry Hat Circus performs on Bishop's Beach.
photo by Rose Grech

The circus comes to town!

While most people don't associate beach activities with Alaska in January, the Hungry Hat Circus warms Bishop's Beach with an illuminating oceanside performance. Featuring fire acts of all kinds – from hooping, to large flaming knife juggling, belly dancing with fire, and balancing flaming swords on dancers' heads – the Circus offers performances and workshops throughout the day, and at

night locals bring Christmas trees down to the beach for a bonfire. The event seizes on Alaska's winter darkness to light up the town and serves as a reminder that Homer's creative spirit is alive year-round.

In what might be described by some as a different kind of circus, Bunnell's Assistant Director Adele Person visits Juneau to participate in a state legislature convening, hosted by the Alaska State Council on the Arts. "I spoke to Senator Micciche and Representative Seaton about our creative placemaking successes and they are both supportive of our efforts," says Groning. "It's pretty interesting to stand next to the Conoco Philips lobby, education lobbies, and fishing groups and think about how much we do with just 1% for the arts. It was a beautiful collaborative effort by the Arts Council, the Humanities Forum, and Museums Alaska." Groning

and Roger Schmidt from the Fine Arts Camp in Sitka (another ArtPlace awardee) also meet with Jamie Bennett, the new director of ArtPlace, and Jayson Smart of the Rasmuson Foundation, to discuss their creative placemaking efforts. "What is interesting is that these small grassroots arts organizations are succeeding where entrenched interests and bureaucratic gridlock have failed. Our message is one of abundance: What the arts can do for you, it can do for all of us."

Youth design their futures

The winter offers opportunities to reflect on the communities' challenges and strategies for change. A community health assessment developed by the peninsula's MAPP initiative reports Homer's top two health risks are underage drinking and adult heavy and binge drinking. In response, the Homer Prevention Project organizes a youth photography exhibit at KBay Café, inviting young people to reflect on the community health assessment, and Homer's first local poetry slam is held to coincide with the exhibit. The community in attendance is energized by the creative energy, courage, and depth Homer's youth have brought to a complex community challenge through poetry and photography. The winner of the poetry slam receives a notebook to write poems in and then pass around to others in the community as a living collection.

Homer locals also form Cosmic Agents, a community group of young creatives, age 21-39. Bunnell Street Arts Center hosts the group for dinners seasonally, and the members share ideas about how they would like to engage with the community and what kind of support Bunnell and others can offer to emerging artists. Bunnell is hopeful that this motivated and energetic group continues to feel activated and nurtured by the Arts Center.

FEBRUARY 2014

And the winner is.....!

Bunnell Street Arts Center is over the moon to announce the finalists for the 2014 Old Town Artist in Residence and Old Town Public Art programs! Four artists were selected as artists-in-residence, with projects aimed to engage the local community in imaginative new ways. Additionally, two artists were selected for public art installations in Old Town.

With so many partners involved in the planning and selection of these upcoming projects, "everyone now owns a piece of the success to come," says Brianna Allen. "Community galvanization is hinged on knowing you had something to do with that success. The diverse buy-in and forms of land, money, materials, and long-term stewardship our community has invested will ultimately fuel the program's success as we bring outside artists inside our tiny nestle of Homer." As the first visiting artists arrive – Soriba and Shelly Fofana – the community of Old Town Homer gathers potluck-style to welcome the visitors and drum their introductions on into the night.

SELECTED ARTISTS IN RESIDENCE

Ibrahima "Soriba" and Shelley Fofana

Soriba and Shelley Fofana from Santa Fe, New Mexico, will bring to Homer the spirit and joy of West African dance and drumming. Through immersion in traditional rhythms and songs from Guinea, the artists will "share the relevance of this art form and its connection to sacred forms of living as we exist within community." During the residency the Fofanas will work with locals – from preschoolers to professional performing artists – and use local resources to create a performance piece that explores many of the cultural contexts for this art form, including dance, drumming, dundun (dance and drumming in unison), and traditional songs, music, and video imagery. The Fofanas will give also an artist talk entitled "The Culture of Dance and Drumming in Guinea", introducing the public to the idea of a culture which honors and supports its musicians and dancers as an integral part of daily life.

Allison Akootchook Warden

Inupiaq Alaskan performance artist Allison Akootchook Warden proposes a new piece of theater, "Let Glow." The show will explore ways that we seek love in this modern age and how technology can be a deterrent to real intimacy and connection to place. Warden will use her time to research and draft the proposed interactive play. The artist's goal is to present a staged reading of "Let Glow" during her residency, inviting the audience to workshop the interactive elements of the script and provide feedback. During her residency Warden will present an artist talk focusing on how she finds sources that inspire and then connects the dots between inspiration and the intended objective of her staged work.

Alaskan artists beat out stiff national competition for permanent and ephemeral public art projects at Bishop's Beach.

Rachelle Dowdy was selected for the permanent public art installation. The Fairbanks, Alaska-area artist will create an 8' ferro-concrete loon figure standing on a concrete pedestal (adding another 20 inches to the overall height). Affixed to an aluminum mounting plate and additionally supported through the sculpture's fist soars a commercial grade windsock on a 12' pole. Dowdy says, "This anthropomorphic sculpture is not only a reminder of our shared space, but the windsock gives us an instant visual cue to the immediate conditions we are about to immerse ourselves into."

