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Peer reviewed

**Moving with joy across the ice while my face turns brown  
from the sun**

Artwork by Maureen Gruben and Text by Kyra Kordoski  
Tuktoyaktuk, NWT



*Figure 1 Maureen Gruben, Moving with joy across the ice while my face turns brown from the sun (2019), archival inkjet on Epson Hot Press Bright, 120 × 42.5 in., edition of 3. Courtesy of the artist © Maureen Gruben; photo Kyra Kordoski.*

For *Moving with joy across the ice while my face turns brown from the sun* (2019, fig. 1), Maureen Gruben borrowed fourteen hand-built sleds from families in her Western Arctic hamlet of Tuktoyaktuk and brought them together on the spring sea ice outside her home to form a short-duration installation in which elements of multiple genres—land art, portraiture, performance, monument, photography—converge. Sleds have always been integral to Inuvialuit life, particularly in the spring when community members expertly pack them with everything they need to live on the land. Hitching them to skidoos, they cross miles of frozen

tundra and ice to Husky Lakes, where they prepare their canvas tents and off-grid cabins for the ice fishing season.

Construction elements and techniques for sleds have shifted over the years from the driftwood that washes en masse onto local shores and runners made of lichen and ice, all lashed together with sinew, to machine-cut and composite lumbers with polymer plastic runners, fastened, mostly, with nails and rope. But the flexibility and ingenuity of the handmade has been maintained. Each construction, in its overall size and shape, represents the particular needs of a family or individual hunter. The characteristics of each piece of each sled reflect different minds finding unique strategies; constantly merging streams of personal experience and ancestral teachings and locally available materials and tools determine the curves of runner tips and the dimensions of cargo boxes and decks. These details trace deeply personal relationships to the sled's makers, and the traces become more pronounced as they are mended over the years to increase their lifespan.

They remain a forceful contrast to the now-also-familiar mass-manufactured sleds such as the Boggan brand plastic cargo sleds. The difference is meaningful and can be related to the anthropologist Anna Tsing's work. Tsing has identified the ever-increasing global shift to producing "standardized" units, for which an "individual can stand in for all," as a core strategy for facilitating scalable models of extractive capitalist production.<sup>1</sup> "The only way to create scalability," she states, "is to repress change and encounter."<sup>2</sup> Any one Boggan could, indeed, be swapped seamlessly out for another; they can break but are not easily effectively repaired; their production certainly could be scaled to generate profit in any snowy market. With handmade sleds, repairs and adjustments index change over years, marking idiosyncratic incidents of not only production but continuous use. In essence, they remain permeable to numerous ongoing encounters—with tools, ice, tundra, ski-doo, the varied materials being transported—holding space in what Tsing has referred to as the "peripheries of capitalism."<sup>3</sup>

In standing the gathered sleds upright, Gruben lifts them into a human orientation, making these distinctive characteristics more immediately legible to our eye level while emphasizing and honoring the sled as an archetypal form. This gesture in many ways imbues the sleds with aspects of portraiture. In the first chapter of the art historian Shearer West's 2004 book *Portraiture*, she determines that the Western portrait has historically had a dual nature, being concerned with both "likeness" and "type."<sup>4</sup> As a primary support for this, she cites Erwin Panofsky's statement that a portrait, "on the one hand . . . seeks to bring out whatever it is in which the sitter differs from the rest of humanity . . . on the other hand it seeks to bring out whatever the sitter has in common with the rest of humanity."<sup>5</sup> Moving on in later chapters to address postmodernism and "identities," West cites

several artists working with the genre but outside representationalism for whom “the primary concern may not be to convey a likeness of themselves but to reveal something more fundamental about their life,” observing a “shift [in] attention from the iconic qualities of portraiture to the indexical ones.”<sup>6</sup> These observations have evident parallels with Gruben’s presentation of sleds. In the collective nature of *Moving with joy across the ice . . .*, the parallels extend to another comment West makes in her book: “group portraiture,” she states, “has often had an affinity with theatrical performance, as figures can be shown interacting with each other as well as posing for the portraitist.”<sup>7</sup>

