

A Visual Autobiography: The Self-Portraits of Carl Beam

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To anyone familiar with the art of Carl Beam (b. 1943), the image of Beam himself is easily recognizable. Beam's self-portraits appear within his dense multi-imaged compositions (paintings, prints, ceramics, constructions) that combine images from the news, art, history and science textbooks, family photographs and archival photographs of Natives. Beam identifies himself as Ojibwa. Occasionally, he is the only subject of his work and inevitably confronts the viewer with a defiant glare. Beam's fragmented compositions resemble collages but are executed with photo-transfer techniques. The face and figure of Beam have been an on-going subject for more than twenty-five years now and these photos are candid and truthful, rather than posed or idealized. This abundance of self-portraits indicates that he is not only interested in exploring his own physical appearance, but also in inserting himself into a variety of roles by costume, pose, activity or context. Beam's exploration of himself as an independent subject is a novel one in the contemporary Canadian art world and recognized recently when he received a 2005 Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts. In Beam's works, as these self-images demonstrate, Beam is created and re-created according to the changing paradigms of contemporary life.

As a subject, self-portraits have provided artists, such as Rembrandt and Van Gogh, with an opportunity for self-scrutiny. Andy Warhol used transfer techniques to reproduce himself in multiples. However, these self-portrait artists produced compositions with the portrait as the sole subject. Beam, on the other hand, usually combines his own image with other topics, texts, and visual representations, which

emphasize that the physical aspect of his person belongs within a larger context and one, which is fragmented and disjointed. There is no consistent narrative. In other words, Carl Beam is exploring not only his physical self, but also examining his cultural, environmental and political relationships. This is unusual. As Norbert Lynton has said, “Portraits are not generally associated with ideas, though of course they can be....”¹ Beam’s work demonstrates that portraits, self-portraits and ideas can coexist.

This paper aims to investigate some of Beam's self-portraits for their relationship to the tradition of portraiture and as a vehicle for exploring his self-identity. Like Rembrandt, Beam explores his own face and body in a variety of poses. Like Van Gogh, he experiments with a number of techniques. Unlike both Rembrandt and Van Gogh, Beam does not depict himself in the usual manner of artistic self-portraits, as occupational representations, holding a paintbrush or with an easel. Marc Fumaroli remarks: “The series of self-portraits painted by Rembrandt and van Gogh seem to bear out that modern idea of the solitary, tormented genius, who is as misunderstood as each of us is bound to be.”² Beam too often appears in these artworks as solitary and tormented. He is, then, joining a long tradition of artist’s self-portraits. Yet making portraits now is ironical. Modernism, among its many exclusions, declared the portrait “obsolete.”³ Robert Rosenblum, on portraiture at mid-century, declared the practice “gloomy,” “moribund” and even “dead.”⁴ In fact, Clement Greenberg, in conversation with Willem de Kooning, said, “It is impossible today to paint a face.” And, de Kooning

¹ . Norbert Lynton, “Portraits from a Pluralist Century,” *Painting the Century: 101 Portrait Masterpieces 1900-2000* by Robin Gibson (New York: Watson-Guption, 2001), 29.

² . Marc Fumaroli, “Artists and Group Portraits,” *Identity and Alterity: Figures of the Body, 1895/1995: la Biennale di Venezia, 46.esposizione internazionale d’arte* by Manlio Brusatin and Jean Clair (Venice: Marsilio, 1995), 9.

³ . Didier Ottinger, “Portrait, Mask, Hood: Otto Dix, Jean Hélicon, Philip Guston,” *Identity and Alterity: Figures of the Body, 1895/1995: la Biennale di Venezia, 46.esposizione internazionale d’arte* by Manlio Brusatin and Jean Clair (Venice: Marsilio, 1995), 55.

⁴ . Robert Rosenblum, *On Modern American Art: Selected Essays*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 205.

replied: “That’s right, and it’s impossible not to.”⁵ Robin Gibson of the National Portrait Gallery believes “as long as there is humanity, portraiture...will continue to be a primary force in the visual arts.”⁶ In many of Beam's self-portraits, the images are not painted; instead, they are photographs transferred by serigraph or etching or emulsion. Or when Beam paints himself, he is already familiar to the viewer from the photographs.

