

Creative Rituals



Art Alaska: **Janine Gibbons**

Curated by Sandra Evertson
Photography by Janine Gibbons
Portrait by Dieter Klose

Alaskan mixed media artist **Janine Gibbons** is in full alignment with honor, gratitude and appreciation of her craft. She grew up in Petersburg, Alaska, a small fishing town perched between glaciers and majestic mountains on an island in Southeast Alaska. Graduating with degrees from both the Art Institute of Seattle and Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado. In search of self, Janine studied everything from education to philosophy, biology to religion, finally settling upon what she had already been doing her entire life, art. She finds organic inspiration in the harmonious colors and intricate patterns of nature and in the meticulous work of her Haida ancestors with whom she communes on a daily basis.



I am a divorced mother with two amazing young children, Lili and Reid. Like the octopus, women must be malleable. We must balance our hearts, minds and bodies and simultaneously accomplish multiple tasks in short order. I believe that how we feel becomes a part of the art we create. My best ideas come early in the morning. My Grandmother told me, “Don’t sleep your life away,” and I listened. I wake up at 4 a.m., make myself a cup of tea and start painting. Around 5 a.m., I do my yoga and meditation followed by a long walk. I feel the most open to creativity, new thoughts and ideas when I keep a healthy, clear mind.

Things that have stood the test of time fascinate me: trees, rocks, water, stories and ancient artifacts. When I look at the work that I have created I am reminded of everything I’ve seen and experienced. These experiences are expressed in my work. The work I do is meticulous, with several steps that build upon each other. Each step must be done with care and attention to detail. Visually, my work is organic and structured, colorful and muted, energetic and relaxed. Reid recently said to me, “Mom, you see everything in color—in rainbows.”

My Haida and Scandinavian ancestors are a main source of inspiration. For over 13,000 years the seafaring Haida natives have inhabited the coastal bays and inlets of Haida Gwaii, located off the coast of British Columbia, and more recently, some of them migrated to southern Southeast Alaska. Perfection of craft was both a matter of survival



“Particularly when we are out in nature we can sense our ancestors. Even if we cannot see them, we feel them: Picking berries just as they did, catching fish or just chatting away getting lost in time. The scent of the ocean, the rain, the trees, the fog, the sound of whales, of eagles and ravens—it’s all part of our DNA.” —Janine Gibbons

and a creation of beauty for these people. If a basket was woven wrong, it would leak water, so the craftsmen took the time to do it right. It also represented their connection to the spirit world. That attitude was instilled in me from a young age. I was always told, “Whatever you do, do it well.” I strive to work with care and attention to detail. My entire being is involved with my art because I enjoy the physicality of creating, though I often find it difficult to keep up with the momentum of my ideas! Spending time in nature, doing yoga and meditation are crucial self-care practices for me. They keep the inspiration flowing. It’s very difficult to work when I’m not in balance. In the last few years I feel I’ve accomplished the most in my life: wholesaling, retailing, producing, designing, running a studio and traveling constantly between Durango, Colorado, and Southeast Alaska, both places that I call home. My jewelry is now sold in the Smithsonian Renwick Gallery Store, Seattle Art Museum shop as well as in over 100 other shops.

As I have grown as an artist, I have learned that I work best when I start with imperfections. The imperfect pieces end up being the most beautiful and simultaneously the most challenging. The initial intended outcome is never the final outcome. When I create with enamel, for example, there is always going to be variation from piece to piece, from batch to batch, because there are external factors that are completely out of my control and for me, that is the beauty and discovery of this art form.

Recently I’ve ventured into new forms of self expression by illustrating children’s books. Sealaska Heritage Institute (SHI) has published 19 new culturally-based children’s books that reflect the Native worldview. Its latest releases include the ancient Haida story “The Woman Carried Away by Killer Whales” and the Tlingit story “The Woman Who Married the Bear.” The books are part of the institute’s award-winning series “Baby Raven Reads,” a program for Alaska Native families with children up to age 5 that promotes language development and school readiness. In December, “Baby Raven Reads” was one of 15 programs



“I like to think of my jewelry as talismans of nature. The people who wear it bring another dimension to the beauty of how I experience life.”

—Janine Gibbons

in the world chosen for a 2017 Library of Congress Literacy Awards Program Best Practice Honoree.

My photography of the commercial fisherman’s life will be published in “National Fisherman Magazine.” I document the island communities of Southeast Alaska with photography, painting and sculpture and recently opened an artist cooperative. For many years I worked alone but now as my work changes, I have found that being with family and friends, volunteering in my community, collaborating with other artists, learning and sharing the stories of my ancestors, and spending as much time in nature as I possibly can is what most fuels my passion to create.



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