

## Nicholas Galanin: *The Value of Sharpness: When It Falls*

By Christopher Green | March 2019



Installation view: *Nicholas Galanin, The Value of Sharpness: When It Falls*, Open Source Gallery, 2019.  
Photo: Stefan Hagen. Courtesy Open Source Gallery, New York.

At Open Source Gallery, 60 white porcelain hatchets, patterned with red and blue florals, tumble end over end in a shallow arc along the length of the gallery. Suspended from the ceiling by threads of clear fishing line, they fly as if thrown. Rising from chest height, the visitor can just barely walk under the peak of their crest before the axes fall and come to a stop at eye level, shy of the gallery wall. Their shadows dance on the walls as the hatchets sway on their strings, the angular shades appearing out the corner of one's eye like another crowd of blades thrown from out of sight. Walking around the installation, one cannot help but step directly into the arrested trajectory and look head-long into the drove of spinning earthenware. Staring down the gilded edges, the light shines off their delftware glaze, a glimmering hint at their true fragility.

A single-work exhibition by Sitka-based Nichola Galanin (Tlingit/Unangax<sup>ˆ</sup>), *The Value of Sharpness: When It Falls* reprises a recurring medium and format that the artist uses to engage

questions around the authenticity, commodification, and responsiveness of Indigenous culture in the face of colonialism's legacy. The present work recalls his 2013 installation *I dreamt I could fly*, in which sixty porcelain arrows with a similar blue delftware decoration hung in an arc from the gallery ceiling. The arrows in that piece are long and thin, evident in their wavering fragility. As tools for sustenance and protection they are functionless decorative representations, incapable of flight. The hatchets of *The Value of Sharpness* are likewise fragile and decorative, but Galanin finds further ambiguity in their form and material utility. While the porcelain is guaranteed to break upon first impact, the hatchets have a palpable heft nearly felt in one's palm. As Galanin notes in the exhibition release, "The capability of the hatchets is not in their ability to split wood or bone, but in their ability to shatter, creating small sharp projectiles and edges from decorative representations." The potentiality in the sharpness of fragmentation, the mutability of material, is Galanin's apt metaphor for the survivance and resilience of Indigenous communities.

Porcelain is a fragile and malleable medium that Galanin has frequently exploited to mask, confound, and make ambiguous the utility and cultural associations of its moldable forms. In *God Complex* (2016) a white porcelain set of riot gear hangs on the wall in a cruciform. The material fragility of the body armor belies its connotations of police militarization and bodily violence, the fragile ceramic shell of the suit suggesting the emptiness of the white savior-martyr ideology at the heart of the settler-colonial state. He has likewise used floral patterning as cultural camouflage in ongoing series such as *Imaginary Indian* (2008-2016) and *S'igeika'awu: Ghosts* (2009). In the former, the artist sourced Indonesian made imitation masks that are frequently sold in Alaskan tourist shops and painted them with the floral and garden patterns of French toile. *S'igeika'awu: Ghosts* features similarly sourced masks cast out of porcelain and decorated with the floral delftware pattern that recurs in *The Value of Sharpness*. These cultural transmutations, whereby a cheap imitation acquires the status of Indigenous art, are a hallmark of Galanin's practice and are insightful commentaries on the commodification of Indigenous culture. The delftware hatchets are likewise outsourced, made by a non-Native porcelain studio based in Colorado after a commercial hatchet design that provided the mold. Thus Galanin, in a Duchampian move, doubly transforms the non-Native products, the readymade commercial design and the Colorado-sourced porcelain, into a conceptual work of contemporary and "authentic" Indigenous art.



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The particular style of hatchet was intentionally chosen to evoke the tomahawk, the stereotypical weapon of choice in popular imaginings of the "Indian." The ambiguity in *The Value of Sharpness* between hatchet and tomahawk, tool and weapon, plays on the assumptions, stereotypes, and fetishes that the viewer brings and accordingly must confront from their own position. The opportunity is available, in standing before the path of the flying hatchets, to engage in cowboy and Indian fantasies. It is not dissimilar from the expectations that consumers of tourist curios, unloading from cruise ships and tour buses, bring to the market for Alaska Native arts. Seeking the fantasy of the authentic, the consumer is more often confronted by the foreign-made facsimile, in the end only to not know or care about the difference. We see that desire for the decorative, consumable, stereotypical representations of Indigenous people in the floral patterning of Galanin's hatchets, and the commodification of culture in the gilded edge of the blade. The gold glaze, however, is soft; it cancels out the imagined sharpness of the blade, just as the delicate ceramic does. While gold had less value than ceremonially significant materials like copper or utilitarian metal like steel when introduced to the Northwest Coast as a trade good, its value as currency and capital had to be reckoned with as contrasting ideals of wealth were steadily imposed on Indigenous communities. The gilded edge obscures any use value, and the sharpness of the hatchets will only return when they break. The porcelain blades of *The Value of Sharpness* are in a state of arrested flight; their trajectory leads towards a shattering point, but their fall is controlled, tied up in an alien system. When these tools do break, perhaps their fragmentary edges might be turned on the binds that hold them.