

CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER

BLUE RAIN GALLERY

130 LINCOLN AVENUE, SUITE C, SANTA FE

CANNUPA HANSKA LUGER FIRST IMPRESSED US WITH HIS BEGUILING SHOW OF

feathered boom boxes, which he later publicly smashed on the floor. This daring usurpation followed by the enthralling civic destruction left the Santa Fe art world and the Native community at large in keen anticipation of his next move. This town is still full of dogged Native stereotypes and we are thirsty for a fresh Native artist to destroy them.

Emerging from a family of artists, Luger never felt that art was beyond reach. In 2011, he graduated with honors from the Institute of American Indian Arts, where the idea of a Native singularity appeared screamingly defunct. The lack of descriptors for “Native American” is a huge driver for Luger’s socially conscious work. Native identities, informed by a multitude of landscapes and histories, are as varied as America itself. Luger himself was born in North Dakota, in 1979, on the Standing Rock Reservation and sites his “genetics” as Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota, Austrian, and Norwegian, possibly with an amalgam of additional European blood. Americans are predominantly mutts, and yet, embarrassingly, there is still a challenge in accepting indigenous artistic tradition or innovation into the mainstream consciousness without oversimplifying it to a fault—mostly from lack of education and resources—and Luger is proudly opening the floodgates. He does it with humor, artistic maturity, and a candid affect that’s not just unintimidating but contagious.

Over Indian Market, Blue Rain Gallery had a notably rigorous production of daily shows, amid which Luger debuted two new bodies of work—both of doll-size ceramic and felt humanoids. The first series, *Regalia*, categorizes ceremonial animal masks worn on human bodies. Each figure wears a different animal, for which he or she is named, and something about these frank classifications feels purposefully simple.

Regalia: Wolf is a black female, naked, with claws. Her arms are reaching up to the gods or ether. A wolf’s head in white porcelain, circled by a burly brown coif, covers her head. She is part wolf, part woman, absolutely mythical and talismanic as she waves into the air. *Regalia: Lynx* is a proud warrior whose puffed chest pushes upward, and although he has a man’s body, his extremities are also animalistic: furry feet, claw fingernails, and a feline face framed by orange feathers. He has the defiance of a rapper and the face of a sage—a caricature, and yet dead serious—who offers himself as a target verging on martyrdom. Luger says of the *Regalia* series that the “regalia itself has a life and purpose more than simply the object being worn; it is an extension of a way of being.” The characters thus fully assume their embodiments.

Ironically, Luger intends the second series, *Once Upon a Time There Were Humans*, to be in the far future when we humans are extinct and animals try to honor us. The fairytale title immediately prompts folklore and a fabled heritage. The dolls are solid and heavy and their sewn felt exterior makes them unbearably tactile, but disappointingly

not stuffed animals. Their inspired visages, stoic little bodies, and anthropomorphic surprises encourage imagination nonetheless. *Once Upon a Time There Were Humans: Antelope* looks like a funny little Frenchman with a black upturned mustache and beady eyes. His figure is bulbous and meets the ground with no feet. Grey rectangles slump as arms and his ceramic face looks more like a tooth than a man. Almost abashedly revealing are *Antelope*’s gracefully long horns wrapped in bright stripes of red, white, and grey felt. He is mythic and allegorical.

Once Upon a Time There Were Humans: Lion also has a mustache, but his is stubborn and downturned beneath a broad triangular nose. Layered squares and triangles of felt radiate from his face to create a bountiful mane that flowers from his stout, cylindrical body. A red tail loops around from his backside. He is gruff, but encourages sympathy—reminiscent of the

Cowardly Lion. *Once Upon a Time There Were Humans: Owl*’s mask is downright Neolithic in black porcelain that’s primitively shaped and attached to the brown felt head with a piece of string.

Luger’s new work is an expertly executed consideration of Native identities that does not tease out specific traditions in any educative way, but then again, Luger is fond of using stereotypes. By representing the very thing that the artist aims to shatter, and by doing so with poignancy and whim, he communicates to a broader cultural audience in the same way that Takashi Murakami iconizes his own Japanese cast of characters. In Luger’s newest work, animals and humans tango in a singularly Native enigmatic web and stereotypes that aren’t stale are no longer stereotypes.

—HANNAH HOEL

Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Once Upon a Time There Were Humans: Narwhal*, ceramic, felt, and steel, 11" x 6 1/2" x 8", 2014

