

VENICE

Volume 0

Zucca Project Space

THE VENICE BIENNALE 2019 provided the impetus for an original and thought-provoking art installation *Volume 0*, exhibited May 10 to June 30, 2019. This was a collaboration between Zucca Projects, Dr. Max Carocci, curator, and two distinguished North American Indigenous contemporary artists, Nadia Myre (Algonquin member of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinaabeg First Nation) and Alan Michelson (Mohawk of the Six Nations at Grand River).

The choice of engaging Myre and Michelson was inspired, for both figures have received accolades from the wider arts and cultural establishment. Nadia Myre was awarded membership in the Royal Canadian Academy of the Arts (2012); won a Sobey Art Award (2014) as well as the Ordre des arts et des lettres du Québec Cultural Ambassador Award, Montreal (2019). Alan Michelson is the first Indigenous artist to have a one-person show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, which opens October 25, 2019. His commissioned work, *Mantle*, was the winning entry in a competition to create a public sculpture that honors the federal recognition in 2018 of many of Virginia's Indigenous peoples.

The original concept for *Volume 0* was Max Carocci's determination to give contemporary First Nations artists the opportunity to show a "new response to [the] textual authority that Indigenous artists or arts have never been given or allowed before," at least in this sort of European context or venue. He had been examining the earliest visual records of Native American peoples and cultures, especially those records created in Venice, a city known for its printing and book publishing since the 16th century. Carocci focused on an influential set of volumes published in Venice by Giovanni Battista Ramusio, *Delle Navigazioni et Viaggi (Of Navigations and Voyages)*, which appeared between 1550 and 1559. The curator proposed the idea that



Indigenous artists should have a chance to destabilize these 16th-century accounts and present decolonized and multivocal understandings of those originating encounters. Such an intervention into records of early contact and its visualization might be conceptualized as an exhibition of Ramusio's "missing" volume, which Carocci titled *Volume 0*.

As an Italian curator, Carocci had two further ambitions. First, he realized that this Venetian/Italian connection with overarching views of Indigenous North American cultures was not recognized generally and needed to be retrieved as an historical episode. Secondly, glass seed beads, used extensively in the North American "Indian trade," were produced on the Venetian island of Murano, famous throughout Europe for its glassware. This was a crucial historical linkage—or entanglement—that had been left out of wider art-historical or curatorial discourses, at least in Europe.

In the context of the Venice Biennale, with its large national pavilions and generally bigger spaces for exhibiting contemporary works, the dimensions of the Zucca Project Space could be viewed as somewhat constrained: a shop-sized venue divided into a front and back room. However, both artists worked effectively with the space and created visually impressive, site-specific pieces that engaged viewers, drawing them further inside. Myre's work took up the brightly lit area in front, and Michelson's installation made use of a darkened area beyond.

Nadia Myre's installation consisted of a chapel-like space with a soundscape



TOP Alan Michelson, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum (Theatre of the World)*, 2019, four-channel video with sound, marine buoys, variable dimensions. Both images courtesy of the author.

BOTTOM Nadia Myre (Kitigan Zibi Algonquin), *Volume 1*, 2019, earthenware, beads, threads. Wallpaper: Nadia Myre (Kitigan Zibi Algonquin), *Damask (Volume 0)*, 2019, wallpaper installation.

background that added to its auratic presentation. A repeated pattern of printed wallpaper designed from engravings found in Giovanni Ramusio's third volume (based on Jacques Cartier's account of his travels) and from other European-designed symbols covered all the walls of this "sacred room."

The wallpaper pattern told viewers of the entangled and syncretic mingling of cultures that constituted the real circumstances of contact between American Indigenous and European invaders from the start. Dominant cultural symbols such as the Roman Catholic Sacred Heart and European sailing vessels were repeated in the pattern and joined with a ring-shaped image of the circular, wooden surround of the Iroquoian village at Hochelaga (where Montreal would eventually be situated), all interlaced into the repeated damask patterning of European manufacture. Cohabiting in the same design were flower-shaped bundles of tobacco leaves and Sky Woman, whose fall onto the back of Turtle would form the continent of North America (Turtle Island) as is told in Haudenosaunee origin stories.

