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Arts and Entertainment

Using 'subsistence research' to develop her works, Alaska carver receives prestigious fellowship

By Lizzy Hahn

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Koyukon Dené and Iñupiaq artist Erin Ggaadimits Ivalu Gingrich works on a carving in her studio on Monday in Anchorage. Gingrich was one of five Native artists selected for the 2025 Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

The aroma of cedar wood filled the air and shavings fell around Erin Ggaadimits Ivalu Gingrich as she carved away at one of her wooden sculptures.

Working at her carving table in her home studio in Anchorage, the table shifted as Gingrich carefully put her weight onto her tool.

The piece she was working on is a realistic rendering of a fish, which hangs face-down vertically with beads flowing off of it.

Gingrich, an Anchorage carver and interdisciplinary artist, is one of five Native American or First Nations artists selected for the prestigious 2025 Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship.

Gingrich's work focuses on her Indigenous subsistence upbringing.

"Seeing the things around us as gifts is really what I'm trying to stipulate in my work, in my practice, trying to reinforce those traditional beliefs," Gingrich said.

Gingrich, who is Koyukon Dené and Iñupiaq, began carving in 2008 while attending her first semester of school at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. At the school, she learned from mentors Kathleen Carlo-Kendall, Da-ka-xeen Mehner and the late Glen Simpson. Gingrich has been an artist professionally since graduating from UAF in 2014.

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Erin Ggaadimits Ivalu Gingrich in her studio. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

“I was surrounded by artists my entire life ... my family’s still filled with women who are creative, makers and artists,” said Gingrich. “Being creative was very much fostered in my childhood.”

Gingrich has turned her creativity into her career. She uses basswood, paint and beads to create each sculpture. Each piece starts with Gingrich going to do what she calls “subsistence research.”

Her research is conducted while she is out enjoying the land with her family, friends or even just alone. Connecting with the land helps give her inspiration for her art. Subjects of hers include salmon, seals, ptarmigan, caribou and many more Alaska animals.

After her research, Gingrich goes home and draws up a few sketches. Once she has settled on a design, Gingrich creates a template that she uses as a reference point when carving the wood.

Her most important tool, she said, is her carving table. Gingrich occasionally brings in-progress pieces with her to fish camp in Coho, just northwest of Kasilof. There she has a secondary carving table where she works when the tide is out.

Taking a 2- to 3-inch-thick piece of basswood, Gingrich starts slicing away bits of the wood until it resembles the template. The largest pieces that she regularly makes, Gingrich says, are her salmon pieces.

These salmon are realistic, both in size and composition. Gingrich even adds a single vertebrae from salmon she has caught to the bottom of her piece, where the salmon head would have been.



“So with each stroke of the knife here, you’re reducing that material and slowly undoing the work,” said Gingrich. She referred to carving as an “embodied practice” that is quite physically demanding.

“You gain muscle memory, you gain form, you gain a physique from this practice,” Gingrich said. She laughed, saying that she used to wear a Fitbit while carving and it told her she was “carving for miles.”

Once she is done with the carving part, Gingrich moves on to applying paint on the work to “give it a skin and give it that resemblance of the representation,” she said.

She finishes off the piece by adorning it with beads.

“That’s how the work feels completed to me,” Gingrich said. “It follows this lineage of Indigenous adornments that I’ve experienced my whole life as an Alaska Native woman, being covered in beads.”

Beads to her are a form of love, honor, adornment and care — as well as a way to assert their value.

Gingrich said it takes her about two weeks to complete each project if she is working without distractions. This includes all three of the steps, from carving to painting to beading.



Erin Ggaadimits Ivalu Gingrich in her studio. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

Gingrich's inspiration for her work comes from the environment around her. She aims to have her work honor "our reality of what keeps us fed and what has kept my ancestors, me and my family here since time immemorial."

Gingrich said that she has started using the Inupiaq language, Indigenous words and place names when titling her pieces. "Sitnasauq Asiat," or "Nome blueberries," is the title of one of her recent pieces.

Gingrich will be teaching sculpture classes at the University of Alaska Anchorage this academic year. She taught one class last fall and said she really enjoyed it, as well as the academic community at UAA.

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"I think it's important to return to community in some way, and this is something that allows me to do that, which is really a gift," said Gingrich.

A big challenge Gingrich faces being an artist in Alaska is shipping. She is currently in the process of packing up her finished pieces that will be displayed in an exhibition in Indianapolis. Between the five artists, the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art in Indianapolis is purchasing \$100,000 of artwork. The pieces from the group will be on display in the museum from November 2025 to February 2026. Each artist will also receive \$50,000 as part of the award.

Gingrich applied for this fellowship while she was working on her finals, right before graduating last year with her master's degree from the Institute of American Indian Arts. In the fall, she was selected as one of the five recipients.

"I'm so honored to be included in this amazing group of artists, the really phenomenal group of artists that I'm so lucky to be in a cohort with," said Gingrich.

Gingrich's work can currently be found in exhibits in the British Museum and the Anchorage Museum.



Erin Ggaadimits Ivalu Gingrich in her studio. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

For the time being, Gingrich will continue to gather inspiration while at her fish camp in Coho or while picking berries in Nome.

She'll also be busy preparing her pieces for the six upcoming exhibitions in the fall. Outside of the Eiteljorg, she'll be showing her work in New Mexico, New Jersey and Alaska.

"What I hope my work does is highlight the voices of the folks who are taking care of their homelands actively, there's so much work being done all over the state of Alaska to protect our wild places," Gingrich said.

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