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ANCESTRAL FUTURES

New Mexico-based artist Cannupa Hanska Luger uses cloth, clay and mirrors to explore and confront Native American history, call out looming eco atrocities and ask us to reconnect with the earth. He tells America Meredith about his vision for tomorrow. Photography by Brandon Soder





Photo: Gabe Fermín, White Sands, NM, courtesy the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery

Juniper and piñon cover the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in Northern New Mexico where Cannupa Hanska Luger, his wife Ginger Dunnill, and their two children have made their home. In this high desert, Luger has a modest two-storey studio, a prefabricated shed in which he dreams and constructs sculptures, regalia and installations to keep up with his dizzying exhibition schedule.

Luger is a citizen of the Three Affiliated Tribes of the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota. These tribes, including the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara people, traditionally balanced farming with hunting buffalo along the Missouri River in the Northern Plains. He is also of Lakota ancestry from his father's side; the Lakota people are historically a nomadic tribe of the Northern Plains who followed the buffalo. Born and raised on the Standing Rock Reservation in the Dakotas, Luger grew up in a hands-on environment of art and ranch work, so he has always created.

His multifaceted process, which includes performance, film, installation and social practice, is rooted in ceramics and textiles. In his unheated studio, a small electric kiln on the ground floor is dedicated to ceramics. Tubs of found garments and industrial scraps await their turn at the sewing machine on the second floor. Through crafting, he wants humanity to reconnect with the earth.

Luger first encountered ceramics at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, where he earned his BFA in 2011 and was my student in early Native American art history. The sculpting professor Karita Coffey first introduced him to ceramics. 'Karita noticed that I was producing more than her curriculum asked for, so she just gave me a table in the back of the studio space and said, "Go nuts",' the artist recalls, during our conversation and tour over a video call in February. She said: 'The greatest instructor you're ever going to have is the clay itself.' Before that introduction, Luger was a painter and graffiti artist. 'With acrylic, you have instant gratification,' he explains. 'Clay does not provide that. You think you're on the right path, then you put it into the kiln and the thing explodes. Clay has shifted my personality traits. As much as you push and manipulate the material, the material does the same to you.'

The artist picked up sewing and other textiles through necessity, while living in the Pacific Northwest in the 1990s. 'There was a need for hats,' he says. 'In that post-grunge era in Seattle and Olympia, I was around all these wet hippy kids. One evening we sat down and crocheted.'

Luger downplays his sewing skills: 'By and large, I repurpose existing things. How I use the afghan is the same way that we would use hides. You'd have to hunt the animal, then transform it into something beautiful so that nothing

Left: Future Ancestral Technologies: New Myth (regalia detail, ceramic, felt, repurposed afghan), 2021, part of Luger's evolving multiplatform project first launched in 2015



Snake: photo Craig Smith for Heard Museum

'Clay has shifted my personality traits. As much as you push and manipulate the material, the material does the same to you'

is wasted. I found it's easier for me to hunt Americana in the post-consumer wastelands – thrift stores.'

Working with others is a hallmark of Luger's career. Breakthrough works included the *Mirror Shield Project* (2016) and *Every One* (2018). A widespread collaboration, the former provided large mirrors to water protectors and Native activists resisting construction of the Dakota Access oil pipeline on the Standing Rock Reservation. The mirrors reflected to the amassed police and security forces their own actions. Videos documented performances with the mirror shields, which are now used worldwide in non-violent protests. *Every One: Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, Queer and Trans Relatives Bead Project* (2018) called attention to a crisis in the United States and Canada. Luger guided hundreds of people to handcraft 4,000 clay beads in varying shades of grey. When strung together, the curtain of beads created an image inspired by *Sister*, a photograph by Kali Spitzer, created to bring individuality back. These shared efforts rehumanised the statistics of murdered and missing Native relatives; each bead represents a lost life. The Museum of Art and Design in New York awarded Luger its inaugural Burke Award for craft in 2018, and increasingly

prestigious awards and fellowships have followed. The pandemic did nothing to slow Luger's exhibition schedule, but it did shut off many in-person events. 'I don't see anybody. I don't leave my little mountain unless I'm leaving the state,' he says. He is now focused on three major art projects, all exhibiting this year: *Future Ancestral Technologies: We Survive You*, a performative exploration of Indigenous futurisms in the landscape; *(Be)Longing*, sculptural installations honouring the 'buffalo nation'; and *A Way Home: Mandan Clay Continuum*, revitalising ancestral pottery practices for Mandan people. While these subjects might seem wildly diverse, from Luger's perspective they are deeply entwined. 'Indigenous futurisms is science fiction but does not look at time on a linear stage,' he explains. 'We are a point in time, and we radiate in every direction, because we have generational knowledge.' He launched *Future Ancestral Technologies*, an evolving

