Conscious Culture: A Carl Beam Exhibition Pamphlet

Carl Beam

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Conscious Culture: A Carl Beam Exhibition showcases twelve silkscreen prints from Sheridan’s permanent collection. The artworks come from two related bodies of work, created between the turn of the 21st century and the time of the artist’s passing. The two collections, *The Whale of Our Being* and *Crossroads*, share common themes of cultural identity, self-examination, and a departure from the natural world. The imagery in the prints ranges from pop culture icons to more personal accounts of Indigenous culture, which are informed by Beam’s relationship to both Euro-American and Ojibwe perspectives.

Carl Beam’s use of photo-collage, screen process, and mixed media techniques complements his characteristic juxtaposition of contrasting ideas and materiality. Prints such as *Madonna* and *Boxer*, for example, bring together pop art aesthetics and Indigenous imagery. At the same time, *Family* features photographs of Beam’s biological family alongside historical figures, a turtle, and entomological specimens of bees.

Although deeply influenced by the autobiographical, the prints on display here also highlight universal concepts such as internal conflict and human impact – aspects of daily life that transcend individual experience.

“My works are like little puzzles, interesting little games. I play a game with humanity and with creativity. I ask viewers to play the participatory game of dreaming ourselves as each other. In this we find out that we’re all basically human... My work is not fabricated for the art market. There’s no market for intellectual puzzles or works of spiritual emancipation.”

-Carl Beam, 1999
About Carl Beam

Carl Beam (1943-2005), born Carl Edward Migwans at M’Chigeeng First Nation (West Bay), Manitoulin Island, was a groundbreaking contemporary artist who created opportunities for future generations of Indigenous artists working in Canada. He is recognized as the first contemporary Indigenous artist to have work purchased by the National Gallery of Canada.

Born to an Ojibwe mother and American father, Beam’s elders gave him the name “Ahkideh” from the Anishinaabe word “aakode,” which means “one who is brave.” From the age of ten to eighteen, he was sent to the Garnier Residential School, in Spanish, Ontario, an experience that influenced much of his later artwork.

Throughout the 1970s, Beam attended multiple educational institutions to further his artistic career. He graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Victoria and pursued a master’s degree at the University of Alberta. During this time, Beam developed his signature style, which used photo-transfer, collage, and mixed media techniques to create large-scale and visually commanding art. His prolific artistic career also encompassed painting, ceramics, sculpture, and performance. In 1979, he married his wife Ann Beam, with whom he often collaborated.

Carl Beam’s artwork has been featured in many prominent exhibitions, including the National Gallery’s Indigena: Perspectives of Indigenous Peoples on Five Hundred Years (1992) and a touring retrospective of his work in 2010. He was inducted into the Royal Canadian Academy of the Arts in 2000 and received the Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2005.

Collections Information

The Whale of Our Being

From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, Carl Beam produced a body of work titled The Whale of Our Being. The series includes serigraphs (screen prints), etchings, large-scale photo-emulsion works, and sculptures that reflect on humanity’s departure from and inability to live in harmony with the natural world. The colour-saturated artworks include collage-style compositions that incorporate photographs of Indigenous historical figures, Christian symbolism, magazine clippings, and images representing scientific discovery. This period also marked his earliest use of celebrity imagery, which is prominent in this exhibition.

Crossroads

Until 2005, Carl Beam worked on a new collection, which remained unfinished at the time of his death. Crossroads was inspired by a popular song titled “Cross Road Blues” by the American blues musician Robert Johnson. According to his wife, Ann Beam, he used the artwork in this collection to consider his own hybrid identity. In Crossroads, Beam used printing techniques to depict musicians, historical figures, scientists, and celebrities such as Albert Einstein and Cher. The figures are juxtaposed with images of animals, insects, and birds, incorporating hand-drawn elements and text. Like in The Whale of Our Being, the use of very bright, highly-saturated colours suggests a reflection on humanity’s departure from nature, a theme seen throughout Carl Beam’s earlier artwork.

Monina Lamentac and Cassidy Roylance

Conscious Culture: A Carl Beam Exhibition is curated by Monina Lamentac and Cassidy Roylance (Honours Bachelor of Interior Design, 2021) as part of the Creative Campus Galleries’ Summer 2020 Co-op placement in Exhibition Design. During the semester-long internship, Lamentac and Roylance had the opportunity to work closely with the Creative Campus Galleries’ permanent art collection and gain professional experience developing all aspects of an exhibition, from collection research through to the design of a virtual exhibition space.

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