

The New York Times Magazine

June 19, 2022

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A headpiece made by the artist Cannupa Hanska Luger for his “Future Ancestral Technologies” video, performance and installation series. Page 44.



Photograph by Cara Romero for The New York Times

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On the Cover For her article on health care for transgender youths, Emily Bazelon interviewed more than 60 clinicians, researchers, activists and historians. She also spoke with more than two dozen young people about their experiences. One of them is pictured on the cover. Photograph by Anne Vetter for The New York Times.

GROUNDWORK

CANNUPA HANSKA

LUGER

IS UPENDING

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BY

JOSHUA

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PHOTOGRAPHS

BY

CARA

ROMERO



EARLY IN HIS CAREER,

the artist Cannupa Hanska Luger realized that his Indigenous ancestors would not have had words to describe his work — that the objects they made, however beautifully embellished, were always created with some purpose in mind. Before white anthropologists recast them as aesthetic treasures and displayed them in museums and private collections, beaded bison-hide sacks were meant for carrying things, and Pueblo pots for storing or cooking food. My own Tlingit ancestors used decorative cedar chests, like one in the permanent collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to store regalia used in religious ceremonies. Luger, who is 43, spent years of his artistic life grappling with the fetishizing of Native objects. Then something similar happened to his own work.

Luger lives in Glorieta, N.M., near Santa Fe, and in the summer of 2016, he was doing well as an artist, having just sold an eight-foot-tall ceramic-and-steel figure he called “Nature” to the Denver Art Museum for \$30,000. His father is among the Sioux residents of Standing Rock Indian Reservation, which straddles the border separating North and South Dakota; Luger spent his early childhood there and still visits regularly. When community members faced violent resistance for opposing the construction of an oil pipeline near the reservation that could threaten their water supply, Luger decided to take a break from making art to create something that people could use to defend themselves against police batons and projectiles.

He emerged from his workshop with a shield that had a reflective outer surface, a way of forcing law enforcement to confront their own aggression. It became the basis of an open-source experiment called “The Mirror Shield Project,” for which he filmed a video tutorial that he posted online. Luger, wearing a yellow beanie and safety goggles, explains over down-tempo instrumental hip-hop how others can replicate his work in locations as inhospitable as parking lots or campsites, using cheap materials available at any hardware store. The video’s aesthetics are coolly understated, but Luger’s tone is earnest, even urgent. “Please,” he says at the end, “if you are willing, and you believe that water is important, create these shields to protect the water protectors.”

Word spread on social media, and soon people were making their own mirror shields to send to protesters on the reservation. Luger worried that the authorities might confiscate the shields, calling

them weapons. So, being intimately familiar with the back roads into the reservation, he got in a van and drove 500 of them there with a partner, the Native artist Rory Wakemup. When they arrived just before Thanksgiving, Luger distributed the shields and directed people to hold them above their heads in something deliberately resembling a performance — to reflect images of state violence back to those perpetrating it, while also making clear they weren’t weapons.

“It wasn’t, like, *art*,” Luger said. “I’d seen too many people getting shot with percussion grenades, being shot directly with tear-gas canisters.” One person could make enough shields to protect several frontline protesters, he figured, and if those protesters shielded everyone behind them, then thousands at the camp might be safer because of his efforts. Yet Luger is an artist, even at his most practical, and by disguising his activism as performance art he inadvertently attracted attention from journalists, gallerists and art collectors — more attention, it turned out, than any of the pieces he previously made for sale.

Hans Ulrich Obrist, an influential curator and the artistic director at the Serpentine gallery in London, discovered Luger through “The Mirror Shield Project” and said the video guidance reminded him of Marcel Duchamp’s “Unhappy Readymade,” which was constructed by the artist’s sister in Paris based on instructions he had sent her from Argentina. Obrist was also impressed with how Luger’s do-it-yourself approach “focused on community.” Others took notice as well: In the year before the Standing Rock protests, Luger participated in shows at five galleries; in the year after, he did 19 of them. In 2018, he won the inaugural Burke Prize for contemporary craft from the Museum of Arts and Design, which exhibited “The Mirror Shield Project” alongside some of Luger’s newer work. “He shows us a contemporary moment in which craft enables indigeneity and modernity to occupy the same space,” wrote Namita Gupta Wiggers, one of the jurors.

