

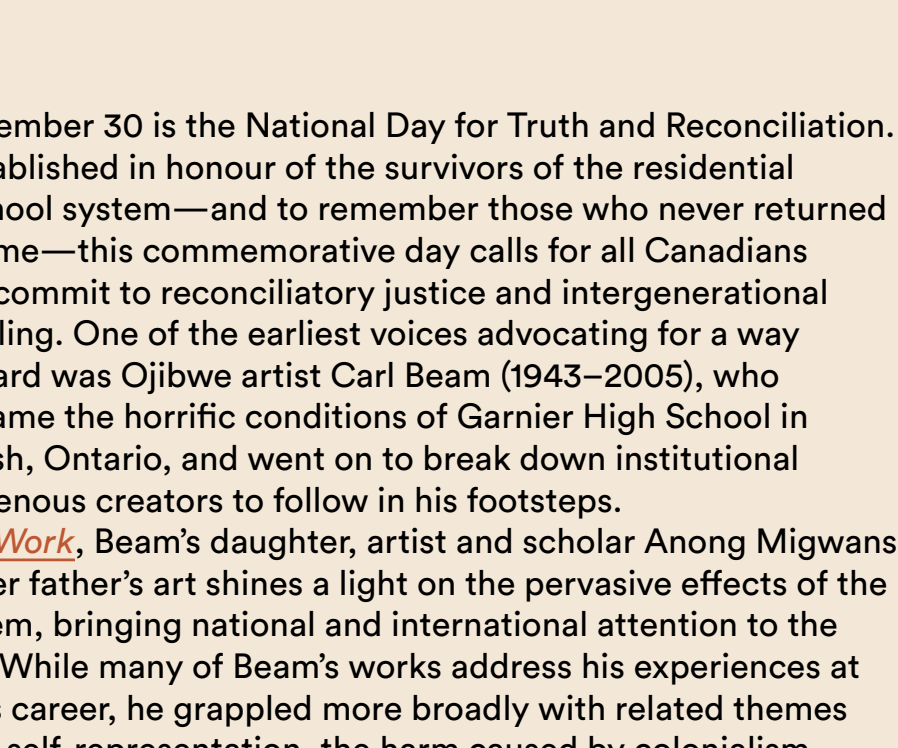
SEPTEMBER 27, 2024

# THE TRAILBLAZING LIFE AND WORK OF CARL BEAM HIS ART AND ACTIVISM

*As the first open-access, online publication about one of the country's most revered artists, Carl Beam: Life & Work by Anong Migwans Beam addresses how the visionary creator's work is a call for a better, fairer world.*



Carl Beam in front of *Exorcism in Thunder Bay*, 1984, photograph by Ann Beam.



Carl Beam, *The North American Iceberg*, 1985, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.



Anong Migwans Beam

September 30 is the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. Established in honour of the survivors of the residential school system—and to remember those who never returned home—this commemorative day calls for all Canadians to commit to reconciliatory justice and intergenerational healing. One of the earliest voices advocating for a way forward was Ojibwe artist Carl Beam (1943–2005), who overcame the horrific conditions of Garnier High School in Spanish, Ontario, and went on to break down institutional barriers for other Indigenous creators to follow in his footsteps.

In *Carl Beam: Life & Work*, Beam's daughter, artist and scholar Anong Migwans Beam, recounts how her father's art shines a light on the pervasive effects of the residential school system, bringing national and international attention to the stories of its survivors. While many of Beam's works address his experiences at Garnier, throughout his career, he grappled more broadly with related themes concerning Indigenous self-representation, the harm caused by colonialism, and alternative conceptions of time. His mixed-media masterpiece, *The North American Iceberg*, 1985—the first deliberate purchase of a work by a First Nations artist for the National Gallery of Canada's contemporary art collection—encapsulates Beam's lifelong critique of colonial ideologies. In the spirit of moving forward while looking back, today, we examine this complex work and its legacy with excerpts from *Carl Beam: Life & Work* by Anong Migwans Beam.

