

Carl Beam: Looking Back, Flying Still

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Virginia EICHHORN

The first time I met Carl Beam (not including through his art work) was by telephone in the late 1980s. He was heading to Montreal with his family—Annie his wife and their daughter Anong. Sitting in front of me when the telephone rang was the maquette for his *Columbus Boat*—the sculptural work that would become one of the centre pieces of his seminal *Columbus Project*. We talked about the work and his upcoming exhibition at the Power Plant. There was much to do in preparation for that but he told me that he needed to take the family and go away for awhile first. "Time with the family," he said, "is the most important thing."

Since that time, I had the wonderful fortune to work with Carl on several exhibitions and was honoured to know him, Ann and Anong as friends as well as colleagues. Carl achieved many accolades in his lifetime. In 2000 he won 1st place recipient of Ernst & Young Great Canadian Printmaking Competition and became Royal Canadian Academy of Art Award Recipient and Member. And in 1986 *North American Iceberg* (1985) became the first work purchased from a Native Canadian artist by the National Gallery of Canada as a contemporary work of art rather than as an ethnographic artefact. In doing this, Carl opened the doors for other Native artists to demand that their work be judged on its merits as art works—not by virtue of the fact of the cultural background of the artist who created it.

to him throughout. It was his continuous quest for respect for the integrity of the artwork and for his pride in his First Nations background that made him a hero and inspiration to Native and non-Native artists alike. When he passed on, respected Elders Dan and Mary Lou Smoke-Asayenes wrote, "We have lost one of our most critical, cultural icons. He was a power of example who expressed the greatest tribute to his people through his art. He walked the talk and never let them forget it. His outspoken views were reflected in his artistic style which he created from the spirit world."

Likewise within Carl's experimentation with materials and techniques there was no hierarchy, no worry about what was "high art" and what was "low art." It was the merits of the individual work that always mattered in the end.

In 1980 Ann and Carl Beam were living in the American Southwest. The discovery of the techniques and materials used by the Native Americans in creating their works acted as the catalyst for the Beams' excitement about the possibilities of ceramics as part of their art practice. The most important aspect, for the Beams, was that the pottery was hand-built rather than wheel-thrown. This allowed for greater potential of shapes and encouraged them to experiment. The Beams fully explored these possibilities, creating ceramic works which were entirely made with natural materials that they found themselves—paint stones, dug earth, etc. The act of pottery making became in effect a manifestation of their personal philosophy placed in context with world events. The traditional forms of pots and bowls became engaged and dynamic platforms for Carl's forms and ideas—every bit as much fully thought out and developed as his paintings and works on paper. Carl once said, "The hemispherical quality of a large bowl, still excites me . . . It is a universe unto itself, where anything can happen, the designs are limitless." (August 2004)

In 1992 they were once more

living on Manitoulin Island and began working on their hand-built adobe home. During that time period, approximately three years, Carl spent less time in his studio and bristled when asked why he "wasn't making art these days." As Carl said, he was actually busy with a mammoth-scale ceramic sculptural project. And indeed, the finished home is an artwork unto itself and seems to grow organically out of the earth, fully integrated with the surrounding environment.

He made his mark through his provocative and unrelenting artworks which grappled with some of life's most difficult issues: questions of identity, prejudice, homelessness, hunger and most often, how to live one's life. For Carl these issues were never separated or compartmentalized. How you lived your life as an individual, the simple actions and decisions that were made each day, were seen as having a profound effect not only on our individual lives and communities, but on the entire global community. Carl, and the life he and his family lived, in



the home that they built with their own hands, was an activist statement, a challenge to all those who claim that an individual could never make a difference. They set up a paradigm where the only reason many people do not live in a sustainable manner is because they choose not to. These ideas and philosophies permeated Carl's work of the 1990s—perhaps most directly in an exhibition titled "Margins: Food and Shelter."

"Margins: Food and Shelter" consisted of work using adobe and hominy corn as the two main



Carl BEAM and Ann BEAM built this Adobe House together, in 1992, on Manitoulin Island.

→
Carl BEAM working.

