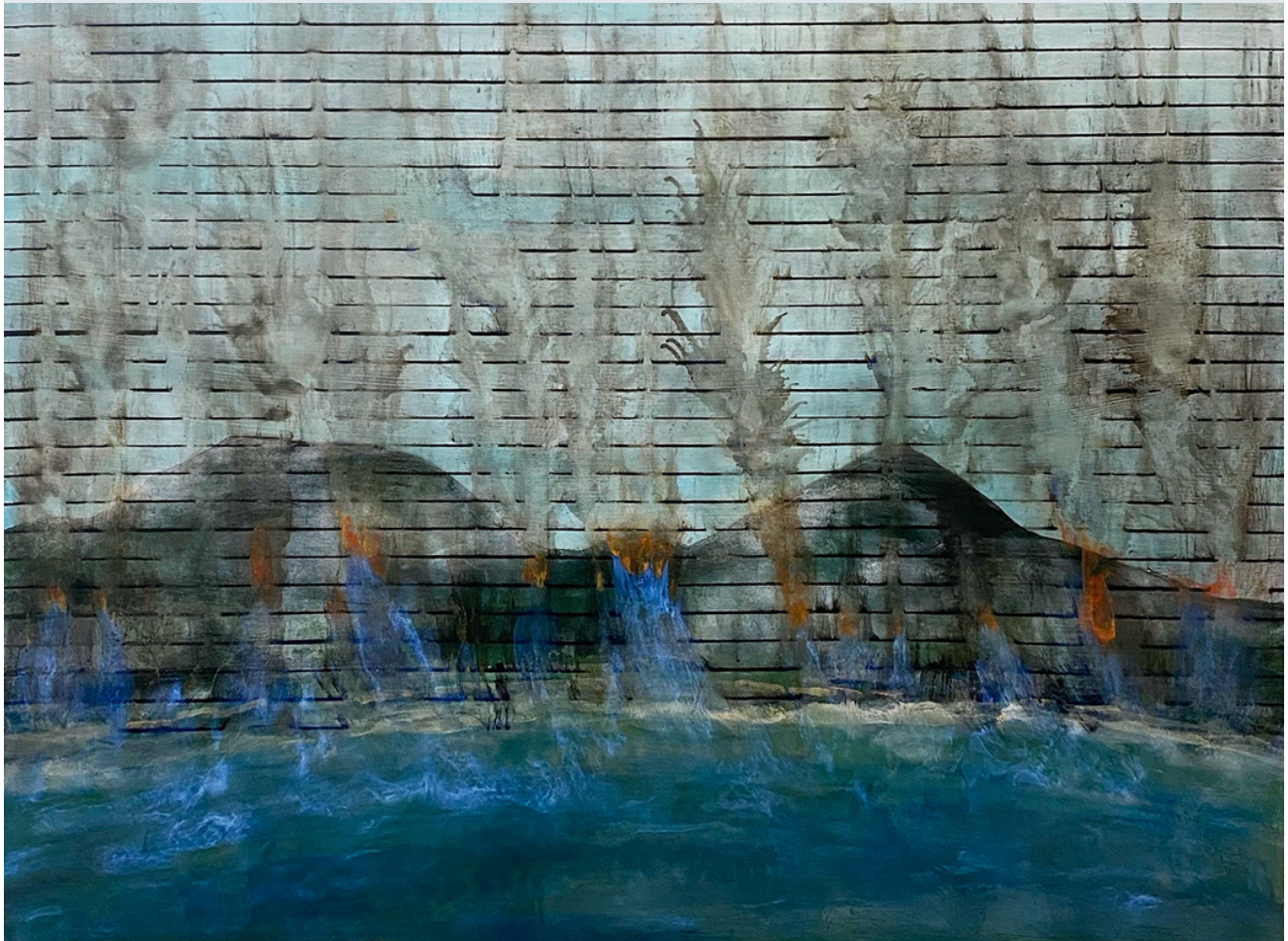


THE DAILY GAZETTE

WHEN CREDIBILITY MATTERS

On Exhibit at Union College: Mandeville's 'Addenda' reevaluates archived materials

By Indiana Nash | [February 23, 2022](#)



Merritt Johnson, "When the world turned upside down long enough for Water to move and catch fire and wipe out the ink lines that divide, claim, kill and bury." (Courtesy Accola Griefen Fine Art, New York City and the artist, © Merritt Johnson)

The latest exhibit to open at the Mandeville Gallery raises questions about the things we archive and the legacy of a Union College alumnus.