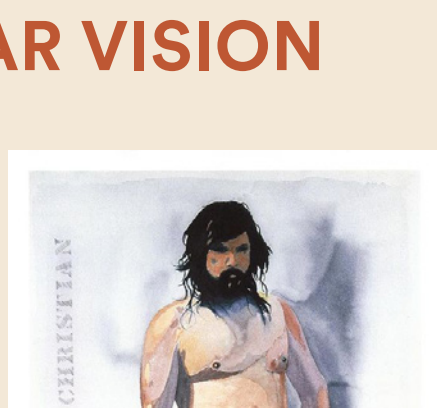
Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

## A SURVIVOR OF EDUCATION



Carl Beam (right), his mother, Barbara Migwans (left), and his baby sister, Marjorie, on Manitoulin Island, 1946, photographer unknown.

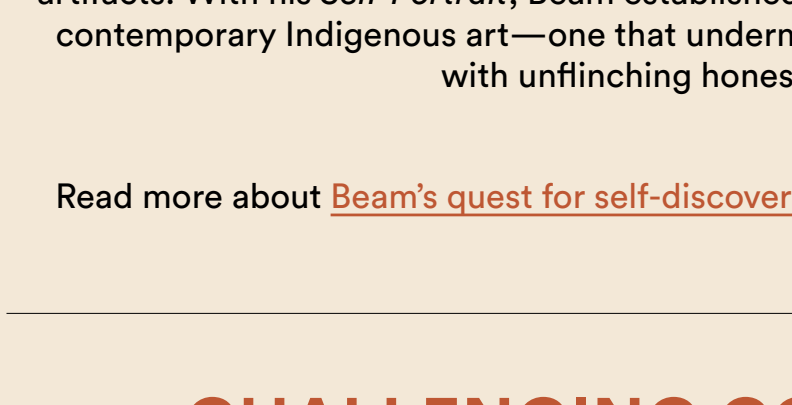


Carl Beam, *Forced Ideas in School Days*, 1991, Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa.

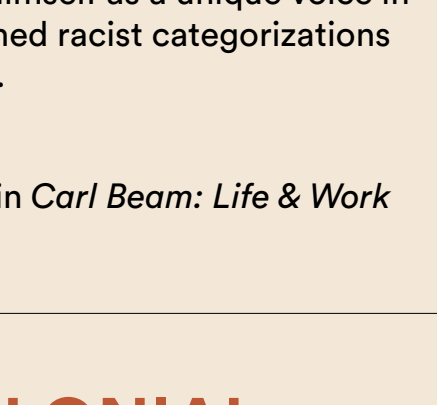
Born on May 24, 1943, Carl Beam (above left, with his mother) was raised in M'Chigeeng First Nation on Manitoulin Island, a sacred place for the Ojibwe and many other First Nations. As a child, Beam learned about his ancestral history and how to interact with the natural environment from his mother, Barbara Migwans, and others in his community. However, his youth was marred by the abuse he suffered as a student at Garnier High School, an all-boys boarding school operated by the Jesuits, where he was sent at the age of ten, and where he endured firsthand the assimilative cultural and physical violence of Canada's residential school system. The artist's experiences at Garnier would later drive his continual questioning of Western systems of thought as he condemned the harmful effects of religious dogma in works such as *Forced Ideas in School Days*, 1991 (above right).

Read more about [Beam's early years](#) in *Carl Beam: Life & Work*

## FORGING A SINGULAR VISION



Fritz Scholder, *Indian Power*, 1972, Denver Art Museum.

