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Two collections become one in ‘On This Ground: Being and Belonging in America’ at PEM

In its newly unveiled permanent installation, the museum merges Colonial and Native American art to tell a single national narrative that’s both brutal and brutally honest

By Murray Whyte Globe Staff, Updated March 17, 2022

Joseph Blackburn’s portraits of the Fitches are hung next to works from Steve Locke's "Homage to the Auction Block" series at the Peabody Essex Museum’s "On This Ground: Being and Belonging in America." ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

SALEM — What might be the most important element of the Peabody Essex Museum’s wholesale redux of its collection of American art isn’t an artwork at all. It’s a video of Elizabeth Solomon, a member of the Massachusett Tribe at Ponkapoag, delivering stern words at the outset, and a plea. “You are in native space,” she says. “Be mindful of how you interact with that place, and the Indigenous people who belong to it.”

Last year, PEM said the top-to-bottom do-over of its American galleries would merge its collections of Colonial and Native American art into a holistic national narrative, however uncomfortable that may be. And with Solomon as its unofficial greeter, the museum is as good as its word.

Right up front, the foundational trauma of American nationhood is on explicit display: Next to Solomon is a fist-size basalt sculpture of a bear from around 1500, believed to be by an artist of the Pawtucket band of the Massachusett, whose lineage here stretches thousands of years; opposite them is a 1750 portrait of Judge Richard Saltonstall by the artist Robert Feke, paired with the original Massachusetts Bay Colony Charter from 1628-29 declaring it sovereign territory of King Charles, relatively brand new. In the same space, "In This Place (An American Lyric)," by the contemporary poet Amanda Gorman, is posted on the title wall, limning the country's fractious history — and present — of race relations.

It feels significant that Solomon is moving, living, breathing — an emblem of an ancient culture that has survived colonial plunder long enough to seize a moment of rejuvenation —while Saltonstall, whose family claimed masses of land in Essex County that had belonged to Indigenous people, is static and long dead. The juxtaposition is not coincidental. Together, they're a sign of what's to come.

What's to come is heavy — because what else could it be? — but not heavy-handed, illuminating but never pedantic. It's a broad experiment with a permanent footprint and, in this country, likely the first of its kind. The Museum of Fine Arts has made a handful of interventions with Indigenous art in its own American galleries, while the Hood Museum at Dartmouth College recently opened "This Land: American Engagement with the Natural World," a purposeful merging of Indigenous and Colonial art from the 19th century to present day that closes June 5. But none has taken quite the leap that PEM has.

The entire display falls under an enigmatic title: "On This Ground: Being and Belonging in America," a stage set for the various dramas of the ages without historical parameter or structure. PEM's reinstall was inspired by the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa and the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, which in 2017 merged their Canadian historical and Indigenous art collections on the occasion of the country's 150th anniversary.

It was a delicate moment. A national Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the country's residential school system for Indigenous children had just delivered its final report on the endemic psychological and physical abuses the schools had inflicted on students for generations. Hundreds died unreported, as several recent grisly discoveries have shown. Both museums committed to never again separate Canadian and Indigenous art; the division, they felt, had built a narrative of conqueror and conquered that diminished Indigenous culture while sanitizing the exploits of the colonists.

That's the context for "On This Ground," too, and PEM curators Karen Kramer and Sarah Chasse take care to strike an uneasy balance throughout. There are moments of call and response, though few and carefully chosen (Solomon set against Saltonstall is one). Community advisers, both Indigenous and not, suggested to Kramer and Chasse that each culture have its own moments. The result, as Chasse described it to me on a recent walk-through, is a double helix of representation that diverges and converges episodically.

Time here is fluid, and contemporaneity vital. PEM has a long history of engaging with contemporary Indigenous art, and it reinforces that priority early on: In a section titled, simply, "We Are the Land," a wall is devoted to the photographic practice of Will Wilson, a Diné (Navajo) artist whose portrait series of Indigenous people is built as a response to the dramatic manipulations of Edward Curtis more than a century ago.

Curtis famously staged his images of Indigenous people and often shot his subjects against backdrops, draining them of context; through his lens, they became more like objects on display to fit the "vanishing race" narrative he helped popularize. Wilson shoots his subjects in their homes and invites them to dress as they like. He calls the series "Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange"; the pictures here are from a chapter commissioned by PEM in 2019, when Wilson worked with local members of the Wampanoag nation.

The curators could have put Curtis's pictures alongside Wilson's — his work, inevitably, comes up later in the display — but instead made space for Wilson and his subjects to just be. It's a dignified choice, allowing Wilson to not be defined by opposition. Instead, he shares space with Indigenous works spanning 10,000 years in a sparsely beautiful gallery.

Nearby, millennia-old, hand-hewn stone fishnet sinkers hover like spirits in a glowing vitrine; bisecting the space is Ho-Chunk artist Truman Lowe's 2003 work "The Seine of Journeys," a spare composition of slim branches polished smooth, as if by water, and arranged loosely like a net. On a plinth below it sits a 19th-century Wampanoag nation eel trap woven of wood and bast, its natural aesthetic kin.

