

American **Craft**

Act *of* Devotion

+ Tiny Scenes
of the
Apocalypse
The Dish
on
Dinnerware
Copenhagen
Cool



*Cannupa
Hanska Luger:
"Art has
never let me
down"*

Poster
Inside

years
75

americancraftmag.org
December/January 2018



*Cannupa
Hanska Luger
builds sculptures
and installations
that shatter
misconceptions.*

CREATIVITY DISRUPTION

STORY BY Deborah Bishop PORTRAITS BY Karen Kuehn



Cannupa Hanska Luger, born on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, works in ceramics and other mediums to take on social issues; he sees it as part of his obligation as an artist.



“THERE IS ACTUALLY NO WORD for ‘art’ in my language,” says Cannupa Hanska Luger, whose ceramic-centric objects and installations reside in museums, galleries, and private collections around the country. Speaking volumes about the nature of the indigenous American experience, Luger’s sculptures are at once visually arresting and thought-provoking portals into subjects ranging from our destructive dependence on oil to New Age hucksterism.

“The whole idea of art as commodity is a construct,” he continues. “We just made the detritus of our daily lives – shoes, shirts, cups, cooking pots – beautiful. These things were

then commodified, collected, and stashed in museums, totally out of context. And yet this abusive practice kept our cultural and visual language alive and provided a way for people to sustain themselves, sometimes by making art in an environment that despised them.”

Like his creations, Luger is at once intellectual and emotional, analytical and warm, and capable of great humor, even when discussing some of the atrocities that have been – and continue to be – endured by indigenous peoples.

Born on the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota, Luger, 38, is enrolled in the affiliated Mandan, Hidatsa,

and Arikara tribes (with some Lakota from his father and Norwegian from his blond-haired, blue-eyed grandmother, who found a home with the affiliated tribes during the Depression). Today, the artist makes his home and studio in the pine forests of Glorieta, New Mexico, 15 miles from Santa Fe, where he lives with his wife, Ginger Dunnill, a multidisciplinary artist and sound designer, and their sons ’io Kahoku, 5, and Tsesa Tsoki, 3.

His mother, Kathy Whitman-Elk Woman, is also a working artist. After divorcing, she moved with her six children to Phoenix in search of a more robust market for her large



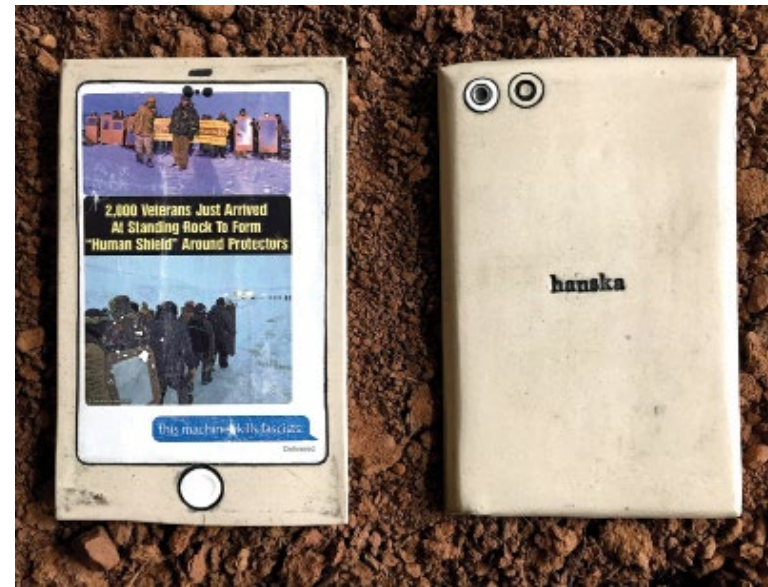
BUFFALO SKULLS

Old Dominion (top) comments on the US legacy of colonization. The other skulls are part of Luger’s *Life Is Breathtaking* series, which looks at how culture is commodified.

TOP LEFT: The artist in his New Mexico studio.

BOTTOM LEFT: Luger’s work is often cerebral, but he values practicality, too. A tattoo helps the husband, father, and artist keep his to-do list at hand.

Dominion, Weapon, and Luger photos: Courtesy of the artist / Other skull photos (2): Blue Rain Gallery



stone carvings. (Luger spent summers in North Dakota, working on the Luger family ranch.) Whitman’s ability to support the family with her art gave her son the confidence to pursue a similar path, and he credits his forebears, including his mother, with empowering contemporary artists to break free of the tropes expected of them and create a more personal body of work. “I’m standing on the shoulders of the people who suffered from exposure to a corrosive system. It’s because of them that I get to go to the next level, push that edge, and make the art that I do.”