These sleds may not be posing, but they can be said to have been placed in relation to one another. It is a celebratory grouping that, in the manner West describes above, “reveals something fundamental” about the lives of families who have been in mutually supportive relation for generations.<sup>8</sup> The relationship represented is one of deep time, and this arrangement is only a moment of that span. The sleds were in fact in place only long enough for the work to be photographed. This was for two reasons. The first was safety, given the weight and size of the sleds on a naturally shifting surface of snow and ice. The second was they were still in active use and needed for springtime traveling out to ice fishing camps. They had work to do, and this was also just a brief episode (or encounter) in the multiyear lives of these sleds. Which is to say that, like performance art, *Moving with joy across the ice . . .* has a strong relationship to time as well as place. This temporality may seem to sit in a contradictory tension with the monumental presence the sleds have taken on in this upright position, due to their size relative to a human scale. But the complicated relationship between performance, monumentality, audience, and place has been extensively investigated by the art historian Mechtild Widrich, who has argued that the usual act of documenting a performance piece extends its existence and affect from the ephemeral into the monumental. In a 2014 paper Widrich focused her attention on how this documentation and ongoing representation has drastically multiplied due to today’s “massive engines of reproduction” (social media, ubiquitous cameras, etc.), and considers how this “mediation,” as she terms it, influences our understanding of site-specificity.<sup>9</sup> She argues that “the connections between layers of mediation—and actual acts and things—in space and time add up to a new kind of monumentality and site-directedness,” and advocates for replacing the term *site-specific* with *site-directed* because she feels the latter is “more flexible, while allowing precise orientation to sites.”<sup>10</sup>

It adds to the richness of this line of conversation to consider that *Moving with joy across the ice . . .* was reiterated and augmented in the winter of 2021 for a public art piece at Toronto’s Bentway Skate Trail, a public ice-skating track built annually under Toronto’s Gardiner Expressway, the main artery into the city that

runs along the Great Lakes shoreline. The Toronto installation, titled *Moving with Joy*, consisted of seven sleds based loosely on the dimensions of the ones she borrowed for her initial piece. Six of them displayed large-format images that Gruben captured during time spent at Husky Lakes in the spring of 2021, and the seventh held an LED screen that looped a juxtaposed montage of video clips shot during the same period. The two iterations invert the relationship between site and artwork: in the first, *Moving with joy across the ice while my face turns brown from the sun*, the sleds are situated in the land; in the second, that land is framed by the sleds. *Moving with Joy* (fig. 2) also threw one site in relation to another, superimposing aspects of Western Arctic life onto life in Toronto. The Bentway site in particular amplified Toronto's inherent elements of movement, not only with an audience primarily in motion on skates, but in being situated beneath a constant flow of traffic. While the sleds included in this iteration were manufactured in a Toronto studio, they nevertheless incorporated personal elements intimately connected to the Western Arctic: their runners were painted with rich colors drawn from pieces of Gruben's mother's embroidery and beading. The video clips and images were not originally captured for or as "art" in a formal sense, but as part of that now ubiquitous daily process that Widrich addresses of using phones to document and commemorate our lives as and where they are being lived.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 2 Maureen Gruben, *Moving with Joy* (2021), installation view at the Bentway Skate Trail, December 2021. Courtesy of the artist, © Maureen Gruben, photo Shane Parent.

In recognizing the fluidity and complexity of sites, of how not only artworks but also our increasingly prolific documentation of and conversations about

artworks mediate sites, Widrich argues that “adding a layer of ‘movement as mediation’ to our activity of deciphering the meaning and construction of history might allow us to understand that whenever monuments are built, moved, or removed, the sites they direct to are as much a product as productive of their meaning.”<sup>12</sup> It is worth considering what the implications of this framework would be when applied to a piece that occurs on, and so directs to, a site in which human activities and histories are not pervasive and dominant but still integrated and balanced with the nonhuman. Or what the implications would be when the site to which an artwork plus its mediation directs—in this case, the sea ice outside Gruben’s home—cyclically disappears and reappears as it melts and re-forms every year according to a more-than-human rhythm. Widrich’s argument for site-directness might, then, be particularly valuable if taken as conscious acknowledgment of the boundaries of mediation, of the varied, shifting edges of our individual knowledge. This might push us to consider more carefully questions like, what is an audience’s responsibility to sites they are directed to, but have no, or little, firsthand experience of? Or, very simply, in what ways does land extend beyond “site”?