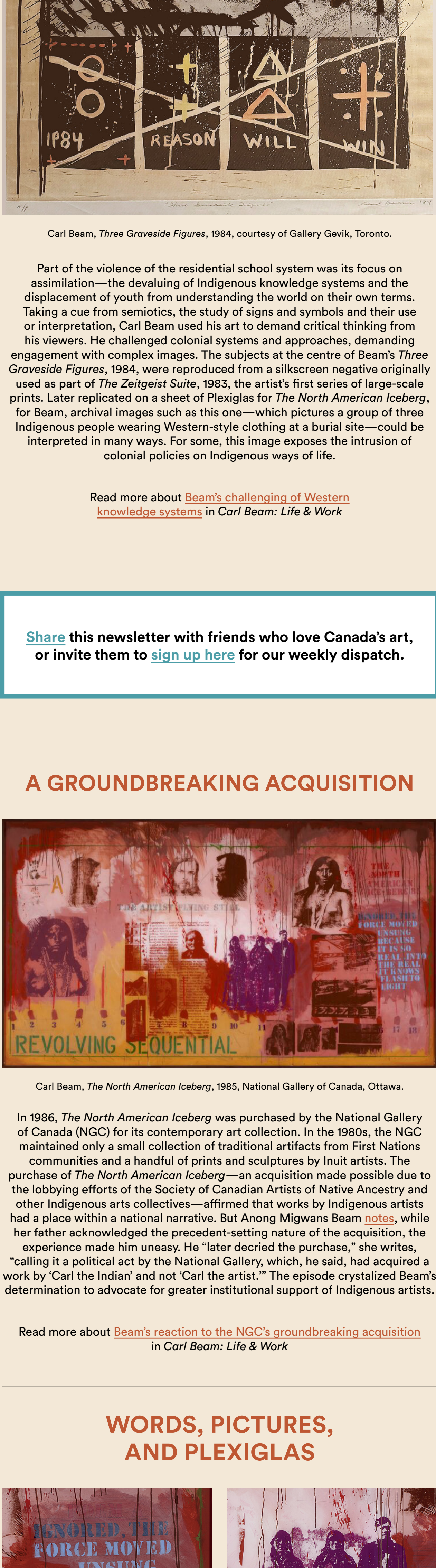


Carl Beam, *Self-Portrait in My Christian Dior Bathing Suit*, 1980, private collection.

As an act of rebellion, Carl Beam left Garnier High School in Grade 10 and received his diploma through correspondence courses. In his spare time, while working labour-intensive jobs in Ontario and British Columbia, Beam took up painting to process his childhood trauma and to reclaim a sense of agency. His early style, which was declarative and self-representational, was inspired in part by Luiséio artist Fritz Scholder (1937–2005), whose works like *Indian Power*, 1972 (above left), were forceful deconstructions of harmful stereotypes of Indigenous peoples. Many of Beam's early-career works, such as *Self-Portrait in My Christian Dior Bathing Suit*, 1980 (above right), combated the centuries-long treatment of Indigenous subjects in art as ethnographic or anthropological artifacts. With his *Self-Portrait*, Beam established himself as a unique voice in contemporary Indigenous art—one that undermined racist categorizations with unflinching honesty.

Read more about [Beam's quest for self-discovery](#) in *Carl Beam: Life & Work*

## CHALLENGING COLONIAL IDEOLOGY



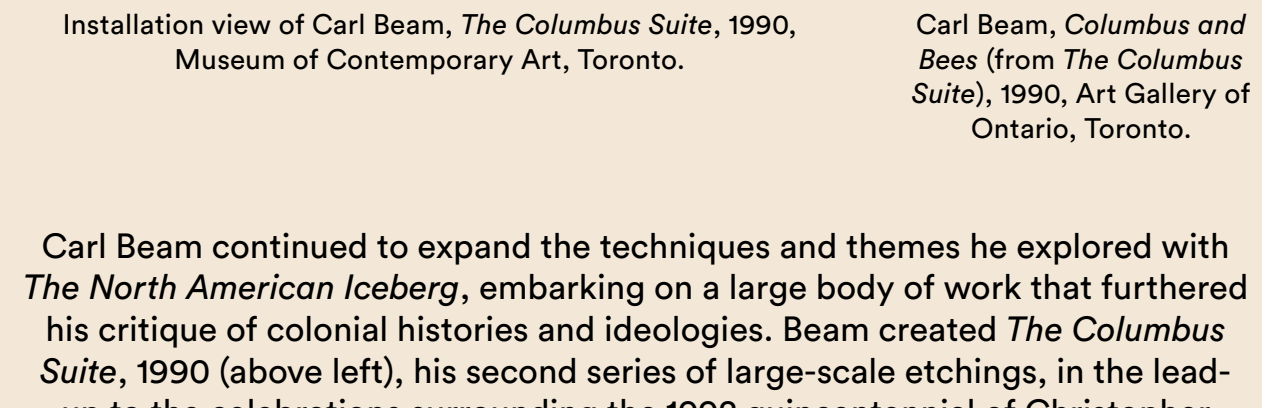
Carl Beam, *Three Graveside Figures*, 1984, courtesy of Gallery Gevik, Toronto.