By 2020, Luger had made a leap even some of the most prominent Native American artists never manage, from selling his pieces through a gallery in Santa Fe to working with one based in Manhattan, the Garth Greenan Gallery, where buyers outside the silo of American Indian art collecting might see it. This past April, Luger was awarded a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship; in

May, he led a workshop on making mirror shields at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where, on June 23, “The Mirror Shield Project” will be part of a water-themed group exhibition conceived by the first Indigenous curator in the museum’s 150-year history, Patricia Marroquin Norby.

I first met Luger last December over video chat. He has the inner glow of a neighborhood barista everyone wants to be friends with, and large brown eyes that seem to be smiling even when the rest of his face is not. In conversation, his patience and intellect hint at a lifetime spent dealing with people who have preconceptions about his art or his identity. Dressed in a red pull-over fleece and a wool cap, he rolled a cigarette while we talked about whether it’s possible for American Indians to produce art that doesn’t trap us, creatively, between the white settlers who engineered our pain and the white audiences eager to see what we’ve made from it. Years after the Standing Rock protests brought attention to “The Mirror Shield Project,” increasingly prestigious institutions have approached Luger about displaying something he still insists is not a work of art. Participating in the Met exhibit, he told me, has been a matter of making peace with the fact that whether he considers it art or not, presenting the project in public can be another way of reminding people what happened at Standing Rock.

Luger’s Native predecessors, like Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Allan Houser and T.C. Cannon, spent their careers fighting long-held stereotypes that had confined Native artists to the world of crafts and kept them out of the mainstream art market; Luger and peers like Nicholas Galanin, as part of a generation of Native artists embraced by the fine-arts community, must instead reckon with what that market wants from them and what it is they want to be selling. One path is to trade on familiar symbols of Indigenous culture, but Luger and many of his contemporaries are also bending a wide range of forms to their own cultural perspective, creating a visual language independent of the archaeologist’s gaze. Being embraced by the fine-arts community, however, doesn’t mean being understood by it. “A generation later, or two generations later, we’re having that same conversation,” Luger said, reflecting on his elders’ legacy. “They broke through into the larger market, but it didn’t create the world that they imagined.”

WHEN I ENCOUNTERED

Luger’s work for the first time late last year — an installation called “Every One” — I was transfixed. Conceived as a response to a June 2019 report from the Canadian government on missing and

murdered Indigenous women, which critics considered an incomplete accounting of more than 4,000 cases of disappearance or murder suspected by Indigenous groups, “Every One” is a monumental work. It consists of more than 4,000 fist-size ceramic beads hung to form what looks like a pixelated black-and-white portrait of an Indigenous woman; each bead represents one of the missing or murdered women, while the portrait, based on the tintype photograph “Sister,”

by Kali Spitzer, represents the loved ones left to suffer in their absence.

As with “The Mirror Shield Project,” Luger engaged the public in making the work, posting a video to solicit some of the ceramic beads from Indigenous communities. The result is a visceral sense of shared feeling. After my first experience seeing the work on a screen, I found myself returning to it over and over. I never know what emotions “Every One” will trigger in me, but I can

be sure that I won’t feel isolated by them; up close, each white, black and gray ceramic bead signals loneliness and loss, but upon stepping back, I am powerfully reminded of our connectedness.

Luger told me that while creating the piece, he recited aloud the same prayer each time he fired one of its ceramic beads in his kiln: “This is too many. This is enough. This has to stop.” For him, this ritual was the point of it all: to memorialize as individuals those who had been consigned to the mass grave of a government report on genocide. “The reason these people are being murdered and disappeared in the first place,” Luger said, “is because they’re being dehumanized. So how could further dehumanization be the solution to the problem?”

Several weeks later, on a bright, frigid January afternoon, I met the artist at his home in the snow-flecked hills above Santa Fe. Luger wore bluejeans, a hooded sweatshirt and a beanie. While playing with his dogs outside, we talked about various ceramic pieces he’d been working on: a head with a sword plunged into its mouth; an oversize bison skull; a stoic Indigenous face mask. “They’re not art; they are what’s left over from art,” he told me. Luger’s art is process-oriented, not object-oriented, and what drives him is not the thing he’s making but the thrill of making it. “All of these things are just byproducts of something incredibly special. Ceramic chips and paint fades, but creation is perfect.”