This visual biography of Carl Beam with world events, cultural heroes, historical figures, personal history, the environment, Native symbols, and issues of contemporary concern, such as land claims and residential schools, is presented like a puzzle; the fragments of each composition add a facet or two to the overall construction of Carl Beam, the person and the artist. To approach this end, this paper considers the self-portraits, first of all, with Beam as a role player where costumes and props change his appearance. Secondly, to present the artist as concerned citizen concerned with issues involving historical events and current affairs such as assassinations, nuclear power, rockets launching into space and important Native leaders of the past.

Carl Beam as Role Player

Beam introduces variety into his own depictions by adopting different roles or wearing costumes. Here Beam presents himself in mug shots, as fashion model, as Necromancer and as John Wayne. These layered artworks also expand the viewer’s perception of Beam’s personality. There is more to Beam than his physical appearance.

In 1986, the National Gallery of Canada acquired its first work by a contemporary Canadian Native artist and this was Carl Beam's *The North American Iceberg* (1985).⁷

⁵ . Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968), 74.

⁶ . Robin Gibson, *The Portrait Now* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1993), 8.

⁷ . Carl Beam, *The North American Iceberg*, 1985, mixed media, 7' x 12' 3" or 216.6 x 374.1 cm. Collection of The National Gallery of Canada.

At the time, the acquisition was regarded as "a landmark event."⁸ Later, Beam said he initially thought they bought the work from Carl the artist, but then realized they bought it from Carl the Native.⁹ The painting has received much notoriety for this, but little attention has been paid to its iconography. The huge surface (7' x 12' 3"), a sheet of Plexiglas, is dense with images, including self-portraits, and texts. Sharing the same surface are a news photograph of Sadat's assassination, a rocket lifting-off, an encyclopedia entry and photograph of Geronimo, a hand-print, an eagle, archival photographs of Natives, numbers and texts which are both hand-written and stenciled. The numbers, in fact, relate to Beam's awareness of the Colonial penchant for measuring everything. *The North American Iceberg* is a fragmented composition that has affinity with a newspaper page or a wall of graffiti. The photo-transfer technique allows the inclusion of commonplace images, like those used by Robert Rauschenberg or Andy Warhol, to construct multi-faceted compositions. However, the images that Beam uses are not random, but relate to on-going themes of cruelty, devastation and impending doom.

In addition to the recognizable imagery there are splashes and drips of paint. And prevalent in most Beam compositions are texts. The largest stencil here reads: "Revolving Sequential." "The artist flying still" appears under the self-portraits and, to the right, a longer text: "Ignored, the force ... unsung because it is so real, into the real it knows flash to light." More words are painted over and not readily visible. Beam uses photo-transfers to deal with history, his history, which encompasses both Native and non-Native persons and events, of the past and present. This imagery, according to Jay Scott, summed up his life and art until 1985.¹⁰ Dana Williams comments that Beam, among

⁸. "National Gallery of Canada Acquires First Work by Native Artist," *Native Art Studies Association of Canada Newsletter*, 2:1 (Winter 1987), 1.

⁹. John K. Grande, "Carl Beam: Dissolving Time," *Canadian Forum*, 72, no. 820 (June 1993), 20.

¹⁰. Jay Scott, "I Lost it At the Trading Post," *Canadian Art*, 2:4 (Winter 1985), 39.

others, is “carrying the burden of the world.”¹¹ The collage-like format discourages visual unity in favour of fragments and the imagery enhances this because it comes from so many different sources. Overall balance is achieved by the astute arrangement of the individual elements and the use of colour to link the parts into a coherent visual whole.

Beam's title parodies the major exhibition called *The European Iceberg: Creativity in Germany and Italy Today* curated by Germano Celant at the Art Gallery of Ontario, February 8 to April 7, 1985. In organizing this, Celant emphasized the "interrelationships between creative disciplines" to exemplify "the complexity of culture."¹² Further, Celant stated: "This show is important not only because it recognizes national identity, but also because it questions the ways in which identity is expressed."¹³ Beam's art works too are about personal identity and how a Native today straddles different cultures to fit into the wider concept of national identity.

