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Bringing it All Back Home

T.C. Cannon (1946–1978, Caddo/Kiowa) is one of the most inventive Native¹ artists in America. Cannon came of age in the turbulent 1960s and 1970s. Through his dynamic use of color and pattern, an interplay between foreground and background, and mash-ups of Native and non-Native elements, Cannon developed a visual language that pulled Native American people out of the staid world of black-and-white romanticized Indian portraiture. Cannon was among the first twentieth-century Native artists to surface issues of the brutal traumas wrought by colonialism and power dynamics through paintings, poetry, and music. Emerging during the anti-war protests and civil rights movement of the 1960s, Cannon interrogated troubling aspects of American histories, including war, disease, land-hungry colonists, and hundreds of years of federal policies that nearly wiped out Native populations across the continent. Deeply personal and politically urgent, Cannon also showed us how Native American people persist and flourish in the face of oppression, a perspective that was previously absent from American history and art history. Ultimately, Cannon’s work demonstrates that the American experience is unimaginable without Native American history and culture.

I curated the Peabody Essex Museum’s (PEM) 2018–19 nationally touring exhibition *T.C. Cannon: At the Edge of America* and was an editor of and contributor to its companion publication. Multiple aspects of curating this project respond to and purposefully harness the intangible aspects of Cannon’s vision and voice, serving as a natural extension to my curatorial practice, which aims to build bridges between Indigenous art and artists (often left out of the conversation) and mainstream museum audiences. For me, intangible aspects of Cannon’s work focus on what is felt and known but cannot necessarily be seen: emotions, memories, spiritual knowledge, and a sense of community. Other intangibles include individual and collective effects of colonization and how, for Cannon, making art and voicing these painful truths was cathartic—a medicine. Cannon’s work advocates for inclusion and equality. Building a more connected community through interpretive text, dramatic media pieces, and interactive gallery activities follows his lead. By presenting more than just the painterly in an art-historical context, we encourage audiences to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Cannon as an amazingly complex, thoughtful human with rich life experiences that informed his vision and voice. Cannon urges us to grapple with the contradictions and questions of history—and our place in it. Through the exhibition design and interpretation, we demonstrate the relevance of Cannon’s work in the context of

ongoing national conversations about ethnic identity, land rights, and social justice, as well as questions of what it means to be American.



Fig. 1. Installation view of *T.C. Cannon: At the Edge of America* at Peabody Essex Museum. © 2018 Peabody Essex Museum; photography by Kathy Tarantola/PEM

Centering on T.C. Cannon as narrator of the exhibition, and decentralizing my curatorial voice as the authority, was an intentional strategy I employed to activate Cannon’s Native perspective and to build empathy with the audience. A selection of direct quotes, a display of Cannon’s handwritten letters and snapshots he sent from his yearlong tour of duty in Vietnam, recordings of him singing and playing guitar, two immersive media experiences, and nearly a dozen large-scale poetry reproductions (treated like artwork) deepen the connection of the visitor to Cannon and his work, as well as increase the emotional involvement with the subjects Cannon portrayed. The object labels use straightforward language and an engaging tone to provide historical and contemporary contexts for the paintings as well as details from Cannon’s life. My curatorial decisions for object pairings versus stand-alone moments, and the general look and feel of the exhibition space, further supports close looking and maximizes our potential for capturing visitor attention and emotion. Empathy is a step toward reducing prejudice and the gaps between life events and worldviews, particularly relevant when working with Indigenous art and artists. And engaging audiences in histories, dialogue, and reflection around issues of social justice and inclusion can be a transformational and impactful experience, as elucidated in Mike Murawski’s 2016 blog post “[The Urgency of Empathy & Social Impact in Museums.](#)”

