

Previews of Works For Sale at Upcoming Shows

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Cannupa Hanska Luger in his studio. Photo by D'Nelle Jones.

New *Never Neverland*

Cannupa Hanska Luger's mixed-media ceramic sculptures are a fresh take on indigenous cultures. By Nicki Escudero

Cannupa Hanska Luger is interested in smashing stereotypes of Native Americans—both literally and figuratively. In a 2013 performance accompanying his *Stereotype: Misconceptions of the Native American* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, he destroyed about 10 sculptures adorned with accessories such as feathers and dream catchers, the embellishments serving as stereotypical motifs of his Native American community. He had worked on the pieces for 15 hours a day over a month and a half, but Hanska says the series really took his whole life to build. It took only an afternoon to let the stereotypes go.

"It was really easy to destroy them," says Hanska, 36, enrolled in the Three Affiliated Tribes (Mandan, Hidatsa, and Akira) and based in the Santa Fe, New Mexico, area. "The whole process was really cathartic for me in trying to understand the root of where a lot of the stereotypes come from. By the time I finished those pieces for collectors, they would only fortify the stereotype—they would not help destroy them."

Hanska says building the pieces was difficult, as he applied kitschy objects sustaining the ideas of Native communities to the work. Only one piece from the series, *The Luger*, survived. It is the work Hanska says "is a finger pointing back at me," a piece that

talked about the fact you can't describe the Native American in a single umbrella.

That theme continues in his new series *Never Neverland*, an updated take on the *Peter Pan* story that gives a modern look of ideas of colonialization, adaptability and survival as major components to the developing of culture. Hanska includes indigenous people, lost boys and animals in his new series, a unique cosmology created with the intent of developing a variety of cultures that evolve over time.

"I get to play with these fictitious Native motifs, which is really fun for me, because so much of what is appreciated or romanticized



Never Neverland series, mixed media





Never Neverland series, mixed media

with Native culture is set in a historical past," Hanska says. "I like to talk about where we are now and the importance of the stories that develop after contact and in the modern world, and the experiences of indigenous cultures in a totally industrialized forefront of technology and advancement. We don't exist in a vacuum, and all the things we represent in pop culture are all things that are part of our story."

Indigenous characters in the series wear feathers and fur atop basketball sneakers and cowboy boots, while the lost boys are often nude and androgynous, representing

the push-pull between societal expectations and animalistic nature. Hanska, a father with a 3-year-old and a 1-year-old, says he recognizes the wildness of his own youth and the paradigm shifts into parenthood—what becomes important when you're responsible for something beyond yourself.

Hanska will bring about a dozen new pieces from the series to Santa Fe's Blue Rain Gallery in August, as part of the gallery's *Annual Celebration of Contemporary Native American Art*. Blue Rain Gallery has represented the artist for the past three years, and director

of business development Denise Phetteplace says the gallery was attracted to representing Hanska because of his wonderful sense of skill and ability to manipulate materials while conveying thought-provoking ideas.

"It's one thing to have good ideas, and it's another to be able to articulate them in an aesthetically pleasing way," says Phetteplace. "He manages to do that and be on top of his craft. He is full of promise and talent, and is an artist we envision a successful future with."

Hanska's interest in sculpture is influenced by a theme that is a constant driver of his work:



Eat, Prey, Love V, ceramic and mixed media, 16 x 14 x 9"



Stereotype, the Luger, ceramic and mixed media, 21 x 18½ x 10"

entropy. He says his attraction to sculpture began when he desired to learn a skill set that could be considered a trade or a craft, and after he asked himself, "What good am I as an artist after the fall? If the world ends, and it's a *Mad Max* world, what would my purpose be?" Having the ability to weld and create something three-dimensional provides something more useful than painting say, if people are fighting for gasoline, though Hanska's artistic roots come from being a graffiti artist and later a live painter at concerts.

He says the artist career of his mother, Kathy Whitman, is part of what instilled him with an interest in art as a child. Raising five kids as a single mom, his mother was a provider for the family as a stone sculptor, painter and

now creator of eco-sculpture, using materials such as aluminum cans to make sculptures and jewelry. Hanska also integrates eco-friendly materials in his mixed-media ceramic works, such as his *Hidatsagami* series, an interpretation of origami, which features paper. Other materials he has used include leather, felt, fur and bone.

Adding items such as yarn or paper give the ceramic pieces movement and substance, says Hanska's collector Kim Niven from Milbank, South Dakota, who says she appreciates the glasslike quality of Hanska's ceramic work. Her attraction to his art goes beyond the surface, though.

"In addition to the appearance of Cannupa's

pieces, there is a feeling that goes with them," says Niven. "They pull something out of you and make you feel a connectedness to the static piece of art."

The involved development of testing new shapes and ideas with a variety of materials keeps Hanska stimulated and focused. He says as someone raised in a generation valuing MTV and sugar, instant gratification used to appeal to him. Now, he likes that his art is steeped in process, and he prefers to build in series until he's exhausted and moves on to the next series idea.

"I like having an art form where the material itself is literally having conversations with you that you need to slow down," Hanska says. "It's not words it's speaking in, but function—



Never Neverland series, from left: Feline I and Feline II, ceramic and leather, 26 x 8 x 6"

I need to take it easy and dry a little bit. I like that conversation I can have with the clay as it teaches me to be patient."

It also harks back to Hanska's interest in entropy, as the clay transforms to ceramic in the firing process and, if he chooses, he can then smash the ceramic sculpture to bits. He says entropy serves as a total function for existence, as there is no advantage to not allow things to deteriorate.

"As things break down, there's an opportunity for future growth," Hanska says. "If nothing ever died, nothing would ever live. It's something we all have to deal with and, of late, with the state of fear society is in and the fear of death, I don't think people give enough credit to what it

actually is. I try to honor it versus be afraid of it."

Besides revering concepts such as entropy in his works, Hanska says he enjoys the challenge of turning things that aren't necessarily aesthetically pleasing into things that are pretty. What's most important to him, he says, is to widen the path of contemporary Native art through his work.

"I want people to recognize the fact that 'we're still here' is not enough," Hanska says. "There are incredible Native communities with wonderful visual language that can be shared as long as people are willing to step out of their comfortable ideas of what 'Native American' is and appreciate us in the world—not just Natives, but humanity in general." 🐾

Cannupa Hanska Luger at the Annual Celebration of Contemporary Native American Art

When: August 19-23, 2015; August 20, 5 to 8 p.m., artist reception

Where: Blue Rain Gallery, 130 Lincoln Avenue, Suite C, Santa Fe, NM 87501

Information: (505) 954-9902
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