Opposite, clockwise from top: *This Is Not A Snake / The One Who Checks & The One Who Balances*, 2017-20; Luger hand-building in clay; ephemera in the artist's studio including ceramics and a photo of his wife, Ginger Dunnill, and his dog, Bandit



In the late 19th century, millions of buffalo were slaughtered in two decades. '(Be)Longing' embodies the artist's ongoing research into this atrocity

multiplatform project, at the Plains Art Museum in 2015. His artist statement describes a future narrative in which 'Indigenous people develop sustainable, migration-based technology to live nomadically in hyper-attunement to land and water'. Luger envisions a future where humans reconnect with their environment and heal the wounds of extractive economies. His artwork in *Environmental Injustice: Indigenous Peoples' Alternatives*, on view throughout August at the Musée d'Ethnographie de Genève in Switzerland, also addresses these needs head on.

'A component of *Future Ancestral Technologies* is the repurposing of our detritus,' explains Luger. He fashions spectacular regalia from materials such as thrift-store afghans and industrial felt. Two figures wearing these fantastical suits and comically oversized horns travel across landscapes of mountains and sands. Videos and still photographs document travels of these 'monster slayers', loosely based on the Hero Twins that appear in tribal oral histories throughout North America. During the pandemic, images of his Hero Twins on highway billboards in *Future Ancestral Technologies: We Survive You* became a way to safely reach audiences.

The Hero Twins' horned headdresses allude to the cultural

significance of the buffalo, or American bison. Luger has worked with buffalo imagery for years and researched its history. In the late 19th century, the United States federal government hired mercenaries to slaughter the buffalo to force Plains tribes onto reservations. Millions of buffalo were killed over two decades. *(Be)Longing*, a sculptural installation and video, embodies the artist's ongoing research into this atrocity. He crafted stylised, life-sized buffalo skeletons from small ceramic and steel components, which he embedded in riverine areas with red streamers of cloth to represent bloodshed. Aerial drone footage linked the loss of buffalo with environmental collapse.

'Through my research around the eradication of buffalo, I've come across so much information around what happened with the bones afterwards,' he says. 'They would ship out the bones, first to be incinerated, to produce two materials: bone black pigment and calcium bicarbonate, used as fertiliser. There was so much of it that they even

Below: *(Be)Longing*, 2019, mixed media, life-size buffalo skeleton installation. Opposite: Cannupa Hanska Luger wearing components of his regalia from his video *Wathéca*



(Be)Longing: Kate Russell Photography



Luger fashions spectacular regalia from thrift-store material

used it in early steel production,' he says. 'So the trains and skyscrapers of the industrial revolution of America were a contribution of buffalo.' The nutrients from millions of 19th-century buffalo continue to exist today. 'This slow-releasing fertiliser is *still* providing calcium to the breadbasket of this country.'

His artworks about the attempted eradication and survival of the buffalo nation will be on show this autumn at the Amarillo Museum of Art in Texas. These installations highlight how integral buffalo are to the health of the entire Great Plains ecosystem. 'There can be no true restoration without roaming herds of buffalo,' he writes.

Cultural restoration guides another of Luger's projects, *A Way Home*. 'My aunt has been dreaming about how we used to make our clay bodies,' he says. 'She knows nothing about clay. She came to me because she knew I worked with the material and told me her dream, and I was like, "That's a recipe for a clay body".'

Hoping to recuperate the ceramic practices of his Mandan ancestors, Luger secured a fellowship from the Center for Craft in Asheville, North Carolina, where he will exhibit this autumn. Northern Plains artefacts, some archaeological, some from the early 19th century, were spirited away to museums on the East Coast or flooded in Native communities by hydroelectric projects in the early 1950s.

Mandan women were once prolific pot makers, using sand-tempered black clay they built up with a coiling method. They incised and cord-marked these before pit-firing them in buffalo dung. 'But that story was broken by smallpox,' Luger says. Smallpox epidemics in 1781 and 1837 devastated the Mandan and Hidatsa.

The COVID-19 pandemic has slowed but not stifled his work. He has been able to harvest clay from North Dakota and has experimented with hand-processing and hand-building. 'The most important component I wasn't able to realise is engagement with my community. It's one thing to learn all of that as an individual, but it doesn't mean anything unless it can be transmitted, and celebrated, and have the people add to the relationship of clay.'

Luger looks forward to collaborating with his family this summer: 'We're going to try out some of these clay bodies and do some pit firing.' The ceramics and documentation of the process will form this autumn's exhibition at the Center for Craft, *M̐h̐q̐ pm̐k̐* (mee-HAAHP-mahk), meaning 'nowadays' in Mandan. He wants to merge old and new techniques and share these with fellow Mandan people to propel this art form forward.

The future belongs to those who can envision it. Luger invites us to join him in sculpting a better tomorrow together. cannupahanska.com



Right: Cannupa in front of his studio in Glorieta, New Mexico. He is wearing a headpiece honouring the American buffalo, made from repurposed felt and foam, for a forthcoming regalia series