Part of the violence of the residential school system was its focus on assimilation—the devaluing of Indigenous knowledge systems and the displacement of youth from understanding the world on their own terms. Taking a cue from semiotics, the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation, Carl Beam used his art to demand critical thinking from his viewers. He challenged colonial systems and approaches, demanding engagement with complex images. The subjects at the centre of Beam's *Three Graveside Figures*, 1984, were reproduced from a silkscreen negative originally used as part of *The Zeitgeist Suite*, 1983, the artist's first series of large-scale prints. Later replicated on a sheet of Plexiglas for *The North American Iceberg*, for Indigenous people wearing Western-style clothing at a burial site—could be interpreted in many ways. For some, this image exposes the intrusion of colonial policies on Indigenous ways of life.

Read more about [Beam's challenging of Western knowledge systems](#) in *Carl Beam: Life & Work*

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## A GROUNDBREAKING ACQUISITION

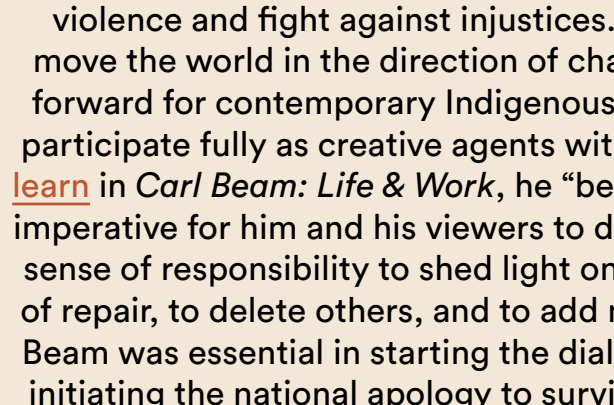


Carl Beam, *The North American Iceberg*, 1985, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

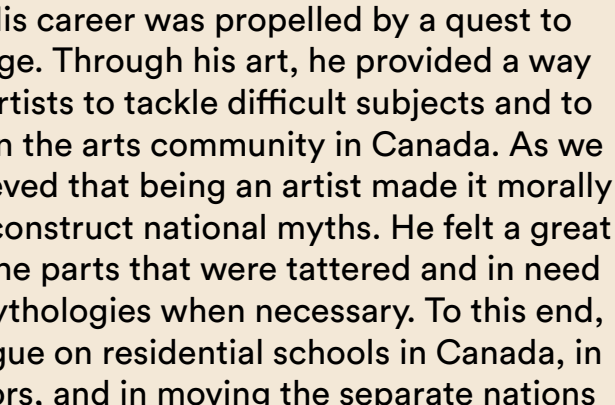
In 1986, *The North American Iceberg* was purchased by the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) for its contemporary art collection. In the 1980s, the NGC maintained only a small collection of traditional artworks from First Nations communities and a handful of prints and sculptures by Inuit artists. The purchase of *The North American Iceberg*—an acquisition made possible due to the lobbying efforts of the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry and other Indigenous arts collectives—affirmed that works by Indigenous artists had a place within a national narrative. But Anong Migwans Beam [notes](#), while her father acknowledged the precedent-setting nature of the acquisition, the experience made him uneasy. He “later decried the purchase,” she writes, “calling it a political act by the National Gallery, which, he said, had acquired a work by ‘Carl the Indian’ and not ‘Carl the artist.’” The episode crystallized Beam's determination to advocate for greater institutional support of Indigenous artists.

Read more about [Beam's reaction to the NGC's groundbreaking acquisition](#) in *Carl Beam: Life & Work*

## WORDS, PICTURES, AND PLEXIGLAS



Carl Beam, *The North American Iceberg* (detail), 1985, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