Beam situates himself amidst this array of historical and contemporary references with three photographic images, a left profile on the left, and at the upper centre, frontal and right profile views. These self-portraits of Beam are reminiscent of law enforcement mug shots. To Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, mug shots have their own cultural readings: "Frontal and side views of suspects' unsmiling, unadorned faces are shot. These conventions of framing and composition alone connote to viewers a sense of the subject's deviance and guilt...the image format has the power to suggest the photographic subject's guilt."¹⁴ As Paul Fussel asserts: "a new sense of selfhood can be tried on like a

¹¹ .Dana Alan Williams, “An Historical Overview of Contemporary Indian Art,” *New Territories: 300/500 Years After: An Exhibition of Contemporary Aboriginal Art of Canada* (Montreal: Ateliers Vision Planétaire, 1992),22.

¹². Rachel Rafelman, "The Tip of the Iceberg," *Artviews: Visual Arts Ontario*, 10:1 (Winter 1984/85), 13. [13-16]

¹³. Rafelman, 15.

¹⁴. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001, 24

costume."¹⁵ Beam could also be emulating the mock poster by Marcel Duchamp, *Wanted, \$2000 Reward* (1923) that displays Duchamp's face, both frontally and in profile. Richard Brilliant calls this an "anti-portrait." He further comments on the "interchangeability of human beings by category, and on the ultimate submergence of the self under the weight of labels."¹⁶ With Beam's use of mug shots, he literally presents himself in a different and certainly not complimentary role. He could have arranged the photographs differently, but this order emphasizes that he is a prisoner of his own heritage and the contemporary world.

Gerald McMaster states: "In *The North American Iceberg* the artist is pictured from three different angles; we become the fourth image looking at aboriginal history in this "revolving sequential." This then allows the viewer to become part of the picture, whether we are confronting the various figures staring back at us, or witnessing world events - space travel or the assassination of Anwar Sadat - or trying to suture together all the disparate images" (93). Here McMaster trips over his syntax by identifying three different views of one artist as if they are three separate persons so that the involved viewer becomes number four. It should be only the viewer and the art. McMaster does not comment on the repeated image of the woman wearing a necklace; he only concentrates on the recognizable images of the artist. That Beam appears more than once is not unusual, he does, for instance, in *Plexiglas Landscape*.

One of Beam's best-known early works is *Self-Portrait in My Christian Dior Bathing Suit* (1980), a watercolour.¹⁷ Beam, clad only in a brief bathing suit, stands frontally and full-length, glaring at the viewer. This painting has the "here-I-am" quality

¹⁵. As quoted by Eric J. Leed. *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism*. New York: Basic Books/Harper Collins, 1991, 34.

¹⁶. Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 171-174.

¹⁷. Carl Beam, *Self-Portrait in My Christian Dior Bathing Suit*, 1980, watercolour on paper, 106 x 68.5 cm. Ill. in Ryan, 1999, 46. McLuhan, 1984, cover illustration.

of self-portraiture.¹⁸ On the left side, parallel to Beam, the title is stenciled vertically; on the right, overlapping his right leg and both feet, is a hand-written cursive text, which provides further information. It states that this is an "...autobiographical work done in 1980 to validate my presence and to make sure that the work always remains explicitly autobiographical in nature, even if I have to state it in this way...." And, "as far as I'm concerned I'm the artist (among other things as this is my work. This is my work!! I am marking time through my work...." To Elizabeth McLuhan, this work challenges the preconceptions the Canadian public has of Native artists. Beam refuses to limit himself to Indian art (1982, 4).¹⁹ Allan Ryan says that Beam here "adopts a defiant warrior's stance." And further, "Beam challenges the viewer to acknowledge not only the individuality and individual experience of the artist, but also, by extension, that of all aboriginal people" (1992, 60).²⁰ To Jay Scott, this self-portrait is "hilarious" and "unflattering" as it "presents the chubby artist glowering under the Rasputin mane...."(39).²¹ Here Beam has what Didier Ottinger identifies as the unsettling quality of self-portraits – "it stares back at us...it establish[es] a dialogue with the spectator."²² Indeed, Beam has changed his persona again by posing as a fashion mode and awaits a response from the audience.

The *Self-Portrait in My Christian Dior Bathing Suit* has achieved iconic status among other contemporary Canadian Native artists who have emulated Beam's idea, but have also played up the humorous aspects of his painting. Titles such as *Carl, I Can't Fit into My Christian Dehors Bathing Suit!* (1989) by Viviane Gray and *I Couldn't Afford a*

¹⁸ . Julian Bell. "Introduction," *Five Hundred Self-Portraits* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 8.

