Teacher Resource: Carl Beam

September 18 – November 16


Collection of Ann Beam. Photo © Harquail Photography
About Carl Beam

Carl Beam (1943-2005) was a powerful, internationally acclaimed contemporary Canadian artist of Anishinaabe descent. In 1986, Beam’s The North American Iceberg became known as the first work by a First Nations artist to be purchased by the National Gallery of Canada for the collection of contemporary art, thus opening the door for a new generation of First Nations artists to enter.

The exhibition covers the physical diversity of Beam’s works while exploring his investigation into the metaphysical aspects of western and Indigenous cultures. The exhibition is organized around five main themes: The Columbus Project, an immense body of work which challenges historically dominant assumptions and re-examines the meaning of Columbus’ arrival in North America and its long-term repercussions for the Indigenous peoples of the Americas; Plant Communication, Margins: Food / Shelter and The Whale of Our Being touch on Beam’s study of the relationship between humans and their environment; and Crossroads, a meditation on fame and celebrity that was the last series of pieces Beam worked on.

Beam is renowned for working with photography and collage in an aesthetic style that was more akin to the expressive layering of American pop artist Robert Rauschenberg than the traditional forms of Anishinaabek “Woodland School” painters such as Norval Morrisseau (1932-2007), however, Beam’s art engages his Anishinaabek traditions through its recognition of the important role of dreams, the place of spirit helpers, and the lessons of his Aboriginal ancestry. At the same time, it builds intellectual bridges between the philosophical thinking of Western and Anishinaabek traditions.

Featuring 48 of Beam’s most remarkable works, this exhibition is an opportunity to view a selection of his large-scale paintings, ceramics, constructions, and video that cover his entire artistic career. This exhibition is accompanied by an extensive 140-page catalogue, Carl Beam: The Poetics of Being, available for purchase in the Gallery Shop.

Organized by the National Gallery of Canada

School Tours presented by SaskTel

Links to National Gallery of Canada: Carl Beam


National Gallery of Canada: Exhibition highlights

http://www.gallery.ca/beam/en/40.htm

National Gallery of Canada: Artwork and Artists: Carl Beam

http://cybermuse.gallery.ca/cybermuse/teachers/plans/works_artist_e.jsp?mkey=42659&lessonid=44
To Beam, art is a door, a way of reaching a place where he can speak lyrically about what matters to him.

- Joan Murray

Combining Passages of Text and Images

Beam was concerned with the metaphysical. He approached this through Western and Eastern philosophy, especially Zen Buddhism, and his own understanding of Anishnaabek teachings on the nature of being.

His work often took on the form of koans – a form of writing that has its origins in Zen Buddhism. By asking questions and using thought processes that appear illogical, an alternate state of mind can be achieved, allowing one to gain insights that might not otherwise be accessible.

Beam often combined a passage of text with images to create a new kind of koan; one that is read both literally and figuratively. (1)

*Koan – a Zen Buddhist riddle used to focus the mind during meditation and to develop intuitive thinking (Encarta Dictionary)*

**Discussion:** What factors determine who we are, what we believe in, and who we will become?

What choices do we make in life? What determines how we make our choices?

**Collage Activity**

Flip through magazines and newspapers. Allow your mind to wander freely. Take note of words and images that attract your attention. Start to collect images and words randomly. Start to divide the collection into themes. For each theme determine a question. For example, a selection of tree and landscape images might suggest the question, “How do I feel about the natural environment?”

Make a list of words associated each question.

Start to organize your images and words into a composition. Develop your composition until you feel you have created an interesting combination of images and words. This can be the finished work, or use it as a sketch to further develop your ideas. You may wish to try using one of the Transfer Print processes described further on in this resource.

Give your finished work an interesting title, one that perhaps addresses the initial question.
The Columbus Project

The year 1992 marked the quincentenary of Christopher Columbus’ “discovery” of a “New World.” Several art exhibitions were organized to provide artists of Aboriginal descent the opportunity to question the politics of colonization and the resulting decimation of Indigenous populations throughout Central, North and South America.

This inspired Carl Beam to create a large body of work that questioned assumptions of superiority of one societal worldview over another.

What is a worldview?

