“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…”

—Carl Beam

A rare opportunity to see the ceramic work of the late artist Carl Beam is available until May 29 at the UBC Museum of Anthropology. Sixteen of Beam’s hand-built vessels are part of a major retrospective organized and toured by the National Gallery of Canada. Simply entitled Carl Beam, the show features about fifty works in diverse media—from a forty-foot-long painting on linen, to video and performance, to mixed-media works on Plexiglass and earthenware.

Carl Beam (1943–2005) was born in M’Chigeeng (West Bay) on Manitoulin Island, Ont. Of Anishinaabe (Ojibwa) heritage, he is recognized as a major force in challenging the marginalization of contemporary Aboriginal art in Canada. Indeed, he was at the vanguard of a new and assertive art discourse that, starting in the 1970s, fought for more inclusive collection and exhibition policies by major art institutions. Yet he also refused to have his art contained within any restrictive “Native Art” category. Beam's art made clear his position in the world as a thinking, questioning person. It demonstrated his disregard of all polite divisions between art and life, his communal and global concerns, and the necessity of recognizing diverse world views and exploring the spaces between them.

It was fairly early in his art career that Beam was drawn to exploring indigenous ceramic traditions. He and his wife, the artist Ann (Weatherby) Beam, moved to New Mexico in 1980 and stayed for three years. There they discovered for themselves the historical Anasazi (200–1300) and Mimbres (1000–1150) pottery practices of the American Southwest. Beam's earliest ceramics often incorporated elements of the bold geometrics and figurative motifs characterizing the ancient vessels. He was equally inspired by their interplay of polished interior and rough exterior surfaces, an aesthetic contrast he adapted to a range of plates and bowls that became a kind of

"Canvas" for imagery

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“canvas” for his photo-transferred and painted imagery.

_Art_untitled_ (1981) is an olla of unglazed earthenware, painted with a natural mineral pigment. Here, a ring of shamanic figures encircles the vessel’s opening, as though mediating the passage between human and spirit worlds. The motif is part of Beam’s personal iconography of visual images that we begin to recognize as we move through the exhibition, and can see reinterpreted throughout his vast body of work. The artist’s aim was to provoke contemplation of multiple realities and our collective place in the cosmos, offering a far-from-subtle critique on the place of reason and linear thinking in the colonial expansion of Western society. As the exhibition’s curator, Greg Hill, makes clear, Beam’s art engages Anishinaabe knowledge through its recognition of the important roles of dreams, the place of spirit helpers, and the lessons of Aboriginal ancestry. At the same time, it builds intellectual bridges between the philosophical thinking of Western and Anishinaabe traditions.

Beam constructed all of his ceramic pieces by hand out of slabs or coils of clay, using this method to create a variety of plate forms, open bowls, and olla-shaped vessels. The large platter, _Re-Alignment_ (1984), is an example of his glazed earthenware on which he experimented with new image-transfer processes borrowed from commercial applications. Here we can see two identical images of the Plains Cree leader, Chief Poundmaker, who became a key figure in the 1876 negotiations for Treaty Six in Saskatchewan. Beam had varnish decals of Poundmaker’s image made, and applied these to the ceramic surface. He also used stenciled text—a significant component in much of his art—layered over an image of a flying eagle, to make visual and conceptual connections to his works in other media. The square plate, _Geronimo_ (1985), features a varnish-decal image of the renowned Apache leader and medicine man, together with a joker playing card and other images, on a surface influenced by Oribe and Kenzan styles of Japanese pottery. Several vessels in the exhibition, such as _Raven_ (1983), incorporate images of birds, variously juxtaposed with numbers, horizontal lines and grids, and images and notations referencing Western science’s modes of measuring and calculating the natural world—and the limitations of linear understanding.

Beam’s passion for ceramic making continued for the rest of his life, and he and Ann (and later their daughter, Anong) would always collect local clays and natural pigments wherever they travelled and lived. In the late 1990s they expanded their pottery practice to build a house on Manitoulin Island, with thousands of adobe bricks they made by hand—a process that, like their ceramics, became a way of expressing a deep connection to the earth, and creating an art inseparable from life.

Karen Duffek is the curator of Contemporary Visual Arts & Pacific Northwest at UBC’s Museum of Anthropology. She would like to acknowledge the exhibition catalogue, _Carl Beam: The Poetics of Being_, edited by Greg A. Hill (National Gallery of Canada, 2010), and the exhibition texts, for information about Carl Beam’s ceramic practice.

Geronimo, 1985, by Carl Beam. Glazed earthenware, 4 X 27.9 X 28.6 cm. NGC. Photo © Harquail Photography (used with permission).

BC-in-a-Box

Volunteer Graphic Artist Wanted!

The BC-in-a-Box committee is looking for a volunteer graphic artist to help design email-able invitations, a brochure and/or promotional material for the exhibition. If you are able to help, please contact Jackie Frioud at jfrioud@shaw.ca.

Thanks!