In the center of the room a golden, human heart was placed upon a velvet-covered cushion filled with Venetian sand, draped with a lace-like, richly colored, seed-beaded mantle inspired by Indigenous motifs. For this viewer, given the reliquary-like presentation of this object surrounded by the syncretic imagery on the walls, it represents not merely the Sacred Heart repositioned in an Indigenous context, but also all the love and goodness that was available in Indigenous culture had Europeans truly recognized who and what they had encountered and had learned to treasure this new knowledge and experience.

Alan Michelson's work was titled *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum (Theatre of the Orb of the World)*, using the title often used for an atlas in the Renaissance but also playing more generally on the use of Latin in many of the early books and maps printed about the Americas. Michelson's darkened space contained four internally illuminated globes standing a few feet from the ground and positioned to indicate the four sacred directions in Indigenous cosmographies. But they also

signified the European Renaissance notion of the "four parts of the world" in which geographers sought to make sense of the unexpected American encounter resulting from voyages across the Atlantic. On each globe was projected a series of images in video format entailing the four themes chosen by the artist: *Les Sauvages*, *Viaggi*, *War Dance*, and *Relations*. Michelson also used sound in his work. As one moved between the separate spheres, the viewer became aware of recorded statements, Christian hymns sung in Mohawk, and baroque compositions at times overlaid upon each other yet remaining distinguishable. In the video projection, the juxtaposition of a young Haudenosaunee dancer in regalia with the accompanying soundtrack of Jean-Philippe Rameau's Harpsichord Suite in G Major titled *Les Sauvages* represented the gulf between a genuine Indigenous person or group and the fanciful baroque representations of it at the time. But the juxtaposition also refers to those who sought to contain or even annihilate a different culture by calling it *savage*. Moving between the four "worlds," alternative narratives of the European arrival in North America were articulated from the Indigenous vantage point. The viewer was also reminded of present-day situations with the women-led, Indigenous activism of the Idle No More movement and of the issues surrounding Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women currently being raised by activists and protesters.

Carocci had approached those Indigenous artists who might have a direct stake in such early visualizations of the Atlantic seaboard and its original peoples and in those accounts of French voyages sailing up the St. Lawrence River in Canada. *Volume 0* was a successful use of the Venetian context and its histories and gave new relevance to North American Indigenous perspectives in the histories of colonial encounter. Bearing in mind the preconceptions and clichés that still dominate so much of European comprehension of Native American culture and history, these interventions in Venice were powerful demonstrations of the need to think again.

—Stephanie Pratt, PhD (Dakota)

TAOS

Susan Folwell: Through the Looking Glass

Harwood Museum of Art

ON VIEW through January 5, 2020, Susan Folwell's exhibition presents audiences with a prismatic dialogue that refracts between her curated selection of paintings by the Taos Society of Artists and her ceramic artworks as narrative responses. Through strategic pairings, Folwell (Santa Clara Tewa) enacts new stories about northern New Mexico within a northern New Mexico museum. The phrase "through the looking glass" situates Folwell's position as artist rather than subject. Many models from Taos Pueblo collaborated with the Taos Society of Artists, a renowned group of twelve Anglo artists in Taos who primarily painted American Indian subjects during the early 20th century.

Offering viewers an Indigenized perspective of northern New Mexico, Folwell's clay vessels convey her knowledge of Santa Clara and Taos Pueblo, where her family members reside. On her artworks, Folwell paints figurative scenes that celebrate her ceramicist peers, the creative power of Pueblo women, and the sustenance provided by the region. These storied ceramics commemorate the Tewa and Tiwa peoples and their homelands in clay, a foundational medium critical to Pueblo peoples' continuance and care for one another. Pottery also functions as a cross-cultural symbol understood in different ways by the Pueblo communities and the Taos Society of Artists. Both groups frequently featured Pueblo vessels in early 20th century paintings. In this imagery, the clay vessels, as living beings, reflected the artists' and subjects' stories. Indigenous ceramics bear witness to these practitioners' imagined and painted narratives in both Folwell's and the Taos Society of Artists' works.