Anchorage-based artist Jimmy Riordan teams up with Jesus Landin Torrez III and Michael Gerace for an ephemeral installation called "Searching for the Sublime at the End of the Road." The community of Homer and Alaskan artists are invited to help activate a temporary structure on Bishop's Beach built of local clay and then fired. The site will be a base camp for a series of art actions including walks, performances, readings, dinners, and fireside chats. While the structure itself will be ephemeral, the artists have designed the project for permanence as well: "Using various forms of documentation we will create an interactive digital archive of these events, including impromptu discussions and discoveries springing up around the construction of the clay structure. This archive will be housed in an Apple MiPad and displayed at Bunnell Street Arts Center."

APRIL 2014

Africa to Alaska

With the inaugural Old Town Artist Residency underway, Bunnell is keen for the project to reach beyond the Arts Center itself and reverberate throughout the Old Town community, as a demonstration of the collective impact intended by the

Selected Artists in Residence, cont.
guiding participants through the statue theater technique, moving through increasingly complex levels of activity to explore sharing stories through montage statues that will eventually speak. Warden says, "'Let Glow,' focuses on finding love: self-love, community acceptance and place, family-healing love and romantic love." The audience is engaged in and throughout the piece, invited to participate physically and through written and spoken word. "My intention is that each audience member leaves the experience feeling hopeful, more connected to community."

Jarod Charzewski

Charleston, South Carolina-based installation artist Jarod Charzewski has proposed a site-specific installation referencing western civilizations' consumer culture. Charzewski will select materials abundant in the Homer area, and by using the forgotten, discarded, or non-precious items as the medium, he aims to create an immersive landscape for gallery viewers to experience. The artistic process begins with a design phase that utilizes the unique elements of Bunnell's exhibition space, with consideration to lighting, entrances, passageways, and architectural features. "I look forward to engaging with the public in Homer," Charzewski says. "My work has always included local people in a very hands-on way. The outreach program I propose involves interested participants helping to create the piece. Those committed volunteers become collaborators through conversation and transference of skills as we work side by side. The artist and assistant relationship is one I have been on both sides of so I fully recognize and appreciate the time spent for each person."

program. And indeed, the artists Soriba and Shelly Fofana are everywhere – from leading a Homer Middle School physical-education class, to participating in Marimba Madness, a fundraiser by the Homer Council on the Arts held at the Homer Elks Lodge. "Culture is rooted in place, but it is an artist who has the kinetic, super-hero-like powers to engage people beyond a culture's origin," says Freeman. "Like an extension cord linked from Guinea, West Africa, to Homer, Alaska, the artists electrified our winter community with movement, song, and rhythm."

Translating between art and bureaucracy...again

The relationships Old Town's artists and arts leaders have cultivated with City officials are especially important when there are bumps in the road. While the "Welcome to Old Town" sign had been approved by the City in October, a miscommunication with the artist led to a change from the original proposal. With no time to attend another Planning Commission meeting before the artist arrives in Homer, Bunnell staff is able to explain the situation and petition the Commission to approve amendments to the sign's application just in time. The Art Center's track record in understanding the City's codes and regulations, as well as a consistent role as art-to-bureaucracy translator, saved the day!

MAY 2014

A glacier and a search for the sublime

As promised, artist Adrien Segal brings to life Homer's landscape in a creative blending of data and design. Inhabiting the front exhibition gallery space from April 14th to May 17th, Segal shares research on the Douglas Glacier, one of three local glaciers that anchor Homer's stunning view of the Kachemak Bay State Park. Composed in beautiful drawings, clay models, and poster-sized computer renderings, each ridge and formation correlates to glacial retreat data collected since 1958. Not only does Segal's approach spark new conversations about climate change in the Polar North,

Selected Artists in Residence, cont.

Adrien Segal

Sculptor Adrien Segal, based in Oakland, California, has designed her residency to combine local investigation with shared experiences. Segal will begin by offering a community workshop series on carving and whittling. Using local materials gathered from around the town, the workshop will introduce participants to the self-sustaining and hands-on practice of carving objects from found wood.

Segal's main residency activity is a sculptural project, collaborating with local scientific researchers and inviting public interaction to experiment, design, and respond to the landscape. Segal says, "The landscape is a great influence in my inter-disciplinary and process-intensive studio practice. In past projects, I have used data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and collaborated with the US Geological Survey to create sculptures that communicate scientific information as sculptural forms." During her residency, Segal will collaborate with scientific researchers studying Homer's unique natural setting, such as Kachemak Bay Research Reserve, which monitors sea level rise, changes in fresh and marine water temperature, storm events, and coastal uplift. The process of interpreting and translating data into sculptural forms will be on display throughout the residency, so the public can see the full investigation, not simply the end product. The gallery will include a compilation of this research, including drawings, models, material experiments, and found objects, as well as a site-specific sculpture installation.

but it also opens visitors' imaginations to new ways of sharing art-making in an open-studio process installation.

May's trio of artists – James Riordan, Jesus Landin Torrez III, and Michael Gerace – invite Old Town into a 9' tall brick dome on Bishop's Beach in "Searching for the Sublime". The project brings together the technical know-how of Homer's potter-rich artist community with the social practice of the visiting artists. From fireside chats to bricklaying, some fifty people participate in creating the fugitive structure named "Cenotaph." On the last day of the residency, a storm surge washes it away, leaving only the artists' question behind: "What is the sublime and how can we find it in nature and within ourselves?"