Additional interpretive elements include annotated labels, history pop-up and theme panels, as well as questions posed on gallery benches with nearby sketchbooks, which build on the collective gallery experience and invite thoughtful community participation. Prompts in one of the media pieces and throughout the sketchbooks serve as a catalyst for visitors to respond to Cannon’s work (through words or drawings), make connections to their own lives, and find relevance to today’s issues. The questions play on the exhibition subtitle, *At*

the Edge of America, and the conversation prompts and encourages discussion of multiple points of view, sides, and edges. For example, the thematic section on Representation explores how Cannon liberated his figures from the sentimental past, creating a new present and future for them. Two questions were posed: “Is history fact or fiction?” and “Imagine Cannon’s portraits could speak. What would they say to you?” One visitor shared in the adjacent sketchbook, “In the age of technology where change occurs in the blink of an eye, humanity forgets that 1890 was only yesterday. How do you manage an identity that carries the weight of all my forefathers’ mistakes? This land is your land.” This is an empathic, reflexive response directly inspired by Cannon’s art and life, and the kind of thoughtful sharing we intended to encourage.

The goal of building community extends beyond the physical exhibition experience by our local museum constituency and includes building the Native American community—members of Cannon’s family and tribal communities, his art school peers, and recent generations of contemporary Indigenous artists, scholars, and educators. We brought in multiple voices through dynamic programming, including a symposium and film series. The accompanying publication is the first to contextualize Cannon’s painting, poetry, prose, and music within American art and cultural history. We commissioned essays and object entries by several Native artists and scholars, including contributions by two alumni from PEM’s renowned [Native American Fellowship Program](#). Nearly twenty fellows served as exhibition advisors on project content and intent. We also commissioned four new sets of poems by highly respected Native American poets for the publication—and two new songs in response to Cannon’s work by Choctaw singer-songwriter Samantha Crain for the exhibition—to extend his legacy, which still blazes strong. The open sound of Cannon and Crain’s music streaming in the galleries was a social experience. We interwove it with Cannon’s visual art and poetry, because for Cannon, these things were inseparable. Taken together, they give us a richer, more multidimensional portrait of who T.C. Cannon was an artist and as a person.

Bringing the exhibition to Oklahoma, Cannon’s home state, was imperative to the success of the project. His family and friends have left tobacco offerings in the gallery under his photograph, and members of the prestigious Kiowa Ton-Kon-Gah, or Black Leggings Warrior Society (to which Cannon and his fathers were inducted together), honored Cannon’s sister Joyce Cannon Yi with a blanket at the Gilcrease Museum exhibition opening. Cannon’s powerful messages of dispossession, representation, and cultural regeneration still resonate for many Native American people who grew up knowing his work and his legacy as one of the greatest contemporary American Indian artists of the twentieth century. In this way, Cannon and this project continues to build community among Indigenous people.

Cannon believed in people’s ability to connect with and understand his work because of the shared, common humanity it revealed. Cannon’s seductive color palette, figurative paintings, and powerful messages compel us to look closer and think harder. Our curatorial, interpretive, and design directions engage deeply in Cannon’s visions of a complicated America and create opportunities for genuine personal reflection and connection. The capacity to create change in individual understanding and acceptance of other worldviews and lived experiences increases through empathy, and amplifying the intangible aspects of T.C. Cannon’s art points us toward a more connected, empathic society. A remark in the PEM guest comment book speaks to this idea: “My heart breaks, stays, takes responsibility. I am changed.” Through a curatorial practice steeped in empathy, respectful inquiry, and inclusion, we can create a new paradigm for how museums build better bridges between

Indigenous art and artists, complex histories and issues of social justice, and our diverse audiences.

Notes

¹ Throughout this essay, I have capitalized the word “Native” even when not used in conjunction with the word “American” (i.e. Native art, Native people, Native communities, etc). While referencing a person’s specific tribal affiliation(s) according to the current terms used by tribes is always preferable, this usage of the word “Native” reflects the preference of many Indigenous people who are of this place we now call the United States. Some prefer Native without American because it points to the quantity and diversity of Native people without being subjugated as American. Some prefer Native nations over Native American, which points to tribal sovereignty and self-governance. For more on the topic, see Linda Tuhawai Smith’s *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Zed Books, 2012, 2nd edition).