Worldview: A comprehensive view or philosophy of life, the world, and the universe.

*It is the view of life that shapes how people interact and respond to the world around them; it influences, shapes and interprets what people experience and provides them with a sense of vision for the future.* (2)

Teaching Treaties in the Classroom p. 470

Here is a link to the National Gallery of Canada’s Cyber Muse for Teachers. Follow the link and examine the painting, Columbus Chronicles. Read the provide interpretation.

http://cybermuse.gallery.ca/cybermuse/teachers/plans/artwork_e.jsp?lessonid=44

Read and discuss the provided Theme, Composition and Interpretation.

What does this artwork tell us about Beam’s feelings regarding the impact of colonization?

Curator Elizabeth McLuhan called Carl Beam “an artist of eloquent anger.” What do you think this means?

**Definition of ELOQUENT** (Meriam-Webster Dictionary)

1: marked by forceful and fluent expression <an eloquent preacher>

2: vividly or movingly expressive or revealing <an eloquent monument>

Viewing the work of Carl Beam provides many opportunities to consider the challenges of a post-colonial nation. After your tour of the exhibition discuss the following questions:

What is Carl Beam’s cultural heritage?

What does he tell you about his identity?

What does he tell you about his culture?

What does he tell you about the history of Aboriginal people?
How does he further the interests of First Nations people?

Is the artist breaking down stereotypes and biases about First Nations people?

Can a consideration of past injustices change the way we view the world? Can you experience a shift in perception, or “worldview” from the experience of looking at art?

Activity: Eloquent Anger

If you were to choose a subject for which you feel strong emotions, what might it be? How do artists depict strong emotions? Search for examples. You may also wish to consider other art forms such as music and dance.

Create a visual presentation calculated to focus attention, or alter viewers’ attitudes regarding a relevant theme. Collect materials and images to present your idea. Combine these in an interesting way – consider using the photo-transfer techniques described further on in this resource.

Food and Shelter

Beam’s work related to food and shelter elaborates on the deep connection between Beam’s art practice and his life. He was interested in gaining back some of the knowledge to be learned from plants and a mode of life more in tune with natural forces and the earth, both literally and figuratively.

To this end Beam and his wife Ann began working in ceramics, appreciating the sustainability of an art practice derived from the earth. They also built an adobe house. They formed the bricks from the soil of the land where Carl’s grandfather had lived at M’Chigeeng on Manitoulin Island.

Images of the house and studio built by the Beams and some of the process of making adobe bricks can be seen in the painting, New World Koan (1996 – 97)

Image of New World Koan


In 1997 Beam had an exhibition titled, Margins: Food/Shelter. At the Opening Beam invited viewers to sample corn soup. He also distributed packaged seeds of the “Three Sisters” – corn, beans and squash – with instructions on how to grow them.

Activity: Botanical Watercolour Lesson for Children

Here is a fun, simple art activity for young children that will also encourage attentiveness to nature.

http://www.classic-play.com/art-school-botanical-watercolor-lesson/
Display the botanical watercolour paintings. Make posters and invite guests. Prepare and present packages of seeds to invited guests.

Here is a list of the top five seeds to give as gifts:


**Plant your own “Three Sisters” Garden**

If you have a 10’ x 10’ area that you can use to plant a garden, research the legend of the Three Sisters and read the “How to Grow” information. Plant the seeds indoors in the spring, then transplant to grow your own garden of corn, squash and beans, or send seedlings home with students for use in family gardens or in a local community garden.

How to grow the Three Sisters

http://www.reneesgarden.com/articles/3sisters.html

The legend of The Three Sisters

http://www.ncmuseumofhistory.org/collateral/articles/F05.legend.three.sisters.pdf

Activity: Make Your Own Garden Plant Markers


**The Whale of Our Being**

Beam’s concerns regarding the connection between humankind and the plant world expanded with the body of work titled *Whale of our Being*. Here he started to comment on our responsibility as human beings within a global ecology.

Beam’s imagery of whaling becomes a metaphor for our failure to live in harmony with the animals on which we so heavily rely.

