



Smithsonian

National Museum of the American Indian

Arlene Hirschfelder interview with Larry Beck

Emily Moazami

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Collection Overview

Repository:	National Museum of the American Indian
Title:	Arlene Hirschfelder interview with Larry Beck
Date:	September 29, 1993
Identifier:	NMAI.AC.421
Creator:	Hirschfelder, Arlene B.
Extent:	1 Sound cassette
Language:	English .
Summary:	This collection contains an interview with Chnagmiut Yup'ik artist Larry Beck (Lawrence James Beck; 1938-1994) conducted by Arlene Hirschfelder on September 29, 1993.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Gift of Dennis Hirschfelder, 2022.

Related Materials

NMAI also holds the Lawrence 'Larry' James Beck Papers (NMAI.AC.017), as well as, sculptures by the artist (25/5423 and 25/5410).

Processing Information

Collection processed by Emily Moazami, Supervisory Archivist, 2023.

Preferred Citation

Identification of specific item; Date (if known); Arlene Hirschfelder interview with Larry Beck, NMAI.AC.421; National Museum of the American Indian Archives Center, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions

This collection is closed to researchers until the media has been digitized.

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Biographical / Historical

Arlene Hirschfelder (1943-2021) was a American Indian studies scholar, author, and Indian rights advocate. An excerpt from her 2021 obituary in the *Vinyard Gazette* reads, "A lifelong educator, respected scholar, award-winning author and champion of Native American and children's rights, Arlene wrote and edited almost 100 nonfiction books and curricula, curated museum exhibitions and consulted with a vast array of institutions, agencies and corporations to improve their portrayal, awareness and presentation of Indigenous peoples.

She was key in debunking stereotypes and inaccurate information locally and nationally, and was considered a fearless and compassionate advocate in Indian country.

For more than two decades, she served as the scholarship director and education consultant for the Association on American Indian Affairs; her research there helped inform the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978. Later, she was a consultant at the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of the American Indian and a faculty member at the New School for Social Research."

The biography note below is from NMAI's Lawrence 'Larry' James Beck Papers, NMAI.AC.017.

Lawrence 'Larry' James Beck was born in Seattle, Washington on May 20, 1938. Beck's father was American and his mother was Norwegian and Yup'ik from Alaska. Larry was raised in Seattle and in 1956 graduated from Ballard High School. He then attended college at the University of Washington from 1957 to 1959, where he first studied engineering. However, he decided that art was more in his future so between 1960-1961 he attended the Burnley School of Professional Art in Seattle, now known as The Art Institute of Seattle. In 1962 Larry was given the opportunity to attend the University of Arizona's Guadalajara Summer School and study art abroad. Upon his return in 1962, he resumed his studies at The University of Washington and in 1964 he earned a B.A. in painting and a M.F.A. in 1965. While at UW, Larry was taught by George Tsutakawa and Everett Ruess and visiting New York artist Gabriel Kohn. His art reflects the influences of sculptor David Smith, Mark di Suvero and Inuit artist Gariel Kohn.

During the 1966-1967 academic year, Larry was a visiting instructor of sculpture at the University of Oregon, in Eugene. During this time Larry participated in an exhibit called the Great Northwest Sausage Company Art show. This show included artists such as Morris Yarowsky, Dan Solomon, Gertrude (Trudie) Pacific-Beck, David Cotter, John Haugse and Marcella Rawlinson. The years between 1967-1968 were spent at the University of Southampton, England as a Fine Arts Fellow. His wife at the time, Trudie also accompanied him and also studied art while in England. When Larry and Trudie returned to the States, they settled in Skagit Valley Washington.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, Larry focused on his large scale, abstract sculptures and established his reputation as a sculpture. Larry's early works were comprised of found metals and objects assembled in a lyrical but humorous manner. Larry also was apart of the Shazam Society with Tom Robbins among others, which produced performances and happenings. During 1975-1980, he installed projects for Golden Gardens Park in Seattle, Highline Community College and Boeing (King County Airport). He also worked on a piece for the Occidental Park site in Seattle, but due to circumstances of the city it was never installed.

Although Larry was not raised around his ancestral homelands, like his Mother, in the mid 1970s Larry visited the Alaskan coast. It was then that he realized he understood the Yup'ik culture. In 1973 Larry started to produce a new series of pieces called "Inukshuk", which is Inuit for sculpture presence. This term was also used for three major commissions that later followed. Larry continued to use Inuit terminology in his work. This was the first sign that Larry started to embrace his multicultural heritage in his artwork. Larry experimented with making bronze and aluminum small castings of traditional Inuit masks, but he felt uneasy that these masks represented a complete contradiction to his western art training.

After the 1980 install of the Boeing sculpture, Beck experienced what he would call his sculpture career crisis. He became disappointed with public art. This is when Larry received his calling to start working on his abstract Inuit Inua (spirit) masks. Larry embraced the idea of using the ancestral ways of his Mother's people of finding natural objects and turning them into masks or art pieces. Larry utilized this method and found contemporary objects within junkyards and hardware stores to create his contemporary Inua masks. From this time on, Larry focused the remaining years of

his life working on Inua masks. He participated in shows at art galleries and loaned artwork out for traveling exhibits that were exhibited from the United Nations in Switzerland to all over the United States, including his ancestral homelands of Alaska. Also from the mid 1980s till the end of his life in 1994, he spent more time with his children.

On March 27th 1994, Larry died of a heart attack in his home in Washington. His artwork still lives on today in many museums and private collections. He turned Native American Art into something that kept historical cultural ties while also embracing a contemporary look.

Scope and Contents

This collection contains one audiocassette that features an interview with Chnagmiut Yup'ik sculptor Larry Beck (Lawrence James Beck; 1938-1994). Arlene Hirschfelder interviewed Beck on September 29, 1993 for a chapter in her book, *American Indian Lives: Artists and Craftspeople*, published by Facts On File in 1994.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Chnagmiut Yup'ik

Cultures:

Chnagmiut Yup'ik

Names:

Beck, Larry, 1938-1994