For objects like these, PEM uses an attribution gaining momentum in the museum world: "Artist once known." It's a subtle but significant shift. For much of their history, North American museums have seen objects like these as artifacts, not art — crudely utilitarian, not culturally significant. It's the basis of a longstanding ethnographic bias that subordinated Indigenous culture to what colonialists imagined to be the exalted status of their own. It's taken decades, but the myopia of that view has become clear as museums have consulted more broadly with the people they purport to represent within their walls. For generations, colonial culture has been content with its ignorance, perhaps smugly so. Little gestures like this matter a lot.

"On This Ground" still has plenty of time for old favorites: A sizable footprint is devoted to favorite son Nathanial Hawthorne; and the re-creation of Cleopatra's Barge, the extravagant yacht of Salem merchant George Crowninshield Jr. that he sailed around the world in the early 19th century, has never looked better. Artists like Curtis, of course, are here as well, though not unchallenged. Staring down a small selection of his pictures is Kiowa and Caddo painter T.C. Cannon's "Indian with Beaded Headdress," 1978, a glowering figure in a lawn chair under a bright blue sky.

There are moments of complicated beauty: A passage of paintings of landscapes and coastlines by the likes of Fitz-Hugh Lane and Georgia O'Keeffe would be blithely gorgeous if not for the presence of Cherokee artist Kay WalkingStick's "Hovenweep #331," 1987, a rough and gestural depiction of a desert landscape. It's set next to a 1919 painting of a New Mexican arroyo by one of the Ashcan School founders, John Sloan. The display evokes a paradox at the heart of American being, of a subtle alliance across the colonial divide of artists who see this land as sublime. It hints at communion, alien in a national history fractured along racial lines.

Salem itself is a crucible of American colonialism, a critical hub of international trade and the wealth it brought, all of which equips the museum to tell that story in particulars that feel universal. That's important: Colonial wealth was built in land and labor, both achieved by exploitive practices. It's not in the character of this display to be confrontational, but some things can't be lightly drawn.

A powerful segment uses Alison Saar's mesmerizing 2012 sculpture "Weight" as pretext: It's a ramshackle set of scales fashioned from rope and chain. On one side, a cluster of careworn objects — old pots and pans, a pair of flaking boxing gloves, and significantly, a leg shackle — counterweigh a young Black girl, seated on a swing.

It's a chilling portrait of a human being as a commodity, measured in object value —something embedded deeply in the American story, a foundational ugly truth. But the curators weave Saar's statement into specific historical context bound to the very docks not a mile from the museum's front door. On an adjacent wall are two lavishly painted portraits from 1760 by Joseph Blackburn, of Timothy Fitch and Eunice Brown Fitch, a wealthy Salem merchant and his wife.

We know that Fitch traded in enslaved people as well as other goods, a fact the curators make abundantly clear. On the table in front of him is a letter, an order being delivered or filled, and he grins with self-satisfied pride at his own success. Next to him, an elaborate mahogany desk with delicate inlays glows, arm's length from "Weight"; mahogany, a tropical hardwood, would have been harvested by enslaved people in the Caribbean. Beside his wife, the curators inject a dose of very hard recent Boston history: two works from Steve Locke's "Homage to the Auction Block" series.

Locke repurposed Josef Albers's "Homage to the Square" series, a totem of mid-20th-century, high-Modernist formal purity, to highlight a dark stain on American history. Into Albers's squares, Locke inserts a rectangular form with a ragged corner — the footprint of an auction block, where enslaved Africans were sold on arrival to the nascent colonies. Locke proposed a life-size bronze version of the form as a permanent memorial to enslaved people just outside Faneuil Hall in 2019; it had the support of the city, but he withdrew it amid a swell of public controversy, making for a crushing moment in the city's civic culture. It's hard to be reminded, but also necessary: This is America, too.

Given all the trauma, is it wrong to change key? The curators don't think so, and I agree. It's a stroke of ebullient genius that one gallery here is filled with music and voices, video and fashion, vibrancy and joy, almost all of it by Indigenous artists. The final space is a nod to the next generation: paintings of mothers and children by Will Barnett, John Greenwood, and Apsáalooke (Crow) artist Wendy Red Star.

Cleaving it in two is a brand-new acquisition by the Seneca artist Marie Watt, whose joint exhibition with Cannupa Hanska Luger is right upstairs. It's a bright red patchwork of fabric embroidered with words and phrases — "ancestor," "auntie," "earth," "sun" — made in a communal sewing circle that Watt convened for the occasion. It will give you the warm fuzzies; soft and arrow-shaped, it's a vector of positivity for a better future. Maybe Gorman's words, on the wall at the outset, say it best: "it is here, it is now, in the yellow song of dawn's bell/ where we write an American lyric/ we are just beginning to tell."

America is burdened by trauma. That won't change. But being honest about it gives power to something just as American: hope.