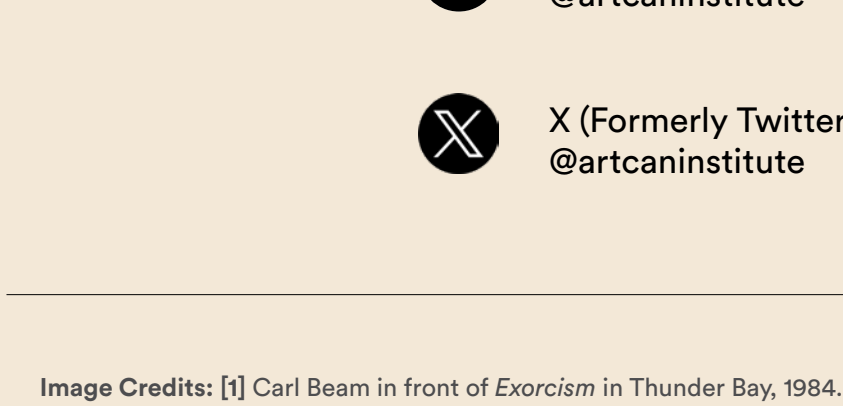


Carl Beam, *The North American Iceberg* (detail), 1985, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

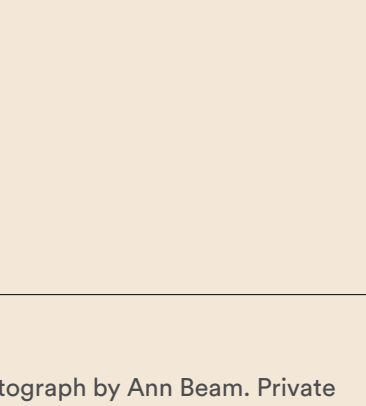
With *The North American Iceberg*, Carl Beam took many significant conceptual and technical leaps. The work is groundbreaking not only due to the precedent-setting nature of its acquisition by the National Gallery of Canada, but also for the innovative methods Beam devised while working with Plexiglas. Unlike his paintings on canvas, *The North American Iceberg* was created by applying its components in reverse order, starting with the photo-transferred images in the foreground and then adding the cursive and stenciled texts backward so that they are legible to the viewer. Beam finished the work by building up that background with acrylic paint. As Anong Migwans Beam [writes](#), it was a “fun trick” for him to operate in this unique fashion, in which “he always challenged technical rules and counted on chance and innovation to push himself forward artistically.”

Read more about [Beam's The North American Iceberg](#) in *Carl Beam: Life & Work*

## THE COLUMBUS SUITE



Installation view of Carl Beam, *The Columbus Suite*, 1990, set of twelve etchings on Arches paper (eleven shown), 83.8 x 109.2 cm (indicative) or 109.2 x 83.8 cm (portrait) (each), Courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto.



Carl Beam, *Columbus and Bees* (from *The Columbus Suite*), 1990, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

Carl Beam continued to expand the techniques and themes he explored with *The North American Iceberg*, embarking on a large body of work that furthered his critique of colonial histories and ideologies. Beam created *The Columbus Suite*, 1990 (above left), his second series of large-scale etchings, in the lead-up to the celebrations surrounding the 1992 quinquennial of Christopher Columbus's “discovery” of the Americas. *The Columbus Suite* is a visual catalogue of signs and symbols, including portraits of some of history's most important leaders and thinkers juxtaposed in radical mashups that invite the viewer's endless speculation. An example of Beam's signature collage-making strategy, *The Columbus Suite* reveals that the notion of discovery ushered in centuries of destructive government policies. Like *The North American Iceberg*, it is a forceful reclamation of Indigenous knowledges and histories.

Read more about [The Columbus Suite](#) in *Carl Beam: Life & Work*

## LEGACY AND INFLUENCE



Carl (right) and Anong Migwans Beam (left) in front of the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, 1992, photograph by Ann Beam.

As a residential school survivor, Carl Beam felt it necessary to call out systemic violence and fight against injustices. His career was propelled by a quest to move the world in the direction of change. Through his art, he provided a way forward for contemporary Indigenous artists to tackle difficult subjects and to participate fully as creative agents within the arts community in Canada. As we [learn](#) in *Carl Beam: Life & Work*, he “believed that being an artist made it morally imperative for him and his viewers to deconstruct national myths. He felt a great sense of responsibility to shed light on the parts that were tattered and in need of repair, to delete others, and to add mythologies when necessary. To this end, Beam was essential in starting the dialogue on residential schools in Canada, in initiating the national apology to survivors, and in moving the separate nations towards an eventual reconciliation.”

Read more about [Beam's legacy](#) in *Carl Beam: Life & Work*

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