NEVER
Tlingit and Unangax artist Nicholas Galanin shares with us his 2021 “Never Forget” installation, which points to the core of the relationship between settler colonialism, land, memory, and reparation. Perched on the hills of Palm Springs, California, on Cahuilla ancestral territory, the monumental sign “Indian Land” serves as a reminder of the costs of glamour and leisure. As one of Hollywood’s favorite getaways, Palm Springs is a reflection of the ongoing settler-colonial project, through which indigenous communities have been systematically robbed of their land. Yet, Galanin’s installation is more than a land acknowledgment – it is a provocation to think about past and present indigenous struggles, as well as land reform.

Keywords
- Land
- Indigenous reservations
- Sovereignty
- Portfolio
- Decolonize
Colonial entities, the U.S. Constitution, and its current government refer collectively to people Indigenous to the continental U.S. as ‘Indian.’ Hollywood’s misrepresentations of Indigenous people reflect and attempt to justify U.S. policy. The term ‘Indian’ is a refusal to acknowledge their sovereignty and attempts to erase the diversity of over 500 distinct nations preexisting the European invasion of the continent. Indigenous land and Indigenous communities remain unique, resilient, complex and beautiful, despite over 500 years of occupation by violent settler states.

Never Forget refuses to legitimize settler occupation, and reframes a word of generic reduction to call for collective action. It is a monumental invitation to landowners: to seek out in Indigenous leadership for land relationships, to center Indigenous knowledge in creating sustainable practices, to contribute to real rent initiatives, and to transfer land titles and rights to Indigenous nations and communities.

Land acknowledgements have become popular in the twenty-first century, with cultural and government entities paying lip service to Indigenous existence without meaningful action of land return to Indigenous nations. Under U.S. law, Indian reservations are Federal lands, owned by the government. Indigenous people living on Indian reservations cannot, for instance, mortgage their homes, because banks won’t accept a mortgage on Federal property. Currently, the titles and rights to less than 3% of land within the United States belong to Indigenous people.

The Land Back movement is not about removing anyone who lives here from this land. It’s about recognition of, and respect for Indigenous knowledge and sovereignty, and returning what was violently invaded.
and occupied. Settler attempts at land management without adequate knowledge or understanding have resulted in many ecosystems pushed to the brink of collapse. Forests are burning, air quality diminishing, the earth and water are heavy with industrial waste threatening the lives of everything dependent upon them.

Governance of land titles, water rights, and other ‘resources’ led and protected by Indigenous nations on their traditional territories benefits all people: ensuring sustainability and regeneration through specific knowledge gained since time immemorial. As Indigenous people we are responsible to the land we come from, to care for and protect it — for our grandchildren’s grandchildren, and for all life who would call this land home.

Never Forget marks what is. It is also a beacon for the future.
Nicholas Galanin

Master of Indigenous Visual Arts, Massey University, New Zealand, 2007. B.A. Silversmithing and Jewelry Design, London Guildhall University, 2003. Galanin has also apprenticed with master carvers between 1997-2006. His work is built from a perspective rooted in connection to land, which also critiques the commodification of culture and contributes to the continuum of Tlingit art. His work can be found in private collections, as well as the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Canada, Portland Art Museum, and Denver Art Museum. He received the 2020 Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence award from The American Academy of Arts and Letters. Galanin currently lives and works with his family in Sitka, Alaska.