Luger calls clay a “generous” material. Recently, he created 72 ceramic bullets, each cast from one of several molds, then fired in his kiln and painted in motifs that reimagined them as purely aesthetic objects. One design featured cobalt-colored flowers that brought to mind Russian teacups, while others drew inspiration from Crayola crayons and military camouflage patterns. Another was given a gold-leaf-and-porcelain treatment. The installation, called “Rounds,” grew out of Luger’s continuing fascination with symbols of colonial violence and his interest in imagining them as aesthetic trophies — like an Indigenous anthropologist of white-settler culture, he unbinds the object from its function and finds a strange beauty.

Below and opening pages: Cannupa Hanska Luger wearing regalia he made for his “Future Ancestral Technologies” video, performance and installation series.



WHEN LUGER WAS 4,

his parents divorced, and the reservation eventually became a place he only visited. He and his four siblings went to live with their mother, the artist Kathy Whitman-Elk Woman, who moved with them to the Black Hills for a time before settling in Santa Fe in order to make a better living. (“There’s no economy for Native art in North Dakota,” Luger said.) It was a transient childhood, with stints in New Mexico and Arizona, but always tethered to the Santa Fe Indian Market, where his mother



Top: "The Mirror Shield Project" at Standing Rock Indian Reservation. Bottom: A scene from "How to Build Mirror Shields for Water Protectors."

sold her beadwork, paintings and sculptures at a booth each August.

Santa Fe has been the center of the Native art world since Sept. 4, 1922, when the Museum of New Mexico's director, Edgar Lee Hewett, inaugurated what was then called the Southwest Indian Fair and Industrial Arts and Crafts Exhibition. In a welcome speech, Hewett, a white archaeologist and anthropologist from Illinois, professed his hopes that the market would help preserve what he sometimes called the "ancestral purity" of Native arts and crafts. Appointing himself an arbiter of Native authenticity, Hewett encouraged Pueblo Indians to abandon any pottery traditions arising from contact with the Spanish — believing they had tainted the "racial purity" of the art — while failing to recognize his own corrupting influence. One draw in the market's first year was a style of black-on-black pottery developed by people of the San Ildefonso Pueblo solely for sale to white buyers; Hewitt also offered free admission to Indians who came dressed in traditional clothing.

A century later, Santa Fe's more than 200 art galleries, which tend to specialize in Native art, mostly sell what Luger calls "Santa Fe romanticism," an aesthetic descendant of Hewett's ideal: silver and turquoise jewelry, Zuni dolls, dusty Georgia O'Keeffe sunsets. Hewett's creation has morphed into the Santa Fe Indian Market, where, for an extended weekend each summer, 1,000 artists representing 160 different tribes, nations and villages showcase and sell their work to more than 100,000 visitors.

Raising Luger around the market, Elk Woman correctly sensed that her son resented its trappings. Being successful there meant endless haggling, networking and the kind of salesmanship that bordered on theatricality. When white customers made insulting offers on Elk Woman's work, told off-color jokes or put unreasonable demands on her time, she had no choice but to indulge them with good humor. She was a single mom with five kids to care for, and with no source of income besides her art, she relied on the Indian

Market. Playing that game well could be stifling, though, and she's sure her son saw that. "I think it left a bad taste in his mouth," she told me. Luger said observing his mother from the periphery of that economy also sharpened his instincts for recognizing who was looking to support Native artists and who was looking to rob them.

Summers on his father's ranch at Standing Rock, meanwhile, were spent bucking hay, branding cattle and riding horses. "It was two completely different lifestyles," Luger's father, Robert Luger, told me. "He got his art from his mom, and he got his orneriness from me." That orneriness expressed itself as a willingness to go his own way.

Inspired by his mother's creativity and surrounded by her materials, Luger turned to art as a teenager. When he was 16, he tagged along to one of his mother's shows, at a gallery in Chicago, where he occupied himself by bending some thin strips of steel he'd found into crow-shaped sculptures. The gallery owner suggested he display them. Luger asked him how much he should charge, doubled it, then swiftly sold all the crows, using the proceeds to buy a silver bracelet made by a Zuni artist. "I actually had very little self-worth at the time," Luger said of his ambitious pricing scheme. "It's just that we had traveled all the way up there."