*For Beam, the Whale becomes the means to contain experience and discuss the world we live in... The Whale of our Being includes whatever has happened to the whale, which in some kind of way happens to everything else. Maybe to our collective disappearance in the world.* (3)

To better understand this theme in the exhibition research what is happening to the whales.

Much of the following information has been adapted from The Learning circle: Classroom Activities on First Nations in Canada published by Indian and Northern Affairs.

First Nations and the Environment - from the Learning Circle, Ages 8 - 11, Unit 6

Traditionally, First Nations cultures believe that human beings were a part of nature, not separate from it. Everyone had a responsibility and a role as the Earth’s stewards.

“If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people.”

- Chief Seattle, 1854

The Circle of Life

The First Nations recognized one of the simplest – but frequently ignored – facts of life: that everything in nature is connected. This concept is often described as the “circle of life.” In our modern age it can be difficult to grasp the complexity and interrelatedness of all living things.

Sharing with Animals and Nature

It is important for students to understand the importance of sharing the earth with plants, animals and other wildlife. This activity should get students to think about behaviour that is harmful to wildlife and the environment and behaviour that is beneficial.

Ask students to make a list of actions that are harmful to wildlife and a list of activities that are good for the environment. Some of the harmful things could be:

- Picking up baby wild animals in the environment
- Carving initials in trees
- Driving cars or motorcycles over fragile land
- Unnecessary digging up plants form the earth
- Destroying birds’ nests
- Polluting the air with factory emissions
- Polluting lakes, rivers and oceans with garbage and sewage

Some of the positive things could be:

- Planting trees
- Walking or biking with your friends instead of driving
- Composting garbage
- Turning off the tap when brushing your teeth
- Using both sides of paper before taking it to be recycled
- Repairing and recycling toys instead of throwing them out
- Turning off lights and appliances when they are not needed

Ask students to draw a picture of things they know about or have seen happen that would hurt or help wild plants or animals.

Ask the students how they think animals react when people treat the environment badly or well.

**Animal Poetry**

Crucial to the traditional world-view of many First Nations is their appreciation that human beings are connected in the circle of life with all other species, and that each species has its own set of special knowledge and skills enabling it to live in the world.

Ask everyone to think about an animal, preferably a wild animal. Students may wish to close their eyes for a few minutes, so that they can imagine the animal living in its natural environment.

When they are finished, they should write their poem, either about the animal, or from the animal's perspective.

**Rebuilding the Circle**

Launch a class project for improving the wildlife habitat in the community. Discuss with the class how the wildlife in their community can be better taken care of. Students should be able to make a list of the wildlife that they encounter daily. Divide the class into groups that are assigned to examine birds, squirrels, small creatures on the ground such as ants, beetles and crickets and creatures in the ground such as worms. Ask each group to identify the different ways it can contribute to the health of its particular wildlife.

**OUR FAMILY WALL** from the Learning Circle, Ages 8 - 11, Unit 5

Ask students to bring photographs of their parents, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, Grandparents or other people whom they consider part of their family. Each student should have a small space on a bulletin board where they can post their pictures. The wall need not be limited to pictures; students should be welcome to post anything else which symbolizes their families. For example, if the family likes going to movies on Sunday, perhaps the students could put up a ticket stub. Or, if the family is First Nations and the child is a member of a clan, he or she could post a picture of the clan animal.

Using the photographs from Our Family Wall, photocopy images and create a family collage using the Transfer Print using Matte Medium technique described in the techniques section of this Resource.
This can be done individually for each student, or as a classroom project on a very large background of watercolour paper or canvas.

Techniques

The earlier works in the exhibition demonstrate Beam’s proficiency and skill with traditional drawing and painting techniques. In the painting The North American Iceberg Beam makes a radical shift. He began painting on the back of Plexiglas surfaces and incorporating photographic techniques. He used several different methods to incorporate photographed images including direct application of photo emulsion, screen printing and transfer prints.

Transfer Prints

The following site provides easy instructions for making a Transfer Print using Packing Tape:

http://www.instructables.com/id/Packing-Tape-Image-Transfers/step5/Finished/

You can also make a Transfer Print using Matte Medium. This requires a photocopied image, matte medium (available at any art store) and a paper that will not fall apart when wet.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7DFuJt3mvw

Notes: