

ANCESTRAL, HISTORICAL & LIVING ARTS of INDIGENOUS PEOPLES of the AMERICAS

# First American Art

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CHASE KAHWINHUT EARLES  
CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER  
LEAH MATA-FRAGUA  
KATHLEEN WALL

MANDAN-HIDATSA-ARIKARA-LAKOTA INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTIST  
**CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER**

By Alicia Inez Guzmán, PhD

**I**N NOVEMBER 2018, Cannupa Hanska Luger won the inaugural Burke Prize, named for Marian and Russell Burke, collectors of craft and supporters of the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City. The award aims to fund an artist under the age of 45 who best represents the future of craft in the media of glass, fiber, clay, metal, or wood—materials often overlooked or undervalued in contemporary art. As we edge into a century of synthetic things and mediated experiences, craft may feel nostalgic, of the past.

Luger, who grew up between the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota and Arizona, is of Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota, Austrian, and Norwegian descent. In the last decade he has become known as a ceramicist, forging creatures big and small in clay.

Some are animals—owls and other birds, deer, coyotes, buffalo—and others human. And then there are the things that don't fall into either category: cigarettes, bottles, beer cans, arrows, and daggers. But even describing the animal, human, and human-made doesn't quite get at how much one of Luger's forms can merge into another. Their quality of shapeshifting, their curves and edges, their glossy and opaque slips and glazes, their ability to yield many meanings, from the condition of humanity that we all share to histories of colonialism and the stereotypes of indigeneity birthed out of the belly of manifest destiny and today's pop culture. Still, all give the sense that they are made by hand—his hand—many carrying the artist's signature, small painted characters that spell out *Hanska*.

And that seems to be at the core of what craft is, objects bearing the imprint



of their maker, especially important when much of the world's things are anonymously manufactured. Yet the Burke Prize is pivotal to the extent that it directs our gazes forward, to the future of what making things by hand looks like. For Luger that future is, of course, Indigenous. It is also undefined by a single medium—neither ceramics, nor performance, nor even social practice. They're all part of the same story. He's at

a tipping point, between object and practice, one long in the making.

**LUGER RECEIVED HIS BFA** degree at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe where he "was able to create a relationship of learning to clay." Before that there were stints in Phoenix, where he went to high school, and Seattle, where he flirted with slam poetry. At IAIA, though, his professors gave him free reign to produce. He says,



**ABOVE:** Installation view of *Lazy Stitch*, a five-artist exhibition curated by Cannupa Hanska Luger, 2018, at the Marie Walsh Sharpe Gallery of Contemporary Art at the Ent Center for the Arts, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Image courtesy of the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, Galleries of Contemporary Art. **ABOVE, LEFT:** *Every One*, 2018, social engagement and sculptural installation comprising 4,000 ceramic beads (each 2 in. diameter), clay, ink, nylon, rope.

**OPPOSITE:** Cannupa Hanska Luger with a mixed-media sculpture. Photo: Marco Paven. Unless otherwise noted, all images courtesy of the artist.

*I got to create my own bad habits, instead of inheriting someone else's. Clay taught me to engage other media and I was one of those mediums. I liked how plastic it was. It created a sense of patience in me that sugar cereal, acrylic paint, and the '90s didn't give me. It influenced how I work with human beings. And for every one sculpture I've made, I have six ashtrays [rejects]. You can put hours and hours into a piece and then pull out shards from the kiln or a bad glaze job. Pieces shrink in that process. There is always room for chaos and it's really humbling. It's patience and observation. But things break, and that's beautiful.*

*The finiteness of things doesn't bring sorrow into my life. A forever apple would be garbage. But a finite apple, that's what makes it special—its entropy.*

This is Luger's way of speaking, moving from a seemingly funny and irrelevant example to making a point about the nature of clay, entropy, and even failure. He connects the dots between art and the rest of the world. That's perhaps because making art within the constraints of one medium can feel so compartmentalized, especially when artists, including Luger, strive to exist within complexity.

At the end of the BFA degree, there are only two outcomes: grad school or

the market. Luger chose the latter, which forced him to create at a fast pace and to turn out objects for vending. But the object was to him only "the echo of the work," in his words, "the theory." And the real work—that was the practice. "I can't sell you the 20 hours I spent in the studio, but I can sell you the object."

