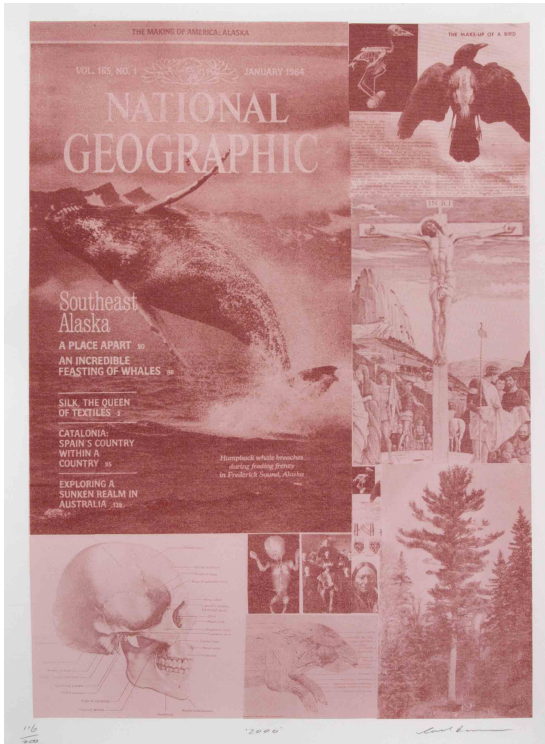




Carl Beam
2000, 1998, and *Fragile Skies*, 1995
Essay by Sky Goodden
2014



Left: Carl Beam, *2000, 1998*, silkscreen on Stonehenge paper. Gift of the Winberg Foundation.

Right: Carl Beam, *Fragile Skies*, 1995, silkscreen on Stonehenge paper. Gift of the Winberg Foundation.

Through a wide variety of media, and a vast collection of unlikely connections, Carl Beam's body of work forms an invented lineage of images fastened to one another like so much family history. He pulls from his dual ancestry (born in 1943 to an Ojibway mother and an American father, on Manitoulin Island); from his experience in and out of residential schools and later, the academe (Beam graduated from the University of Victoria and did graduate work at the University of Alberta); and from temporal and narrative dimensions that extend both behind and out in front of his lived experience, proffering fictions and rebuffing known truths. Indeed, Beam's practice bears out his understanding of lived contradictions, dualisms, and the inside/outside realities of a successful Aboriginal artist working in a generation in which such a thing was unprecedented in Canada. He emerges with a visual language singularly his own. Whether working in print media, paint, or sculptural collage, Beam borrows from others' archives to communicate complicated histories but also those as yet unimagined. Where he draws on colonial chronicles in order to repossess them—with all the steadfastness and melancholy that objective implies—Beam also performs the sleight of hand, even the whimsy, that forming connections from disparate things entails.



In 2000 (1998), Beam juxtaposes a *National Geographic* cover featuring a humpback whale with scientific images—a diagram of a human skull, an X-ray of an infant, an image of a bird’s skeleton, and a diagram of the musculature of a rabbit—further juxtaposing these with a Renaissance image of Christ on the cross. A single line from the *National Geographic* cover speaks to the great mystery that forms their plate: “a place apart.” I’m reminded of art historian Allan J. Ryan’s observation that “Beam has few equals when it comes to displaying a mastery of ironic magic. It is perhaps a talent inherited from Nanabush, the trickster of Ojibway mythology.” (1)

Beam’s silkscreen *Fragile Skies* (1995) typifies the ambiguity with which his images should be read. He offers the immediate option to regard them superficially, like a thin slice of associative tissue. In this way, Beam’s visual associations trip along the work’s surface. We see a selection of frames from *A Moose Walking, Photogravure after Eadward Muybridge* (1887), placed above a picture of industrial smokestacks. The pairing of dynamic forms—both antlers and columns metronomically piercing the sky—could be enough to elucidate the work’s title. We might draw the conclusion that the smokestacks endanger the lives of wildlife—that this is the fragility to which Beam refers (for surely the antlers and the columns provide more than a visual punctuation, and portend some devastating collision). But offsetting the visual analogy of these two images is a third, a portrait of a woman in the bottom right corner of the work. It may be an ancestral photo, or one merely found and positioned like a placeholder for inferred familial affiliations. The woman sits atop a stone fence against a rural backdrop. It is this woman’s countenance—one of benevolence and shy regard—that calls us to look further at the aesthetic associations among the easy citations. It’s in these joints that Beam wields his quiet magic, where networks are implied, encouraged, and yet deviously resisted.

Allan J. Ryan describes Beam’s “ironic imagination” as flowing “from a worried heart.” (2) But pushing through this personal anxiety, and Beam’s propensity for trickster-like contrariety, his iconography is best read through a text of his own, a line that accompanies his late painting, *Big Dissolve* (2001): “the memory of an incomplete poetry.” Beam’s collaged archives invite the viewer to find new meaning, the borders between images suddenly bursting with new life. Where the pursuit of historical forgetting meets the desire for personal memory, Beam’s poetry grows like unnamed fauna, a province where image reigns best.

(1) Allan J. Ryan, “Carl Beam,” Canada Council for the Arts Website: The Governor General’s Awards in Visual and Media Arts – 2005, accessed March 17, 2014, <http://pggavam.canadacouncil.ca/htmlfixed/Archives/2005/we127542526423735000.htm>

(2) Ibid.

This essay was commissioned with funding from the Government of Ontario.