JUNE 2014

A chapter ends, a new invitation extends

One of Bunnell Street Arts Center's hopes for the Old Town initiative was that stewardship would radiate throughout the community, with businesses, City agencies, nonprofits, and residents summoning the will, the know-how, and the power to effect community change. As the year-long initiative that Bunnell has stewarded comes to a close, Old Town neighbors begin the process of forming the first official neighborhood association on the Kenai Peninsula, and this small act is in fact a great victory for self-determination and sustainability. There are other signs, too, that the Old Town community is ready to carry this work forward. For example, local resident Andy Sonneborn has painted a large landscape mural of her own – a 6' x 12' colorful depiction of a tall ship heading up Cook – overlooking one of the busiest intersections of Old Town.

Asia Freeman reflects on the trials and triumphs of the year in terms that evoke the Alaskan landscape: "The lifecycle of this creative placemaking action in Old Town might be best described as experiencing a

tectonic shift within our own social landscape. A full year of geysers and tremors – in the form of public testimony, placemaking presentations, art sculpture installations, signage partnerships, and new and expanded walking spaces – presaged the culture we’ve been envisioning.”

“As radical social sculptors creating change, we humbly acknowledge that an important creative-destruction process is underway with all effective placemaking. In reshaping the ways in which we consider public spaces and the process of fostering a vibrant community, we acknowledge a certain amount of disruption in what’s normal and routine. It is part of the process of reconfiguring the sociocultural landscape.”

Old Town’s creative placemaking initiatives have demonstrated what is possible, with the right combination of patience and urgency, direction and openness, small acts and grand visions. The success of this initiative – with its focus on livability and quality of life – raises deeper questions about public investment and human services. “As we sally-forth with beautifying our Cosmic Hamlet by the Sea, nearly a dozen residential lots here in Old Town are without running water,” says Freeman. “Some residents in Old Town are starting to raise an interesting question: ‘If the city can invest \$100,000 in pedestrian culture in my neighborhood, why can’t we get running water?’” And with creative placemaking efforts having an economic impact on the neighborhood as well, “At what point do rising property values inspire a shift in responsibility toward basic services?”

“I thought this grant and this AIR Program would give an example to Homer, maybe, of what we always should have been. But I’m finding the community is using this initiative to give an example to the entire state of how we all can be.”

These kinds of questions are central to ArtPlace, the National Endowment for the Arts’ Our Town program, the Kresge Foundation, and other national creative placemaking funds that seek creative solutions to our most critical community challenges. These initiatives don’t presume to meet all of a community’s needs, but they invest in processes that can offer a guide for neighborhood development. For Old Town, its success is rooted in fostering community self-determination, honoring culture-bearers, committing public and private investments, and carrying the work through.

* * * *

On June 1, Bunnell’s “Dinner in the Street” is the perfect culmination of a year’s worth of efforts, with over 200 guests and volunteers taking part in Old Town’s biggest creative placemaking experiment yet. Inspired by Soriba and Shelly Fofana’s residency, Homer’s newest drumming group leads dinner guests to the event’s entrance. Guests chat in the sun, surrounded by new public art – gardens, murals, and an outdoor buoy sculpture by AIR Jarod Charzewski. Bunnell’s gallery hosts a Silent Art Auction, featuring works by thirty-six Alaskan

artists. Guests enjoy a five-course dinner provided by five Old Town neighborhood restaurants, eaten out of handcrafted bowls sourced from artists' cupboards. New Orleans pianist Tom McDermott performs rag-time at the Gallery, and local musicians Kevin Duff and Kari Oden play for dinner guests. The happy hoard of pedestrians reclaim the street as commons, and together make the shared space a special place.



Bunnell Street Arts Center's "Dinner in the Street."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Asia Freeman was born in Mexico and raised in Alaska. After graduating from Homer High School she attended Yale College (BA, '91) and Vermont School of Fine Arts (MFA '97). Asia is a visual artist, an adjunct art instructor for the University of Alaska, and a co-founder of Bunnell Street Arts Center, where she holds the position of Artistic Director.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Caitlin Strokosch is President and CEO of the National Performance Network, where she has served since 2016. Previously, she was Executive Director of the Alliance of Artists Communities. For more than 20 years, Strokosch's work has focused on building communities through the arts.

EXTERNAL LINKS

National Performance Network: www.npnweb.org

Bunnell Street Arts Center: www.bunnellarts.org



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All photos courtesy of Bunnell Street Arts Center.



Artist Emily Johnson leads a group along Old Town's Bishop's Beach.

BUNNELL STREET ARTS CENTER: WHERE WE STAND

Long ago the Dena'ina people named the place that Bunnell Arts Center calls home *Tuggeght*. Settlers have since re-named this place Homer, Beluga Slough, and Bishop's Beach. We learned this name from Artist in Residence Emily Johnson (Yup'ik, Soldotna) in her 2016 project, *SHORE: Tuggeght*. Through storytelling, feasting, and dance, her act of land acknowledgment taught us that right here, like many other places, colonizers erased and suppressed history by taking Indigenous land and announcing new names. Subtly, Johnson sparked Bunnell's efforts to place equity and inclusion alongside excellence in our strategic plan.