Luger says he recently pulled out of making work for galleries—and the market—to begin building relationships that graduate school might have otherwise afforded him with institutions: schools, museums, and nonprofits. His goal is to forge a new role "for art production in the 21st century, to think of art as a verb and not a noun. *To art.*"

In the past year, and with this



**above** Cannupa Hanska Luger (Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara-Lakota) and Kathy Elk Woman-Whitman (Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara), *The One Who Checks & The One Who Balances*, 2018, mixed-media regalia, installation view at the Marie Walsh Sharpe Gallery of Contemporary Art at the Ent Center for the Arts, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Image courtesy of the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, Galleries of Contemporary Art.

**opposite** *In the Wake of The Beast*, 2017, site-specific performance with regalia made from surplus industrial felt and ceramic, mixed media, Bennington, Vermont. Photo: Dylan McLaughlin (Navajo).

model in mind, Luger has moved at a breakneck clip as he experiments in *arting*, melding his background as a fine artist making objects with curating, performance, and social practice. To that end, Luger has been traveling widely, both nationally and internationally, installing art, giving lectures, and conceptualizing large-scale public projects. He likens this first year's explosion of activity to the trial and error that comes with producing the first sculpture in a series. It's a prototype year wherein the learning curve is sharp, but where you "know how to make it better in the future. That's what this first year has been like, so we know what the edge is."

**I HADN'T REALLY MET LUGER** until he came to my classroom at Santa Fe University of Art and Design last spring, though I taught his work in previous semesters' classes, and had seen it at local galleries in Santa Fe. We crossed paths a few times, so I emailed him to see if he would create beads with the ten of us for his installation, *Every One*. I'd heard of

his project from a short film produced by Razelle Benally that was making the rounds on social media.

I wanted the students in my class, Contemporary Art of the Americas, to gain firsthand knowledge of what a continental art practice looked like by working with a practicing artist. He arrived wearing knee pads in the shape of eyes made out of felt, accoutrements worn before at Standing Rock. And then the object lesson began: rolling square hunks of clay into fist-sized round forms and piercing them at the center, like a bead. Repetition and materiality. The clay was charcoal in color, but it would eventually fire white and later be stained in a spectrum of greys.

In total, Luger wanted to create 4,000 beads, each representing a data point and a human life. In 2013 the Canadian government began collecting data on missing and murdered First Nations women. According to the Native Women's Association of Canada, the number of missing and murdered women from 1980 to 2012 reached 4,000.



The United States has yet to embark on a similar initiative into the rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women, trans, femme, or queer people. However, a report in 2008 published by the US Department of Justice confirmed that rates of murder against Indigenous women are more than ten times the national average.<sup>1</sup>

To Luger, "each number in that 4,000 references a life," which, in terms of hard data, "can be hard to conceptualize and put into context." The day he came to my classroom, we made about 200 beads—a fraction of the total—while eating tamales, laughing, and holding space for the project. He describes humans like beads, vessels with holes

from our mouths to our anus.

This was the newest iteration of Luger's art making, "engagements" as he calls them, and gatherings toward a single cause: bringing awareness to the epidemic many had never even heard of, my students included. For my class, the gathering was another way of being together and of learning through the body. The end result would be a tapestry, one that reminds me of Rebecca Belmore's *Trace*, beads made with Red River gumbo clay installed like an asymmetrical curtain at the Canadian Museum of Human Rights.

Each bead in *Every One* is akin to a pixel in a grid, and multiple strands are hung like a curtain. Together, the beads

form the contours of a face, eyes, hair, and lips—a woman. The tintype portrait by Kali Spitzer (Kaska Dena) that Luger reproduced in clay depicts the sister of a missing Indigenous woman.

Our class was one of several places across the United States and Canada where folks made beads for *Every One*. And, as promised, our names were listed as collaborators when the artwork was first exhibited at an exhibition Luger organized at the Ent Center for Contemporary Art at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, in spring 2018. *Every One* glowed pink in the light of the gallery, and when I looked closely, I could see the differences in the clay forms. All are roughly two inches in

1. Ronet Bachman, Heather Zaykowski, Rachel Kallmyer, Margarita Poteyeva, and Christina Lanier, "Violence Against American Indian and Alaska Native Women and the Criminal Justice Response: What is Known," US Department of Justice (August 2008), PDE 5.



“We go to these spaces and apologize and remember how to let the land lead.”

**ABOVE** Cannupa Hanska Luger (Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara-Lakota) in collaboration with Ian Kuall'i (Native Hawaiian-Mescalero Apache descent), *Tethered*, 2018, site-specific land acknowledgment, Wilderness Acts Biennial, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Regalia: ceramic, industrial felt, mixed fiber. Photo: Dylan McLaughlin (Navajo).