At the time, Luger was into hip-hop and slam poetry, which briefly exploded into mainstream popularity in the mid-1990s. Each offered him an opportunity to create in a space where he wasn't constantly aware of rules and expectations. "There was no white anthropologist, in those corners, looking for Native art," he said. "In that space, I was allowed to do whatever I was thinking." For the first time, he learned to see art as nothing more than "the medicine of making things." After high school, Luger moved to Seattle for several years and began experimenting with painting in front of an audience while rappers performed. "All of my kids are creative, but Cannupa is the only one who is like me," his mother said. "He *needs* to create."

In his late 20s, Luger returned to Santa Fe and enrolled at the Institute of American Indian Arts, the world's only fine-arts college dedicated to contemporary Indigenous art, which has its campus on 140 acres of high desert just south of Santa Fe and has been a training ground for generations of Native American artists. When Luger arrived at I.A.I.A., it was best known for having nurtured painters like T.C. Cannon, Kevin Red Star and Gina Gray, who in the 1960s and '70s sought to blow apart the stereotype that Indians were all craftspeople rather than fine artists. Cannon used irony and kitsch to subvert stereotypes in paintings that captured off-kilter Indigenous lives in vivid shades of orange, purple and blue, while Gray created heavily stylized, abstract representations of Native bodies. This generation broke through the "buckskin ceiling," Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, a contemporary of those artists, told me; young baby boomers like the Tlingit glass

artist Preston Singletary took it further by using novel materials and modernist techniques to create traditional Native objects, like canoes and seal clubs crafted from colored glass.

By the time Luger was in college, he'd gravitated toward crafts like ceramics and textiles, even as he eschewed Santa Fe romanticism. His work with clay was largely outside any formal custom, because the ceramic traditions of his Mandan,

Hidatsa and Arikara ancestors did not survive the flooding of the Missouri River basin and the smallpox epidemics that followed contact with European settlers. Instead of being based in pure apprenticeship, Luger's techniques emerged from study mingled with self-directed experimentation. Even then, he had "a fearless approach to his practice," according to Smith, who was a visiting artist at I.A.I.A. at the time.

Luger in his studio near Santa Fe, N.M.



This page: Cara Romero for The New York Times. Opposite page: From the artist.

After graduating in 2011, Luger invested in his future as an artist by working on a marijuana farm in Paradise, Calif., with his girlfriend at the time, the artist Ginger Dunnill, earning enough money to buy a small plot of land in Glorieta. When he and Dunnill returned, they married and built the home where they now live with their two children — a simple, modernist cube constructed on an existing foundation, with high, exposed ceilings, loft bedrooms and an impressive collection of paintings by Luger's artist friends.

From this base in Glorieta, with his wife as his manager, Luger finally began pursuing art as his full-time job. In August 2013, the I.A.I.A. Museum of Contemporary Native Arts hosted his first major solo exhibition, called "Stereotype: Misconceptions of the Native American," which explored how media representations flatten Indigenous identity. In one piece for the exhibition, "The Drunk," Luger built a ceramic transistor radio with a liquor bottle embedded in a hollow on its backside — then destroyed it as part of a filmed performance.

In 2014, Dunnill gave birth to their second son, and Luger focused on studio work that would keep him at home. Luger sold many of these pieces through Blue Rain Gallery in Santa Fe, where he learned to engage playfully with "the white gaze." "Primarily white collectors go into Blue Rain to get Native art, and in that space, that's when I was like, 'Oh, this is kind of funny,' because it's a market, it's a product," he said. "And I'm like: I don't want to sell you my culture. I think what I want to do is sell you your idea of my culture." He made anthropomorphic bear, elk and coyote figurines from clay, then draped them in beads and feathers from Hobby Lobby to "make objects that were 'Indian art,' you know, in major quotes." It was, he said, a way of selling white collectors "a tongue-in-cheek regurgitation of their expectations."

Luger's work, at its most lacerating, activated my own inner turmoil as a Tlingit writer who has wrestled with what it means to represent Indigenous culture to white audiences. But instead of struggling with this dissonance, Luger appeared to revel in it, artistically and economically. It thrilled me to hear that collectors acquired his figurines as fast as he could make them, that they seemed willing to buy absolution in the form of a clay doll that served as a wry critique of the transaction itself.