This place, settled by the homesteaders, fox farmers, and fisherman who began arriving about 100 years ago, is a gracious landing place, a borderland of the Dena'ina Athabascan, on the Kenai River, and the Sugpiaq (Russian colonizers called them Alutiiq) people, who are based across Kachemak Bay. Here, an abundance of sea life has sustained rich cultures and attracted many pioneers. In 1937, Maybelle and Arthur Berry erected the Inlet Trading Post, now home to Bunnell Street Arts Center, to serve these newcomers.

Revering this land and its stories has shaped and transformed Bunnell's role as an incubator and presenter of artistic innovators. Bunnell offers programs that examine, engage, challenge, and celebrate our artistic resources, questions, and opportunities. Today, on the leading edge of climate change, Alaskans adapt to survive. In ways both necessary and challenging, we are shaped and forged by our environment and each other. Bunnell Street Arts Center nurtures and presents innovative art of exceptional quality in all media through diverse programs, including Artist in Residence, Artist in Schools, Exhibitions, Performances and Art Salons, and creative placemaking initiatives that promote stewardship and creative exchange through cross-sector partnerships.

Learn more at www.bunnellarts.org

INTERVIEW SERIES: ASIA FREEMAN

Artistic Director, Bunnell Street Arts Center (Homer, Alaska)

December 2018

Interviewed by Paul Bonin-Rodriguez, coordinator of NPN's Knowledge Building Initiative



Asia Freeman

In December 2018, the National Performance Network team sat down with NPN Partner representatives whose work is deeply rooted in community and creative placekeeping. Videos of the interviews are available at www.npnweb.org.

Paul Bonin-Rodriguez: *How did you come to the National Performance Network, and how has it impacted your work?*

Asia Freeman: Bunnell joined National Performance Network a couple of years ago. It has impacted our work incredibly, and actually long before we joined the network, because Alaska – being such a far-flung location – had one NPN Partner, Out North Theater, many years ago. Out North generously shared programming and in essence what we did was tack on to residencies that were NPN-supported and bring them down to Homer. And that went on for a good ten years until Out North closed. They've since re-opened but without the capacity to be an NPN Partner. So we applied and I think partly because of that strong record of sharing and commitment to a certain quality of performance and artists, it's been a really good fit. We joined just a few years ago.

“ Especially in a small town environment, there is a very rich opportunity for dialogue. You know, neighbors, who might not be your allies politically are still your allies when it comes to getting out of the ditch, and when it comes to taking care of each other.”

As far as the impact, I think, in so many ways... First of all, you know, Alaskans really want and need the exposure of very professional and dynamic and even well-traveled artists. Many people who live in Alaska travel a long way to eventually live there, or if they do live there and can't travel much this is a really important cultural exposure.

[NPN is] really important to me, because I've always been interested in deepening the dialogue about why arts matter and what artists can do, and what arts organizations can do for social justice, for change, and for, basically, catalyzing community. Especially in a small town environment, there is a very rich opportunity for dialogue. You know, neighbors, who might not be your allies politically are still your allies when it comes to

getting out of the ditch, and when it comes to taking care of each other. And as a result, we do talk to each other, maybe more than people will in cities. So it's really meaningful to have artists precipitate deeper conversations that get us processing some global or local or, of course, national issues.

PBR: *The Old Town Artist in Residency Program was put forth as a creative placemaking project. How does your organization strive to support the community? And what has your organization come to mean to the community as a result of your creative placemaking work?*

AF: Through ArtPlace, the Old Town Artist in Residence program – our ArtPlace project, which we began in 2013 – empowered Bunnell to reach a little bit deeper and with larger financial and visionary investment in the community. What we decided to do when we applied for this ArtPlace grant of \$150,000 was create a two-year project that would promote stewardship of Old Town through the arts. Old Town is an historic district where Homer established itself along Kachemak Bay just off Cook Inlet, along the tsunami zone where homesteaders, fisher folk, and settlers envisioned creating a new community. There were many things that we didn't know or focus on at the time, which was the erasure of that historic identity of place. It already had a name – *Tuggeght* – which is a Dena'ina name for “this gracious landing place.” So through the residency project we began to really get to know a lot about our identity and history, and share it with each other and visitors, and elevate stories and commitments and passions about that place that we didn't have or really even know how to do before this grant.

Of course with the grant we reserved a significant amount for residency stipends and documentation and marketing and those sorts of things, to create a national call (which was open to Alaskans as well), and some for the capacity of staff to support this. But we started the project in our first year with just a fraction – we got \$150,000 and we used \$50,000 only that first year and focused on small and local calls for artists so we could test and strengthen our

“ ‘Let’s make a public space a shared place, and own it and care about it.’ We talk about who we are and who we want to become.”

muscles around everything from how to contract, to how to call, and then how to work with other partners, like the City of Homer or the adjacent federal Islands and Ocean Visitors Center to create effective installations where there was available land and interests.