**OPPOSITE** Cannupa Hanska Luger (Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara-Lakota) in collaboration with Ian Kuall'i (Native Hawaiian-Mescalero Apache descent), *Tethered*, 2018, aerial view. Photo: Dylan McLaughlin (Navajo).

diameter, though they are imperfect and some still have visible handprints. Other beads aren't exactly round, even closer in form to the original hunks of square clay. But when all 4,000 are read as a whole, the face is undeniable: *Every One*.

**EVERY ONE WAS A FULCRUM** for the rest of the exhibition, and lazy stitch, the method of beadwork and title of the exhibition, a metaphor for intersubjectivity, connectivity between people and place. Beads are only interlinked with other beads and thus functional because of the holes in their center, the space in which a thread can pass. In this way, single beads come together in lanes and eventually entire designs and narratives.

*Lazy Stitch* became a platform for different artists' voices to resonate individually and as a whole around indigeneity, difference, and bearing witness to injustice. This was yet another iteration of Luger's practice, curating a collaborative exhibition and, as he says, a "futurespace that moves away from the rugged individualism of the American myths to celebrate being communal."

Luger invited Chip Thomas, a Black doctor on the Navajo Nation who

is also a photographer and wheat paste artist with the name Jetsonorama; Jesse Hazelip, an activist, performance artist, and tattoo artist whose work is dedicated to protesting the prison industrial complex; Kathy Whitman-Elk Woman (Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara), a stone and metal sculptor, painter, jeweler, beadwork artist, and Luger's mother; Kali Spitzer, of Kaska Dena and Jewish heritage, who works in film and wet-collodion processes; and 1000 Tiny Mirrors, a collaborative performance project that uses aerial acrobatics to enact states of rage, vulnerability, perseverance, and transformation.

At the entrance of *Lazy Stitch* unfurls Jetsonorama's large-scale wheat paste mural, *Return of the Warrior Twins*, featuring two figures bent over, their arms swinging backwards as if getting the momentum to jump, photographed in the Navajo Nation. The original twins are known to have used the methods of their father, the sun, to eliminate monsters such as uranium. Their mother, earth, held those monsters within her belly, depriving them of air and sunlight and keeping them from harming humanity.

The Hero Twins pictured are inspired by the oral history of many tribes. Their faces are completely covered. Of the figures, Luger says:

*I've had these forms. We Have Agency, and those informed the notion that we're the ones we've been waiting for. They were sparked from Native hero tropes, monster and monster slayer types. I made regalia for The One Who Checks and the One Who Balances from armor I took to Standing Rock and riot police gear. Those two armors were the dualities and ends of a spectrum that became the core of the regalia forms. Their role was to destroy the monster. I wanted to limit my human experiences—you can't see or hear when wearing them, just feel your way through the environment. I take these regalia to landscapes that have been abused by uranium and coal and create movements, dances as simple as walking in a way that the landscape decides your movements.*

*We go to these spaces and apologize and remember how to let the land lead.*

Under the twins lay the railroad tracks operated by the Black Mesa and Lake Powell Railroad to transport coal from the Peabody Energy Kayenta Mine to the Navajo Generating Station power plant, an integral part of the infrastructure built around industries of extraction, such as coal.

Inside the gallery, those figures, covered head to toe in felt, crocheted blankets, and beadwork, are installed side by side in *The One Who Checks and the One Who Balances*. One's hand is in the mouth of a black snake as if to push it back into the bowels of the earth. The serpent, *This Is Not a Snake*, is compiled from oil drums, ammunition cans, trash, found objects, steel, and ceramic. Its fangs are made with two gas pumps.

**MOVING FORWARD**, Luger's practice is becoming ever more collaborative

and less about making things to sell. His craft is oriented toward the land, the possibility of ceremony in art, of generating empathy in sharing creativity and activism over the internet, and the future—cultivating the conditions under which generations that come after us can thrive.

For now, Luger says that working within institutions, including museums, means holding them accountable for their role in generating narratives of the so-called "vanishing Indian." He says, "All of the institutional scholarship on Native peoples is dependent on us being terminal. But we're still here, and we've contributed so much to everyone else's existence." Part of that labor involves shepherding said institutions into an Indigenous worldview, one of "reverence over resource," he describes, for "we have an endless capacity to give through all the horrible things we've lived through. That's how you make a good knife—heat and pressure."

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