

PETER BLUM GALLERY

Wall Street International
ART

Carry a Song, Disrupt an Anthem

Nicholas Galanin at Peter Blum Gallery, Manhattan
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Nicholas Galanin, *The American Dream is Alie and Well*

Cultural anthropology was established at the height of British imperialism and reflected the racist ideology justifying colonization. E.B. Tylor and J.G. Frazer believed that systems of magic, religion and science revealed an evolution of the human mind, showing peoples of the past and non-urban folks of the present to be “savage” and just a stage toward the development of the white race and its achievements. Anthropologists now seem to believe that (in a nutshell) hunter-gatherers prefer animism/shamanism, farmers prefer magic and city folks like religion, because those belief systems work best for those environments and corresponding emotional exigencies. There is no evolution from one to the other.

By creating a sculpture of a human head from a thick anthropology book, Nicholas Galanin points to the gap between the experience of the Indigenous person, the meaning and gratification derived from that life, and attempts by academia to examine the Indigenous and to what end they aim this analysis. Ties to the natural environment, and the beliefs, stories and communities engendered by those ties, cannot be conveyed adequately through anthropological methods. There is much for us to learn by studying Indigenous cultures:

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e.g. how shamanism and magic work for many societies or how overpopulation and environmental destruction were fueled by an economic system that divides and exploits. Attempts by a self-described “developed” culture to study the Indigenous will often implicitly categorize their behavior as exotic and backward. When Galanin presents a textbook gutted through the creation of a facial sculpture, he implies that an outsider will never capture the soul of the Indigenous person.

Not grasping the dynamics of the Indigenous experience has not been a problem in the West. From the 1880s through the 1930s there was a huge market in Europe for Tlingit totem poles. Europeans could not possibly understand what they meant, because the poles reflected clan history, kinship systems, accomplishments and meaningful stories. But they loved the ambiguous creativity. Galanin has a totem pole camouflaged, as it were, with a Victorian floral design. The Thunderbird at the top represents power, transformation, transcendence and was often an omen of warfare. Hidden within the floral design, therefore, is an otherworldly threat of vengeance. In another piece Galanin has a totem pole which has been broken up and gilded. The fragmentation results from the Western craving to possess and profit by the beautiful.

Galanin also mashes up Indonesian-made Alaskan masks and presents the pulp as a new type of mask. This mirrors a responsibility for Indigenous artists to expose the inauthentic which is not tied to the culture or dances of the people. He is destroying the attempt to fetishize the masks and to present them shorn of the potency they derive in actual use. He also reveals this in his monochrome series titled *Let Them Enter Dancing and Showing Their Faces*. Many museum exhibits show objects apart from their uses in ceremonies and dances. As Galanin writes: “Dancing in our culture is to move as our ancestors moved. There is much to be learned in this space where we combine time, song, ceremony and community, and breathe life into our mask, headdresses, and hats, our at’oow.”

In one image showing the meaningless appropriation of an Indigenous culture practice, we see Princess Leia side by side with a Hopi girl with a squash blossom whorl in her hair. Bjork also seemed to use this whorl on one of her album covers. The squash blossom was an important fertility symbol used in a winter dance between a male Hopi hawk youth and a hawk woman of marriageable age. The blossoms are spread around the ground to represent and hasten the rebirth of vegetation. For Bjork and Leia, well, it made them look cool. One can be reminded of how the punks began using the Mohawk hairstyle. Of course, it was actually the Pawnee who adopted that style in order to make it more difficult for their warriors to be scalped.

We also see an icon with the head of a shaman’s mask, in lieu of the visage of Jesus, implying we can only imagine the shaman through the lens of our own cultural history and the religion we were taught. So we might look with contempt on the shaman, due to the contempt shown toward shamanism by Christian missionaries who considered the performances to be shams when, in fact, the shaman is the central cultural, spiritual and medicinal figure in many indigenous societies and highly valued for his/her usefulness.

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Perhaps as a snide response to Trump removing prayer rugs from the White House or by Trump's belief that Islamic prayer rugs have been discovered at the US border, pointing to the infiltration of terrorists, Galanin presents his own American prayer rug. The white-noise emanating from a TV may refer to the ethical system of a consumerist society which does not encourage moral transformation or rising to a higher level of humanity, but instead justifies virtually any kind of abuse one feels like committing for the sake of self-indulgence. In *The American Dream is Alie and Well*, the "v" is deliberately missing and this is the type of décor, a polar bear rug covered by an American flag, we might see in longhouses once the Ghost Dance is begun again and the earth is renewed and reclaimed by the Indigenous. It is the image of a conquered economic system, which now seems dominant and indestructible.

The Indian Removal Act of 1830 pushed Native Americans farther and farther west until it became clear that whites wanted the land that Indians had been pushed onto. This led to the assimilation movement reflected by the Dawes Act of 1887. Native Americans were to be taught to value the ownership of individual parcels of land and their children were to be sent to dominant culture schools. The most famous was the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania – its most famous alumnus was Jim Thorpe. Galanin carves Tlingit designs on the types of handcuffs often employed to forcibly remove children to these schools representing the efforts made during the era of the Dawes Act to save and preserve Indigenous culture at all costs. The children were taking their culture with them into this new hell.

Galanin also presents a deer hide painting of the land once occupied by the Lenape tribe, now burrowed though by the New York City subway system. One sees green parcels of ersatz parks created by landscape artists to provide tranquil spaces folks can go into and leave safely as a respite from their city lives. One also sees markings where the upper crust live and are protected by the NYPD. The piece is called *Land Swipe* because the land was swiped from the Lenape and because a swiping gesture is required to get into the subway system using an MTA card. Police would often hide behind pillars, during the Bloomberg era, and wait for economically poor New Yorkers to jump turnstiles so as to ticket and criminalize them, not caring that spending over \$5 for a short round trip ride was just too much for many people. There is also a deer hide painting as an escape plan for artifacts from Indigenous cultures that are being held at the Met Museum. These pieces cannot be understood apart from their cultural contexts, are often held in storage and are just waiting for a return to their proper circumstances in a transformed world.

In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer's attempt to prove an evolution of the human mind inadvertently turned many open-minded Westerners onto the magical practices of non-city-dwellers. Many were taken by the ingenuity, creativity and wonder of the rituals and ceremonies described by Frazer so that, ironically, many folks began to value the culture of Indigenous folks and dispute the evolutionary theory on which cultural anthropology was initially established. This early effort by the early anthropologists backfired as they gave us a new perspective from which to judge our own crimes and ignorance. The critique provided by Galanin and other Indigenous artists should change our overall orientation to Indigenous folks and compel us to focus on the factors which caused us to arrive at such a perilous point in human history.