We did things like poetry along the trail. This is an estuary that’s part of US Fish and Wildlife, and along this estuary and trail the director envisioned sculptures. She’d been to some game park in Africa and said, “We could have sculptures about Alaskan animals or something.” So she tried a call, and she didn’t know too much about doing such a thing and it wasn’t successful. So they had some money and they didn’t know what to do next. And I thought, “What if we did a call that was around poetry, if we invited a local artist in residence to inhabit the slough and to draw on the human and animal and natural history of this place?” The interesting thing to me about the estuary is that it’s this sort of silent center of our community. One on hand, Old Town is a place that was developed due to its water access. And then as a land highway came down, people didn’t really go to Old Town for the same reasons, to park their boats or whatnot. The harbor was developed on the Homer Spit, and so people didn’t even know what the center of our community really has. But by working with Islands and Ocean and creating this very interesting interpretive signage in the form of poems that tell stories, it created an attraction and a nuanced and complex way of looking at our story of place. People would spend a lot of time reading this and the poems are gorgeous. They’re like advice from an estuary. They bring in Dena’ina language and talk about the tiny salmon that are hatched there. It’s just beautiful! Wow! And I thought, this is something that a lot of people would care about. There’ll be scientists, there’ll be children, there’ll be tourists, there’ll be artists, there’ll be writers – huh! So, what next? So we went through stages of it – murals, signage, wayfinding – to just begin thinking about how we could better communicate the sense of identity in Old Town, how we could work with our neighbors. And I’d say we’re very much still learning.

Now it’s five years later, we’re still essentially adapting the model that we forged through this ArtPlace grant, through this Old Town Artist in Residence initiative, to perpetuate residencies to think about stewarding local identities, to think about everything from habitat preservation and cultural preservation to community dialogue and innovation. We’ve done things for five years now like “Dinner in the Street” where we just have a big giant banquet meal that features locally sourced food, garden greens, and seafood for a big cauldron stew, and desserts and whatnot. And people are at these long tables or under tents. It’s been in the road, it’s been at the beach – public spaces – to remind people “let’s make a public space a shared place, and own it and care about it.” We talk about who we are and who we want to become. It’s been game changing!

So then NPN coming along after that ArtPlace grant is over allows us to have a couple of supported artist residencies a year, to commission the creation of projects, which has taken a whole new deeper level – it’s really exciting.

I realized as a result of the ArtPlace initiative, Old Town AIR, with some of the Indigenous artists we had the privilege of working with that we really needed to address Alaska's complex history of colonization. Here we are a community of settlers – surrounded by, on one side of the bay, Indigenous communities, the Dena'ina community up north, Kenai-Sugpiaq area – going blithely along in the form of Manifest Destiny as our place. But it's a place of stolen land like pretty much any place that is "American" today. We deeply need to elevate the stories of the place, and in that process also have truth about what has taken place here in terms of trauma and the violence of colonization, with the aim of going toward – in my wildest dreams – reconciliation through the healing potential of art to surface painful truths in a beautiful way.

" Here we are a community of settlers – surrounded by, on one side of the bay, Indigenous communities, the Dena'ina community up north, Kenai-Sugpiaq area – going blithely along in the form of Manifest Destiny as our place. But it's a place of stolen land like pretty much any place that is 'American' today."

PBR: *Has NPN's approach to community engagement become a helpful container for the work you do?*

AF: Absolutely, because NPN has social justice at its heart, and that's a core value for the practice that we're doing. So it's enabled me to align language and funding and develop partnerships around social justice, alongside excellence and quality and ambition in the world of art presentation. And I don't think they ever were really separate in my mind, but sometimes it takes a lot of resources to really build the projects through which we could make them visible and produce them. So we chose to take this tack of decolonization as a curatorial angle: we've had residencies of visual and performing artists who brought these themes forward. And it's ranged from touring an exhibit to ephemeral dance and storytelling. It's been just amazing. Really exciting. I don't think that

would have happened as well or as deeply if we didn't have the very muscular and powerful funding with ArtPlace and the Old Town AIR to begin in a truly local and deeply invested way.

PBR: *What have been some of the biggest challenges in terms of engaging communities?*

AF: It's still a challenge to build audience and to find partners. So, interestingly, I find myself really broadening. This is a question to me right now: how far should I stretch from what one might call Bunnell's mission – which is to nurture and present innovative and contemporary art of exceptional quality – to support this effort towards decolonization, for example? In other words, if I really stretch and reach to create an inclusive space, we're going to go directly into a space that hasn't necessarily been called "art" by maybe Western society but has always been art in Indigenous societies, which is the arena of art and healing.

“When we don’t have trauma-informed care... then we’re totally short-changing ourselves in terms of social change.”

So now, our partners are expanding to local tribal councils, health providers, people working in trauma-informed care, and bringing language to how we talk about, how we meet each other, how we listen, and how we tell our story. That's where decolonization happens – it happens right at home with how we describe ourselves and how we tell our story. Do we take responsibility? Do

we speak about our pain and our role in the human story which has its dark aspects and its pain – how it’s affected us, what role we’ve played in perpetuating it, and being shaped by it? We can include our children in that, and our care providers can be really sensitive to that or not. And when we don’t have trauma-informed care – whether it’s to the artist or to the client or to the audience member who might need to talk about and process and really reflect on a experience – then we’re totally short-changing ourselves in terms of social change. We can be all in the same room together, talking about a performance, and go to another place...

