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Artifacts to Artworks

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Salem, Mass.

The paradigm-shifting "Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art," at the Peabody Essex Museum, begins with a rude surprise: The first wall text that visitors encounter is a parental warning—breaking the mold of customarily child-friendly displays of totem poles and headdresses.



Vancouver Art Gallery, and Brian Jungen and Catriona Jeffries Gallery

'Cetology' (2002) by Brian Jungen

The eye-popping introductory work that "may not be suitable for young children" is Cree artist Kent Monkman's fiercely satirical, homoerotic "Théâtre de Cristal" (2007), occupying the entire first gallery. It features a 14-foot-high "tipi," fashioned from delicate strands of crystal beads, accompanied by an artist-written wall text parodying Caucasian ethnographers' condescending descriptions of "noble savages." Visitors entering the glitzy enclosure will be confronted by a fleetingly full-frontal silent movie in which the artist's drag-queen alter ego, "Miss Chief Eagle Testickle" (sic), has "her" way with two white men—drunken hunks clothed (and unclothed) in

loincloths. This heavy-handed, jejune exercise in score-settling, which resonates with the literal meaning of "shapeshifting" in Indian cultures (the ability to transform into other beings), is a jarring start to a thought-provoking show.

Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art

Peabody Essex Museum

Through April 29

No newcomer to major exhibitions of Indian art, the PEM owns one of the most venerable (since 1799) and largest (15,000 objects) such collections, and is particularly strong in Northwest Coast art. Displaying 73 works from an international group of lenders, "Shapeshifting" drew many of its most important

historical pieces from the PEM's own trove. Two of its great treasures are a boldly patterned, finely woven fringed Chilkat blanket (c. 1832) and a subtly modeled, vibrantly painted Kaigani Haida female wooden mask, c. 1827, which the PEM received that same year from a seafaring captain.

"Shapeshifting" dutifully includes works by the traditional and contemporary artists who are regulars in Indian installations, including the celebrated potters Maria and Julian Martinez, from the San Ildefonso Pueblo, and Hopi artist Nampeyo, as well as the obligatory photo-bedecked Bently Spang contemporary take on the traditional Cheyenne warshirt. But the PEM has also unearthed some rarely displayed pieces, including (from the National Museum of Natural History) a painted hide shield cover from the Upper Missouri River (c. 1820) recording a Plains Indian's trancelike vision of grizzly bear claws and (possibly) a rain of bullets.

Another seldom-displayed object is a peculiar pine-and-plaster "Sphinx" (c. 1875) by Simeon Stilthda, hauled out of storage at the British Museum for this show. This hybrid has an Egyptian-inspired headdress and forelegs, but a Haida-style face. It exemplifies one of the show's underemphasized strengths—revealing the effect of cross-cultural influences on American Indian artists.

"Shapeshifting" shakes things up by eschewing the usual organizational principles of Indian displays—region, tribe, chronology, medium. Curator Karen Kramer Russell has instead opted for a thematic approach, mixing up pieces according to amorphous, overlapping rubrics: "Changing" (imaginative innovation); "Knowing" (beliefs and worldview); "Locating" (identity and place); and "Voicing" (self-expression, sometimes politically charged). This casts a new light on objects that have typically been admired more for their beauty, technical accomplishment and function than for the concepts, preoccupations and beliefs that they embody.

For example, one of the smallest but most ravishing works in the show—a Northeastern artist's rare drawstring deerskin pouch from the late 1600s to mid-1700s—wasn't merely a repository for tobacco. Its delicate porcupine-quill embroidery invested it with the power to "ensure the survival of [a hunter's] family and community," as its label explains. The show's catalog further elucidates the cosmic and spiritual symbolism of the design and decoration of the pouch, which regrettably is displayed so only one side can be savored.

The show's strong video installations give it a fresh feel, illuminating how some Indians have reconciled their split identity, rooted in tribal traditions and the wider contemporary world.

Dance fans will delight in the ingenuity and artistry of "We Will Again Open This Container of Wisdom That Has Been Left in Our Care" (2006) by Tlingit/Aleut artist Nicholas Galanin. He orchestrates the convergence of two cultures, in two consecutive video clips—one showing David Elsewhere, a loose-limbed modern dancer, moving fluidly in his stark studio to a tribal song; the other showing Tlingit dancer Dan Littlefield, in mask and traditional raiment, stepping with rhythmic deliberation to a contemporary electronic score. Mr. Littlefield's backdrop is a tribal community house's traditional wooden wall screen, which Mr. Galanin helped to carve more than a decade ago.

Also riveting is Kevin Lee Burton's "Nikamowin (song)" (2007), a syncopated paean to the beauty of the fading Cree language, accompanied by evocative video images that career through rural and urban landscapes. For me, the most moving work was by Iñupiaq/Athabaskan artist Erica Lord. This two-channel video meditation, "Binary Selves" (2007), ricochets between her alcoholic father's frozen Alaskan hometown and the world beyond. Ms. Lord finds strength through traditional music, in a virtuosic throat-singing contest with herself.

Pigeonholing such richly nuanced works according to preconceived themes diminishes them. Ms. Russell chose monumental installations that embody all four of her themes to introduce and conclude the show—Mr. Monkman's "Théâtre de Cristal" and, in the final gallery, Dunne-Za Nation artist Brian Jungen's endearing yet conceptually complex "Cetology" (2002), a ceiling-

suspended, 41-foot whale skeleton, uncannily constructed from plastic pieces of common lawn chairs and intended to evoke not only natural-history displays but also contemporary ecological concerns.

In fact, most of the PEM show's offerings—not just its high-profile bookends—are open to multiple layers of interpretation. The achievement of "Shapeshifting" is to shift our notions of pots and pouches from alluring and useful objects to conveyors of personal and metaphysical wisdom.

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