WHEN LUGER INVITED ME

over for dinner one evening, his two sons were riding push scooters over the concrete floors of their home, weaving around the couch and dinner table. High on the prospect of North African takeout and a two-liter root beer, they told me about a trip they took to Detroit and showed me figurines they made using scrap felt from their

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father's workshop: one an "O.C., original creation," and the other a video-game character.

Luger sometimes jokes about the artistic freedom that "the weed house" has afforded him. There is a saying in the Santa Fe art world, the critic and gallerist Garth Clark told me, that you should "be careful never to buy a rent bowl" — meaning one that has been made in haste when the potter's rent is due. But the insidiousness of the rent bowl goes deeper still, Clark added, because it suggests a market in which Indigenous artists have too little elastic income to take creative risks. "Because they live too close to the bone, they couldn't be making work that wasn't selling," he said. "They just sell every piece as they made it, and that imposes a real ceiling on what they could do creatively."

A day earlier, I walked with Luger to his studio. On the path leading there, patches of snow and ice were strewn like white confetti over the boulders and brush dominating the landscape — a landscape whose desert features and cold, thin air would have been as alien to Luger's plains-dwelling ancestors as to mine, who spent their lives in the waterways and woods of Southeast Alaska. "The only exercise I get is chopping wood in the summer and moving boulders in the winter," Luger said as we approached his studio, which looks from the outside as if it could be a small two-story home.

On the first floor, a large, light-filled room held a washing-machine-size kiln in one corner and a workbench running the length of the opposite wall. I saw what appeared to be six ceremonial objects on the floor, fashioned from the remnants of a gas station. Luger was calling them "Dance Clubs"; he had created them by joining flat hardwood blades to ceramic reproductions of gas-pump handles that he painted bright orange; each slab of wood was secured to its ceramic handle using a synthetic animal sinew.

These pieces, like the ceramic bullets, reflected Luger's interest in recasting harmful objects of colonization as purely aesthetic ones — a reference to how white collectors have done the same to Indigenous crafts. But they weren't yet finished; he had to solve one last puzzle. He'd bought cheap hair extensions to attach to the spout of each ceramic pump handle, so that it looked like blond gasoline was pouring out of them, but he hadn't yet figured out the best way to affix them. "I don't do sketches," Luger told me, "so I'm constantly just problem solving."

He surveyed the workshop for remnants of past projects that might offer a solution. Despite a lack of sleep and a looming deadline to get "Dance Clubs" and "Rounds" to Colgate University for a show, Luger seemed to be having fun. When he found a length of hose that he thought might help, he was briefly elated, then got immediately down to the business of experimenting with it. The hose was just wide enough to fit securely over the spout of each gas-pump handle; he cut it into short lengths, glued a fistful of synthetic hair inside each one, then secured a piece of tube over each spout. As soon as "Dance Clubs" was finished, we rushed to get all the pieces crated for shipping, then drove around Santa Fe listening to the singer-songwriter Bill Callahan and the outlaw country artists Blaze Foley and Johnny Paycheck.

In the van, we talked about what white Americans get from Native American art. Luger's theory is that it has to do with their trauma of becoming American, which meant severing all ties to their own ancestral lands — a trauma that has left them with a longing for what Luger calls a "deep time connection" to the land they now inhabit, which is, of course, someone else's ancestral land. The "narrative of bootstrapping and rugged individualism" celebrated in white American culture, he

feels, arises from that displacement; so does capitalism's exploitation of land and natural resources. "It's a byproduct of removing yourself from the land, from the people, from the culture, so that you are an individual. You are alone."

It was only then that I realized I'd misread some of Luger's most important work, which was rooted not in righteous anger toward our colonizers but in a deep well of empathy for them. "Rounds" and "Dance Clubs" address not only what colonialism has cost us but what it has cost them as well, as the instruments of our oppression take the lives of schoolchildren and the spoils of our land contribute to the climate crisis. He has maintained this empathy amid a continued disregard for Indigenous lives: At the Ent Center for the Arts in Colorado Springs, where "Every One" was first displayed, Luger grew melancholy at the sight of the white-gloved gallery staff handling each ceramic ball with the utmost care while assembling the piece. His artist friend Jesse Hazelip pointed out that in life, the people represented by each ceramic ball had never been treated so well by white society. For Luger, there was something devastating about seeing institutions find value in these human beings only after they were dead and gone.