Graduating with honors from the Institute of American Indian Arts in 2011, Luger’s output of ceramic objects incorporating textiles, steel, and paper is both prodigious and strikingly varied in scale, approach, and construction, and it taps into allusions that range from *Peter Pan* to Japanese *shibari*, Persian mythology to the instant nostalgia imparted by Instagram filters. What they all share is a strong narrative girding and sense of polemical purpose, which have the effect of restoring his work to the category of beautiful utilitarianism.

“Truth be told,” says Luger, “I’d rather be considered a

THE WEAPON IS SHARING (THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS), 2017

ABOVE LEFT: A series of clay iPhones share photos Luger took at the 2016 Standing Rock demonstration.

THE LUGER, 2013

ABOVE RIGHT: Luger created, then dropped to the floor, a series of ceramic boom boxes adorned with images of Native American stereotypes. He kept one, *The Luger*, to emphasize that even his opinion is a stereotype. “I can’t tell you who we are, because we are not one thing,” he says.

craftsperson than an artist, because I’m much more interested in function. They may not look like it, but I think of my pieces as vessels, because they all carry an idea. They’re idea vessels, if nothing else.”

We spoke with Luger about his prolific practice and where he stands on the intersection of art and politics – particularly at this strange and challenging time in our country’s history.

Is it fair to say that most of your work is a creative response to acts perpetrated upon Native Americans over the centuries – from colonialism to genocide, appropriation, and environmental terrorism?

Yes. In an ideal world, I’d love to make pretty things all day long. But as an indigenous person in this country, I am a political entity, like it or not. I’ve had so many opportunities and have so much privilege; at this point in our political scenario, I have to weaponize that privilege.

And I’m always learning something new about my history. *Pillar* [a 9-foot installation of stacked ceramic buffalo skulls] is a monument to the genocide that reduced the buffalo population from [tens of millions] to 1,500 by 1895. During my research, I learned that their bones used to be piled up to 50 feet high along the railroad lines, visible as far as the eye could see, and were only removed because they were scaring passengers and hindering the westward expansion. Ironically, removing and harvesting these bones was one of the few jobs available to people of my genetic background.

Is it ever vexing to be cast as a de facto spokesperson for “Native Americans,” when there are hundreds of nations?

Oh, yes. When you’re talking about 500-plus nations, with so many languages and cultural practices, I can’t tell you who we are, because we are not one thing. When one person from one nation describes what it means

to be Native American, even their most honest and heartfelt interpretation is also a stereotype. It’s a lot of pressure being expected to speak for the entire umbrella, but most people can’t see beyond the label of “Indian.”

The word itself conjures such a crazy quilt of clichés, from the romantic idea of the “noble savage” – as depicted in the staged photography of Edward Curtis to movie characters like Tonto and Billy Jack to cigar-store effigies – and such insults as the name and logo of the Washington Redskins.

A lot of my work really plays with those tropes. You don’t get my culture as a commodity. But what I will do is regurgitate your impressions – if only to destroy them.

Stereotype: Misconceptions of the Native American, your 2013 series of ceramic boom boxes embellished with kitsch artifacts – fur, dream catchers, feathered headdresses – went to Art Basel and then the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts in Santa Fe, where you proceeded to break them, save for one titled *The Luger*. Could they not have conveyed meaning intact? Those pieces living on mantels would not have benefitted me





SAVAGE NOBLE, 2017

This figure, a mash-up of man, lion, and scorpion, is Luger's riff on colonial power and romantic stereotypes. "We see this beast for what it is, so now we may slay it," he says.



as much as smashing them, which was so cathartic. I think about our culture being dug up and studied by anthropologists, and they got it so wrong; that some of these objects still sit in museums is proof of that. So letting the Stereotype series exist without being able to expound upon it would reinforce the very notions I want to destroy. I spared *Luger* to emphasize that even my opinion is a stereotype – but at least it's an honest interpretation from a Native perspective.

Is it fair to say that in Santa Fe you're still surrounded by the more traditional type of indigenous art that speaks directly to the expectations of tourists and collectors?

Yes, I am, but that term "indigenous" or "native" is a huge umbrella. Down here I'm surrounded by Pueblo work, which is earthenware. I don't have access to that imagery – their culture is vastly different from mine, and it would be appropriation.

My people were clay workers, but after the government

WASTED, 2016

Luger put imagery such as mascot silhouettes and Navajo patterns on throwaway items, an expression of how appropriation belittles, rather than honors, cultures.

flooded our land in the '50s, so many people were displaced that I'm the only Mandan clay worker I know of. Sometimes I'll dig out clay from along the river back in Fort Berthold [Indian Reservation in North Dakota] and wedge it into the stoneware I use, so there is a physical relationship between that land and my work.