Much of Carl's life involved the struggle to achieve recognition for his art—with respect for who he was as an artist, but without always the "aboriginal" or "native" qualifier. In 1986 Beam was quoted as saying, "My work is not made for Indian people but for thinking people. In the global and evolutionary scheme, the difference between humans is negligible." And that remained important



metaphors. Works included photo-emulsion images of Ann and Carl working on their home often accompanied by large scale texts reading single words “BUILD” “WORK” “GROW”—in their large declamatory styles these weren’t suggestions. The artist was telling the audience what they needed to do. It was not a request. At the opening Carl served homemade hominy corn soup to the crowd and extolled the many uses and easy cultivation of hominy corn. Properly grown, cultivated and distributed, hominy corn could be an effective solution to much of the world hunger problem. Earlier that day Carl had been arguing with someone that it wasn’t about “Native” or “white” issues—the issue, he insisted, was the human race. Any knowledge that was good and beneficial deserved to be, needed to be shared, so that everyone could benefit.

This respect for truth and knowledge was a strong part of who Carl was. Asked what art he liked, invariably he responded “Good art.” He was a man of great integrity and generosity. At his funeral on Manitoulin Island, Deacon Fox said that many people there were surprised to know that Carl was a world famous artist—for them, he was always just Carl. And he proceeded to describe a number of times where when members of the community needed help, Carl was the first one there to offer it.

Carl expressed many times great pride in Ann’s work. One time when I called to speak to him about an upcoming exhibition he said, “The work is going well—but what you need to see is Annie’s stuff—what she’s doing is really exciting.” That pride and support extended to daughter Anong, who unsurprisingly has followed in her parents’ footsteps. And as in many familial relationships the influences among family members is complex—especially in a family of artists, each with their own strong ideas and personalities. Asked to speak at the opening of an event in Toronto in 1996 called “Myth & Reality: A Canadian Landscape” (an event which was set up in antithesis of the AGO’s nostalgic exhibition of the Group of Seven), Carl began his speech quoting Anong, who was then 14, responding to the questions she asked about why we treat the world so badly when we rely on it to exist. While it is true that Carl has influenced Ann and Anong, the influences and inspirations have gone both ways.

“It’s All Relative” (which originated at the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery and is now on tour) was the first time that Carl, Ann and Anong Beam exhibited their work together.

Importantly, it was also the first time that there had been a comprehensive exhibition of their ceramic pieces as well. Carl said that when he was told of the vision for this exhibition he was thrilled. Preparations for the exhibition began in 2003, unfortunately the time that Carl’s health began to fail.

It was a sign of Carl’s tremendous strength and determination, and of the loving and devoted care by his family, that he was able to fight off the debilitating effects of both disease and “cure.” When preparing for “It’s All Relative” he began to lose his sight. He continued to find ways to work and refused to succumb to his ill health. So successful was he at adapting to the effects of his illness many people didn’t realize how ill he truly was, until his appearance at the 2005 Governor General Awards for the Arts, where he received the award for Visual and Media Arts.

The last time I spoke to Carl was a few weeks before he went to the hospital for the last time. He asked me how my children were and what they were up to. He told me that I was doing a good job with my kids. “Gini,” he said. “Keep your family close. Show them the world. That’s the right way to do it.” As with our first conversation, it was all about family.

Carl passed away on July 30th, 2005. Ann, Anong and her husband Marc were with him when he crossed over to the Spirit realm. Since then Carl has been honoured with two public memorial ceremonies. One was held at the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery and the second at the National Gallery. There have been numerous tributes and articles and in Edmonton, Alberta a public memorial in honour of Carl was created by Jane Ash Poitras, her son Eli and other people who felt and wanted to mark the loss of this great artist and man.

Shortly after Carl’s passing, his *Columbus Boat*—after a circuitous and sometimes stormy journey—was donated to the National Gallery by a private collector. It was installed along with *North American Iceberg* and other selected works. After the memorial I went up to view it. As I looked at the work I thought of how strong it still looked. The bare bones of the ribs of the ship exposed—the essence of the ship and the journey. It was solid, powerful and iconic. You could tell that this was something that would endure. And I knew that Carl was still here. ←

Virginia EICHHORN is the Curator of the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery. She is a board member for both Visual Arts Ontario and the Association for Native Development in Performance and Visual Arts. She has contributed numerous articles to many prestigious Canadian magazines and lives in Kitchener with her husband and three sons.

Carl BEAM, *Shaman Family*, 2002, painted earthenware, 12.7 x 111.7 cm; photo: Ann Beam.

Carl BEAM, *Black Snake Pot*, 2004, glazed stoneware, 25.4 x 96.5 cm; photo: Ann Beam.

Carl BEAM, *Whale of Our Being*, 2004, glazed Stoneware, 123.83 c. x 29.85 cm high; permanent collection of the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery, purchased through the assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Program and the Elizabeth L. Gordon Art Program of the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation; photo: Wilhelm Nassau.