In a conversation with the author Dionne Brand published in 2018 under the title “Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom,” the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes land “as a particular space full of relationality to which [Anishinaabe] form very deep attachments over very long periods of time.”<sup>13</sup> Elaborating on this in the same conversation, she explains:

My ancestors worked and worked and worked and worked. They got up every day and made things. They made their political system and their healthcare system and their education system, their transportation networks, their clothes and their food. They were constantly engaged in creating, and through those individual and collective embodied processes, generated thought, ethics, theory.<sup>14</sup>

This mode of expansive creation through deep time that Simpson describes is reflected in the wood cuts and joins, the patches and hand-knotted ropes of sleds. Tsing’s observations on the indeterminate are also relevant here, with respect to how individuals are understood and represented in relation to others, and to time and place:

Our daily habits are repetitive, but they are also open-ended, responding to opportunity and encounter. What if our indeterminate

life form was not the shape of our bodies but rather the shape of our motions over time? Such indeterminacy expands our concept of human life, showing us how we are transformed by encounter.<sup>15</sup>

While the published title of Simpson's conversation ("Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom") was not a known reference for the title *Moving with joy across the ice as my face turns brown from the sun*, the correspondence is deeper than coincidence. The space of ice- and snow-coated tundra in which sleds like these exist is a space of freedom and joy—one that has persisted for thousands of years and is temporary only in a cyclical sense. There is joy, too, in the anticipation of its (once) inevitable annual return. At the end of her conversation with Brand, Simpson, in turn, points to Ashon Crawley's writing on joy. The scholar's first two books are described, respectively, as "an investigation of aesthetics and performance as modes of collective, social imagination" and "an exploration of the interrelation of blackness, mysticism, quantum mechanics and love." In the latter volume, *The Lonely Letters*, when discussing how the "capacious" minimalism of the composer Steve Reich recalls for him James Baldwin's assertion that there is "always a beat beneath the beat," Crawley wonders:

Is there a chance of getting at the thing beneath, the thing underneath, the thing beyond? And this is another way to ask about the unfolding of possibility, of joy, of gods and the human, of love as ceaseless pulse and noise. What the beat, what the music, reveal are the things that remain, the things that exceed capture by the thing called beat, the thing called music. And I wonder if, too, if the thing called love, the thing called god, are the remains of that which exceeds capture similarly, of that which exceeds capture likewise?<sup>16</sup>

Gruben often refers in conversation to the Tuktoyaktuk elder and ice geologist Anngun (Charles Gruben), who has described the sound of a sled moving fast, bouncing over drifting snow, as a drumbeat on the ice. This sound is, perhaps, a beat that itself exceeds capture.

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Inuvialuk artist Maureen Gruben employs an intimate materiality. In her practice, polar bear fur, beluga intestines, and seal skin encounter resins, vinyl, bubble wrap, and metallic tape, forging critical links between daily life in the Western Arctic and global social and environmental concerns. Gruben was born and raised in Tuktoyaktuk, where her parents were traditional knowledge keepers and founders of

E. Gruben's Transport. She holds a bachelor of fine arts from the University of Victoria and has exhibited regularly across Canada and internationally. She was long-listed for the 2019 Aesthetica Art Prize and the 2021 Sobey Art Prize, and her work is held in national and private collections.

Kyra Kordoski's art writing and photo documentation have been featured in numerous periodicals including *esse arts + opinions*, *C Magazine*, *White Fungus*, *Canadian Art*, *BOMB*, *Inuit Art Quarterly*, CBC, and the *Globe and Mail*, and in exhibition catalogs including those published by Emily Carr University Press, grunt gallery, National Gallery of Canada, Art Gallery of Ontario, and Vancouver Art Gallery. She completed an MA in cultural studies from the University of Leeds, as well as an MFA in art writing from Goldsmith's College, University of London, during which time she collaboratively organized public art writing events at Goldsmith's College, Whitechapel Gallery, and various community arts centers in Bristol and London. Since 2016, she has been working with the Inuvialuk artist Maureen Gruben as a studio manager, writer, and photographer, and she spends part of her year at Maureen's home in the Western Arctic hamlet of Tuktoyaktuk.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 41, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400873548>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>4</sup> Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>9</sup> Mechtild Widrich, "Moving Monuments in the Age of Social Media," *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 15, no. 2 (2018): 133, <https://doi.org/10.5749/futuante.15.2.0133>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>13</sup> Dionne Brand and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom: Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in Conversation with Dionne



Brand,” *Literary Review of Canada*, June 2018, <https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2018/06/temporary-spaces-of-joy-and-freedom/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Tsing, *Mushroom*, 60.

<sup>16</sup> Ashon T. Crawley, *The Lonely Letters* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 53, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478009306>.