Speaking of appropriation, your 2016 installation *Wasted* features cans and bottles embellished with Native American imagery, calling to mind everything from Ralph Lauren ad campaigns to Victoria's Secret's use of war bonnets as fashion show props.

Wasted uses a lot of appropriated imagery. Appropriation, mascotry, and romanticism have all have been justified as "honoring" us. Why take a Navajo print and splash it across flasks and underpants sold at the mall? How does it "honor" us to take this visual language and stick it on whatever you want – most of which ends up in the garbage? *Wasted* takes that imagery and puts it onto things immediately recognized as disposable.

In the Lakota and Mandan cultures, we don't talk about ourselves; it's a gross idea – like what I'm doing right now! Your regalia describes you. And even I don't have the right to wear a war bonnet, which is like a Purple Heart – you only get to wear it if you've sacrificed for your people.

You depict another ubiquitous commodity, the iPhone, in *The Weapon Is Sharing (This Machine Kills Fascists)* series. The title is also a nice homage to Woody Guthrie, who taped that message to his guitar.

Our phones have turned all of us into artists and documentarians. This series is a response to technology and the state of our world since No. 45

Savage photos: Robert Erlichman, Art Guild Press / *Wasted* photo: Courtesy of the artist / Ovum photos (4): Blue Rain Gallery



In his artwork, Luger regurgitates stereotypes – but only to destroy them.



OVUM, 2017

Made of clay and felt, this series of egg-like figures personifies potential. They must be incubated to come to fruition, Luger says.

**NEVER
NEVERLAND,
2015**

Luger reimagines the classic children's story *Peter Pan*, which he describes as an original misinterpretation of what the Americas are like. In the series, he asks what the characters would be like if history had played out differently.



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Bear photo: Blue Rain Gallery / Other photo: Courtesy of the artist



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REGALIA, 2013 – 14

LEFT: This series responds to the fashion industry’s use of Native American adornment as fun “dress-up.” “I wanted to emphasize that [a war bonnet] is not a hat,” Luger says. “There’s a greater context to it.”



>^iivwi^<, 2016
In this installation, a masked figure levitates above an array of sex toys being sold as Native American “artifacts.” Labels such as “Buy one, get one half-off” and “Easy to use” satirize the instant gratification New Age spirituality often promises.

[President Trump] came into play. The phones are built of clay, with photo-realistic decals of images that I took during the engagement at Standing Rock and shared on Facebook. It’s a way of communicating with ancestors who are hidden away in museums, to let them know that we’re still here, fighting the good fight.

As you’re from Standing Rock, that must have been an intensely personal engagement. How did the mirror shields you made for the resistance come about?
The Native community is stuck on that river, by geography and political sanctions. To build a pipeline upstream and bypass the necessary safeguards to protect the water is pure racism. The police were shooting

rubber bullets, using pepper spray and hoses. I wanted to make something that could both protect and make a statement, and I was inspired by protesters in the Ukraine [in 2013 – 14] who held mirrors up to the police to reflect back their own humanity.
I made a video showing how to create shields out of plywood and mirrored vinyl, and thousands of them came into the

camp, with all these beautiful variations – including some made by an eighth-grade class in Oregon who wrote prayers and thank-you notes on the inside, visible to those who held them.
For all the serious issues you confront, you don’t shy away from humor. In >^iivwi^< (2016), for example, a guru

figure levitates above an array of sacred objects for sale – which happen to be dildos.
The levitating figure vending these cultural objects is a fake; he’s made of paper and his face is a tied-on ceramic mask. It’s my response to the kind of New Age spirituality that’s everywhere in Santa Fe, and the idea of hawking quick, easy salvation. I have no hang-ups

about how anybody engages with anything, but what’s funny about some types of spirituality is the preference for cherry-picking rather than making a serious commitment to any one culture or practice. So the so-called spiritual objects on sale here are all for instant gratification. It’s a whitewashed version of spirituality, and only Coyote, our trickster figure, is in color.

As an artist who works non-stop, can you ever imagine doing anything else?
Art has never let me down. Any time I had rent due, I was able to make it because of art. I ate ramen and beans, lived in hovels, all that usual stuff, but I stayed devoted to my practice, because that’s what fulfills me.
I also believe that the universe loves commitment and

tends to look kindly on those who submit to the will of its beautiful and chaotic mysteries.
+ cannupahanska.com
Luger’s Wasted is in the “Neo Native” exhibition at the Maloof Foundation in Alta Loma, California, through January 7. Deborah Bishop is a writer and editor in San Francisco, and a regular contributor to American Craft.