Titled "Addenda" and curated by Julie Lohnes, it brings together works by three artists — Gina Adams, Merritt Johnson and Sonya Kelliher-Combs. Each was asked to respond to a collection of archival

materials from Sheldon Jackson (1834-1909), who graduated from Union College in 1855 and became a Presbyterian missionary and the first general agent of education for the territory of Alaska. The materials, which include letters and other documents held at the Union College Special Collections Archives, track Jackson's missionary path, which eventually takes him to Alaska. During his time there, he founded schools and training centers and championed "Americanizing" native populations.

Kelliher-Combs' responded through "Small Secrets, Sheldon Jackson" a series featuring tiny white sock-like pieces lined up on one wall. Each includes beading and tufts of hair embedded through the beading. The fabric contains typed words and phrases, perhaps ones that stuck out to Kelliher-Combs as she read through the archives.

In an artist statement, Kelliher-Combs, who is an Alaskan artist, writes that she was hesitant but intrigued by the idea behind the exhibit.

"I was admittedly excited to see first-hand and in person the correspondence of the larger-than-life figure, Sheldon Jackson, the man who was credited with saving a 'simple race from extinction in the state of Alaska. Today we know his and many others' approaches to education and assimilation of the First Peoples of the United States has had far-reaching negative consequences," Kelliher-Combs writes.

"Small Secrets, Sheldon Jackson" speaks to some of those consequences and the impact that colonial injustice has had. "Often historical trauma creates 'secrets,' and despite the challenging and negative taboo of talking about these issues, they must be voiced in order to transform and promote healing and awareness, and break the cycle," Kelliher-Combs writes.

Not too far away, Johnson contemplates the sheer volume of the materials about Jackson that have been preserved, ruminating on the ink it took to create the materials and the narratives missing from the collection.

In one painting, a mountainous backdrop is overlaid with horizontal black lines, which are smudged and made smoky by several small fires at the base of the mountains. The piece is titled "When the world turned upside down long enough for Water to move and catch fire and wipe out the ink lines that divide, claim, kill and bury."

"The Sheldon Jackson archive contains lines and lines of ink correspondence, none of which I was able to read without considering the quantities of ink used to steal children from their families, ink lines that upended lives, that removed the sounds of parents' tongues from children's mouths," Johnson writes.

Accompanying the above painting are three-dimensional works that act as solutions in a sense to oppressive systems, like the one which Jackson helped create. One work is a small sweetgrass seed

basket, shaped like a grenade. Another is an oxygen tank made out of handwoven black ash. Both are ominous, placed next to paintings that reflect upon the impacts that industrial

emissions have had on the environment.

Across the gallery are large-scale works from Adams, who focused on Jackson's early journey to the West. In a mural, Adams enlarges a historical photograph found in Union's archives and overlays it with lines denoting transcontinental railroad routes. In bold blue letters, the definition of Manifest Destiny is spelled out "a phrase coined in 1845, expressed the philosophy of that drove 19th-century U.S. territorial expansion. Manifest Destiny held that the United States was destined to expand its dominion and spread democracy and capitalism across the entire North American continent."

Beyond the mural, Adams also created "Broken Treaty Quilts," which feature words from treaties like the 1797 Treaty with the Mohawk written out using a traditional American style of quilting. It's a purposefully discordant juxtaposition that draws attention to the lenses that American history has largely been seen through.

"Addenda" is an engaging and thoughtful exhibit, not only in its inception but in its execution. It will be on view through June 12.

The Mandeville Gallery is located on the second floor of the Nott Memorial on the Union College campus and is open daily from 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. All visitors to campus must wear surgical/ N95/ KN95/ KF94 masks indoors, regardless of vaccination status. For more information visit muse.union.edu/mandeville/.