Among the many things that I’ve heard that have just blown my mind most recently – a friend of mine named Martha Crow who’s an Indigenous woman from Igiugig – she’s a relatively new friend who came forward during a recent NPN-supported residency and project called *ALAXXA/ALASKA*, coming to us from Ping Chong Theater in New York and several Alaskan partners, to tell a story about the juxtaposition between Indigenous and White culture, between one version of history and another version of a story of people who’ve been in Alaska for over 10,000 years. I was sitting in the room with Martha and a few other folks talking about the land, who much we love it, and another woman who’s a friend of mine said, “I was born here and raised here, but I feel really sensitive now to saying ‘this is my land.’ I’m not even speaking to the plot where my house was built, but this idea that this is my place, this is my community. Is it mine or was it stolen, really? I’ve inherited it, but what’s my role in that?” And Martha said, “When I went back to my village and I brought my children, my mother laid them down on the ground and rolled them in the dirt. And she said, ‘You know, we don’t own this land. If you love it, it owns you.’” And Martha looked at us and said, “That applies to all of you.”

PBR: *Going forward, what do you think NPN might do to help deepen the engagement practices among its Partners?*

AF: I think that we need more opportunity one-on-one to share and listen to each other. I think that there is a treasure of experiences that we’re gaining, community-to-community and project-to-project, that are giving us everything from more powerful insights about the challenges and opportunities around nurturing social justice to organizational capacity. And how do we actually uphold a strong residency program from an administrative side? How do we build it and fund it and maintain it? And then what happens when you get to a point – and it may be particular to my locale, but I doubt it – where you’re starting to think about things like educational curricula, and history, and story, and how do we impact that in the schools?

There's abundant room to grow and I have to say I'm very pleased in this [NPN] meeting that I've seen funders be part of breakout groups and conversations, because I think it's an excellent time to gather information about the impacts of the field, the needs, and what we're bringing.

ABOUT ASIA FREEMAN

Asia Freeman was born in Mexico and raised in Alaska. After graduating from Homer High School she attended Yale College (BA, '91) and Vermont School of Fine Arts (MFA '97). Asia is a visual artist, an adjunct art instructor for the University of Alaska, and a co-founder of Bunnell Street Arts Center, where she holds the position of Artistic Director.

ABOUT BUNNELL STREET ARTS CENTER

Bunnell was created in 1991 by and for artists. Years ago, beginning in the 1930s, homesteaders told stories around the coal stove in what was then a spacious hardware store in Old Town, Homer. This place has seen American, European, and Russian immigration and colonization. The place we now call Homer lies in the traditional lands of Dena'ina and Alutiiq people. We honor these people and the living culture that call this home. With equal parts historical acknowledgement and creative imagination, locals and visitors, indigenous and immigrant, seek creative forums in this historic center.

Bunnell is a statewide leader of artistic presentation and education with innovative and non-traditional programs designed to shape and strengthen Alaska's cultural economy. Bunnell presents visual art exhibitions, artist residencies, artists in schools, workshops, performances, concerts, film screenings, readings, artist talks and more. Bunnell engages Alaska's diverse and widespread artistic community by cultivating and exploring new ways to survive and thrive as creative visionaries living in geographically distinct landscapes.

EXTERNAL LINKS

National Performance Network: www.npnweb.org

Bunnell Street Arts Center: www.bunnellarts.org



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All photos courtesy of Bunnell Street Arts Center.

DECOLONIZING ALASKA

Tuesday, March 26th, 2019

By Asia Freeman

Artistic Director, Bunnell Street Arts Center (Homer, Alaska)



Emily Johnson is part of a brave new generation of artists that is leading Alaska's cultural sector to become adaptive and resilient. Photo from her work "THE THANK-YOU BAR."

Emily Johnson returns home to Alaska every year to spend time with her family during traditional times of subsistence harvest. During her stay, the Yup'ik artist makes time to share and collect stories that shape her work as a dancer, storyteller, and Artistic Director of Catalyst. Here, at Bunnell Street Arts Center, she's found a place where people have gathered for decades. Long before this was an arts center, it was a general store at the end of the road to the west.

Johnson is part of a brave new generation of artists that is leading Alaska's cultural sector to become adaptive and resilient, placing equity alongside excellence through inspired, decolonizing approaches that force us to evolve. Their artistic works reflect deeper truths about who we are and how we support each other – in ways both necessary and challenging, Alaskans are shaped and forged by our environment, our shared history, and each other.

Incubator of Alaska's artistic innovators, Bunnell's mission is to nurture and present innovative art of exceptional quality for diverse audiences. Through exhibitions, educational and touring programs, artists in residence, and artists in schools Bunnell aims to reflect and connect diverse and disparate communities. Conversations,

workshops, and projects help Alaskans cultivate our identities and strengthen creative visions. Due to geographic and cultural isolation we have few opportunities to access educational art experiences that truly reflect Alaska's racial and cultural diversity. This arts center has been a powerful force in shaping and connecting Alaska's cultural landscape for twenty-seven years.

Revering this land and its stories has shaped and transformed me and my work as a curator at Bunnell Street Arts Center. Here we examine, engage, challenge, and celebrate Alaska's artistic resources, questions, and opportunities. Today, on the leading edge of climate change, Alaskans adapt to survive. In ways both necessary and challenging, we are shaped and forged by our environment and each other. For Bunnell, and for myself, a process of self-definition and transformation is happening in tandem with the decolonizing methods of the artists we present.