When Luger told me this, I wanted to tell him that I'd seen my own little sister in each of those ceramic balls — that she is among the thousands of Indigenous women who have gone missing in America; that I have not heard from her since she stopped returning our family's calls over a decade ago; that my best efforts to find her pointed to a stint in rehab and time living on the streets of Los Angeles; and above all, that I've never felt her absence more strongly than when I gaze at photographs of "Every One." I wanted to tell him how I feel her presence, too, in these moments, and that the experience is like visiting my sister's

grave without conceding that she might be dead. But I couldn't find the right words for any of this.

Luger, too, has found that some things resist expression. In search of a place for these ideas, he has turned to science fiction. Years spent dwelling on the toll of colonialism and genocide have opened his mind to an imaginary post-consumption future, in which white technocrats, having bled the earth of its resources, depart for colonies on Mars, leaving Indigenous people to live in the tailings of their progress; generations later, the great-grandchildren of those old enough

to remember this white exodus make from its detritus a new tribal aesthetic.

In a video from the multimedia series "Future Ancestral Technologies," Luger and Dunnill model the science-fiction-inspired regalia: gauntlets made from sports equipment and industrial felt; giant cloth headdresses that evoke futuristic college-football mascots; secondhand afghans fashioned into full-body outfits. In the background, a robotic voice intones: *How to heal a wound that is still being cut? By traveling into the future, we survive you.*

"Every One" on display at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York.



Photograph by Jenna Bascom/Museum of Arts and Design, via the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery

More than once, Luger told me our survival is a threat to the "myth of America," because our existence is a reminder of the illegitimate land claims this country was built on. Several months ago, he and the Seneca Nation artist Marie Watt were invited by one of Yale's residential colleges to build a monument on campus, in acknowledgment of the fact that it was once Indigenous land. Luger was tormented by the thought of participating in an empty gesture. He and Watt suggested a machine that would flatten ordinary coins into badges reading: "I ACKNOWLEDGED INDIGENOUS LAND TODAY." That, by itself, would seem to read as provocation — an ironic acknowledgment of the meaninglessness of the whole project. But the idea went beyond that. Luger and Watt proposed that, once minted, the metal badges could be connected like a tapestry or chain mail and turned into an artwork by Yale. Whatever patch of land it covered would then belong to the descendants of those Indigenous tribes it was stolen from. "The more people use it, the more Indigenous land the university will have to return," Luger told me.

While a formal commission hadn't yet been made, Charles Bailyn, who is the faculty head of the residential college, told me in an email he was "thrilled by Cannupa's vision." But there seemed to be a disconnect between the vision as Luger described it to me and Bailyn's understanding of it: While Luger told me he sought a legal handover of land, Bailyn said, "I'm guessing it won't be legally binding in the Anglo-American sense, but rather a moral/cultural land return."

Dwelling on Luger's intentions with the piece, I was reminded of something I heard him mention while delivering a large ceramic bison skull for crating. In the next year or two, Luger said, he hoped to construct a war memorial honoring the millions of bison murdered by white settlers as a means of starving American Indians. Texas would be the ideal location, he added, because he'd heard of a barbed-wire salesman there who amassed a fortune in a fencing boom that followed the slaughter of the bison; his plan was to ask the salesman's descendants to help fund the project.

Near sunset on the last day of my visit, Luger and I walked the grounds of I.A.I.A.'s desert campus, which seems to exist on its own planet. Luger was wearing oversize sunglasses and a yellow beanie with a patch that read "YOU ARE ON NATIVE LAND." In a wide-open courtyard, we passed a sculpture of a bison, which prompted me to ask him about the war memorial — in particular, about whether it was anger or mischief that motivated him to provoke white institutions: this family that got rich off barbed wire; Yale. As we walked back to his pickup truck, Luger told me it was about something else entirely — an attempt at healing their trauma with the land and our trauma with them. "I don't see them as provocations. I see them as opportunities," Luger said. "I'm giving them a gift. I'm giving them the opportunity to make themselves whole again." ♦