'The history we always knew'



Bunnell Street Arts Center is located by a place called Bishop's Beach, situated on the borderland of the Kenai River's Dena'ina and the Sugpiaq, who are based across Kachemak Bay.

Bunnell is located by a place called Bishop's Beach by the homesteaders, fox farmers, and fisherman who began settling this area about 100 years ago. It's situated on the borderland of the Kenai River's Dena'ina and the Sugpiaq (Russian colonizers called them *Alutiiq*), who are based across Kachemak Bay. Here, an abundance of sea life has sustained rich cultures and attracted many pioneers.

Street Arts Center, to serve these newcomers. The Inlet Trading Post was a kit general store, milled in Washington and unloaded on the beach from a steamship, probably ordered from Sears and Roebuck. At 32x64 feet, stocked with can goods from floor to ceiling, it was Homer's first "big box" store.

In 1937, Maybelle and Arthur Berry erected the Inlet Trading Post, now home to Bunnell

That was the history we always knew. But long before it was called Bishop's Beach, the Dena'ina people named this place *Tuggeght*. We learned this name from Johnson when she was Artist in Residence in 2016. Her project *SHORE: Homer at Tuggeght* subtly sparked Bunnell's efforts to place equity and inclusion alongside excellence in every aspect of what we do.

Survival stories

As part of presenting *SHORE*, Bunnell and Catalyst joined Woodard Creek Coalition, a cross-sector partnership of community organizations situated in the Woodard Creek watershed, which bisects our town from the mountainside behind us to the beach in front of us. The coalition was created with the intention of daylighting the paved-over creek to mark its presence through paint and dance.

This project invited community stories that revealed the critical, leading role that the arts have in uplifting the intrinsic, age-old, and evolving histories of this place. Through storytelling, feasting, and dance, Johnson's act of land acknowledgment taught us that right here – as in many other places – colonizers erased and suppressed history by taking Indigenous land and announcing new names. Through Johnson's work, the power of land acknowledgement flows like hidden rivers beneath our feet.

Similarly, a play about this land has deeply affected how we tell our story. In 2017, Bunnell co-commissioned Ping Chong + Company to create *ALAXSXA / ALASKA* (uh-LUCK-shkuh), a theatrical piece that weaves puppetry, video, recorded interviews, and *yuraq* (Yup'ik drum and dance) in a collage of striking contemporary and historical encounters between Alaska Native communities and newcomers in our state. Performers Ryan Conarro, Gary Upay'aq Beaver (Central Yup'ik) and puppeteer Justin Perkins reveal little-known histories – at times humorous, at times tragic – and juxtapose them against their own personal histories as “insider” and “outsider” in the Last Frontier.



Image from Ping Chong + Company's *ALAXSXA / ALASKA*.

ALAXSXA / ALASKA audiences experience intimate encounters with a multimedia performance as epic as the changing landscapes of Alaska. We reflect on dozens of stories that alternately illustrate and challenge our impressions of the Great Land. *ALAXSXA / ALASKA* acknowledges that this place is built of many stories, and the colonial narrative that begins with Russian conquest, or the sale of Alaska to the U.S., or Statehood, is as deeply ingrained as it is discriminatory, exclusive, and

privileged. For many, especially non-Native Alaskans, hearing stories of survival – from ice-fishing to snow machine repair at 40 degrees below zero – reminds us that the accounts of those who have survived over 10,000 years are here for those who are paying attention, like vast landscapes under a blanket of snow.

The most powerful occasion of witnessing *ALAXSXA / ALASKA*'s impact was, for me, in the village of Nanwalek. This village is only ten minutes away from my home by plane – just a hop, skip, and a jump across Kachemak Bay, where I've lived most of my life. But I'd never been there. Maybe because it's off the road system. *ALAXSXA / ALASKA* drew a packed audience at Nanwalek's K-12 school. After viewing excerpts of the play with the entire village, Chief Kvasnikoff invited everyone to a talking circle, including very small children.

We heard many courageous and powerful survival stories from families that were fractured – as kids were shipped off to boarding schools, where Native languages were violently suppressed – and the ensuing intergenerational trauma of alcoholism, shame, and violence. It reminded me that the arts are poised to help Americans experience truth and reconciliation if we care to pay attention.

"Decolonization begins in how we meet each other," Conarro said, "how we tell our stories."

Challenging the narrative

The experience of presenting *ALAXSXA / ALASKA* and witnessing its effect on audiences and communities has shown me that Alaskans are ready to push away from the Great White Narrative toward truer stories. From a Creation Residency to two tours of Alaska (2017 and 2018), the piece has been a game-changer, inspiring teachers, health-care providers, tribal leaders, and youth to share their personal stories and challenge the narrative of Alaska that is taught in our schools.

Visual artists are taking up the cause, too. As the world's attention shifts to the shrinking polar ice cap and the future of our planet, Alaska's place in the world has moved from the fringe to the center. Widely considered a "resource state," rich in extracts such as gold, fish, timber, and oil, Alaska has been colonized for centuries by forces that divide and dominate this state's identity.

Alaska's art market has for decades reflected the colonization and repression that has defined the industrialization of Alaska – a stereotypical idea of Alaska featuring dog sleds and "Eskimos," igloos and objects of native iconography often reproduced

abroad. In reality, Alaska artists present expansive ideas of Alaskan culture and people in art that explores both endangered traditions and new constructs of identity. Alaska's artists propose a confluence of indigenous and global materials, expanding and redefining the roles of tradition and technology to explore difficult territories and express new ways of being.

"I live a mixture of Western and indigenous culture," Joel Isaak (Dena'ina - Kenai, Alaska) said. "I explore the freedom to exchange information and experiences. Decolonizing means embracing cultural reciprocity and working toward universal acceptance of human beings."



Joel Isaak created a video installation, *Łuqa' ch'k'ezdelghayi* "Visions of Summer," in which his solo dance is projected on the back of a salmon skin screen.

Isaak created a video installation, *Łuqa' ch'k'ezdelghayi* "Visions of Summer," in which his solo dance is projected on the back of a salmon skin screen. The installation is one of thirty-one artworks featured in *Decolonizing Alaska*, an exhibit produced by Bunnell that toured Alaska for three years and travelled to Washington, D.C. In it, Alaska's artists have been challenged and changed by the question: "How should we tell the stories of colonization?"

Artists respond, surfacing themes ranging from intergenerational trauma to resource management, and how the history of Alaska is told in our schools. For this exhibit, we at Bunnell embraced the challenge ourselves, and didn't leave it solely to Alaskan Native artists. As a curator and visual artist, my feeling is that limiting the conversation to Indigenous artists only perpetuates colonization. Decolonization requires the concerted efforts and profound participation of both the colonizer and the colonized.

Reshaping traditions

The shared innovations, unconventional materials, and respectful inquiry of Alaska's working artists are beginning to dismantle a hierarchy of colonization and usher in a new era. In Alaska's diverse artistic production, we see artist's conversations connecting vast geographic distances and cultural experiences.

"I struggle with how many people draw boundaries and create categories about what kind of people and what kind of artists we are," says filmmaker Michael Walsh (Homer, Alaska). "I fear this perpetuates colonization."

Walsh's 35mm screen-printed film on celluloid celebrates the charismatic power of the Inupiaq woman rapper, AKU-MATU. "White man suppressed this power when he colonized Alaska, creating false divisions. I hope these divisions will dissolve in the 21st century and the voices of today's leaders will resonate with the wisdom of our Indigenous ancestors and hopeful humans of the future," he says.



"In my painting, St. Katherine of Karluk, I replace the symbolic elements of a Russian Orthodox icon with those of the Alutiiq people," Linda Infante Lyons says.

Artistic invention and imagination are reshaping traditions. New possibilities for cultural identity and sustainability are emerging in an environment of innovation. Linda Infante Lyons (*Alutiiq* - Anchorage) painted a portrait of her maternal grandmother from Kodiak Island in a bold, revisionist telling of history that elevates a new, powerful view of Indigenous women.

"Rediscovering culture and recovering lost religious icons are important steps in decolonization," Lyons said. "In my painting, *St. Katherine of Karluk*, I replace the symbolic

elements of a Russian Orthodox icon with those of the Alutiiq people... I am a living example of the melding of two cultures, the native and the colonizer. In this effort to represent the decolonization of Alaska, I acknowledge the assimilated icons of the colonizer, yet bring forth, as equals, the spiritual symbols of my Native ancestors."

I share these artists' hopes that new images of power reflect deeper truths about who we are and how we support each other. May we heal centuries of racism, suppression, and shaming. May new images of powerful Indigenous women infuse Alaska with resilience and respect.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Asia Freeman was born in Mexico and raised in Alaska. After graduating from Homer High School she attended Yale College (BA, '91) and Vermont School of Fine Arts (MFA '97). Asia is a visual artist, an adjunct art instructor for the University of Alaska, and a co-founder of Bunnell Street Arts Center, where she holds the position of Artistic Director.

ABOUT BUNNELL STREET ARTS CENTER

Bunnell was created in 1991 by and for artists. Years ago, beginning in the 1930s, homesteaders told stories around the coal stove in what was then a spacious hardware store in Old Town, Homer. This place has seen American, European, and Russian immigration and colonization. The place we now call Homer lies in the traditional lands of Dena'ina and Alutiiq people. We honor these people and the living culture that call this home. With equal parts historical acknowledgement and creative imagination, locals and visitors, indigenous and immigrant, seek creative forums in this historic center.

Bunnell is a statewide leader of artistic presentation and education with innovative and non-traditional programs designed to shape and strengthen Alaska's cultural economy. Bunnell presents visual art exhibitions, artist residencies, artists in schools, workshops, performances, concerts, film screenings, readings, artist talks and more. Bunnell engages Alaska's diverse and widespread artistic community by cultivating and exploring new ways to survive and thrive as creative visionaries living in geographically distinct landscapes.

EXTERNAL LINKS

National Performance Network: www.npnweb.org

Bunnell Street Arts Center: www.bunnellarts.org

Joel Isaak: www.joelisaak.com/

Emily Johnson/Catalyst Dance: www.catalystdance.com/

Linda Infante Lyons: www.lindainfantelyons.com/

Ping Chong/ALAXSXAIALASKA: www.pingchong.org/interdisciplinary-performance/production-archive/alaxsxa--alaska/

Michael P. Walsh: www.walshinthecloud.com/



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All photos courtesy of Bunnell Street Arts Center.

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