¹⁹ . Elizabeth McLuhan, *Renewal: Masterworks of Contemporary Indian Art from the National Museum of Man* (Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay National Exhibition Centre and Centre for Indian Art, 1982), 4.

²⁰ . Allan J. Ryan, "Postmodern Parody: A Political Strategy in Contemporary Canadian Native Art," *Art Journal*, 51:3 (Fall 1992), 60.

²¹ . Scott, 39.

²² .Ottinger, 57.

Christian Dior Bathing Suit (1990) by Ron Noganosh ensure that Beam's *Self-Portrait in My Christian Dior Bathing Suit* won't be readily forgotten.²³

Another guise in an early series of self-portraits shows Beam as "Necroman," a repeated photograph of Beam concealed behind the skull of a buffalo. With his face totally hidden and wearing a business suit, he stands frontally and faces the viewer. The identity of Beam in this case is known, but certainly not recognizable to the ordinary viewer. McLuhan described Necroman: "the buffalo skull is held aloft almost ceremoniously, emphasizing the cultural continuities that do persist. But the skull is also a death's head... a warning of the dangers of living in the past."²⁴ Necroman dominates the serigraph *Ain't It Funny How Time Slips Away* (1978) and is repeated four times in the lithograph titled *Skulls?* (1978).²⁵ In the latter, there is a photograph and a caricature of the artist. Necroman also is an image repeated three times, but in two sizes, in the large *Plexiglas Landscape* of 1980; here he is positioned in the row above *Sitting Bull* and shares the same slashing diagonal line that cuts across *Sitting Bull's* face.²⁶ Elizabeth McLuhan interprets Beam's *Necroman* as "emblematic of the transformation through death experienced by Indian cultures."²⁷

Necroman disappeared from Beam's imagery after 1980, but reappeared ten years later in the etching *Self-Portrait as John Wayne, Probably* (1990).²⁸ This autobiographical work features a young boy, dressed as a cowboy, reaching for his guns;

23. Viviane Grey, *Carl, I Can't Fit into My Christian Dior Bathing Suit!*, 1989, mixed media, 193 x 61 x 193 cm. Ill in Ryan, 1999, 49. Ron Noganosh, *I Couldn't Afford a Christian Dior Bathing Suit*, 1990, oil, cardboard, Plexiglas, 142 x 86 cm. Ill in Ryan, 1999, 48.

24. Elizabeth McLuhan, *Altered Egos: The Multimedia Work of Carl Beam*. Thunder Bay: Thunder Bay National Exhibition Centre and Centre for Indian Art, 1984, 6-7.

25. Carl Beam, *Ain't It Funny How Time Slips Away*, 1978, Serigraph on paper, 63.3 x 54.0 cm. Ill in *Altered Egos*, #32, 49. Carl Beam, *Skulls?*, 1978, Stone lithograph, 77 x 101 cm. Ill in *Altered Egos*, #33, 49.

26. Carl Beam, *Plexiglas Landscape*, 1980, Acrylic, photocopy transfer on plexiglas, 186.7 x 124.5, Government of Ontario Art Collection, Sudbury. Ill in *Altered Egos*, col. pl. 17, 27 and #17, 28.

27. McLuhan, 1984, 6.

28. Carl Beam, *Self-Portrait as John Wayne, Probably*, 1990, etching on paper, 122 x 81 cm. Ill in Ryan, 1999, #16, 42.

lined up below are images of Beam that we're familiar with, including *Necroman*. Beam talks about his five-year old self: "...at that time, you didn't see any positive images of Indians doing anything. I didn't want to be the guy getting shot off the horse, dragged through the fucking mud. You had to choose one or the other."²⁹

Beam as Concerned Citizen

Beam's biographical emphasis places him within the dual cultures that are his heritage, Ojibwa and European. He combines, as always, Native ideas with those of the general Canadian population, such as traffic signals and rulers. Included too are Native symbols such as turtles, eagles and ravens as well as remnants of his university art history courses.

A more recent trend in Beam's exploration of himself is his use of his own childhood as recorded in photographs taken from the family album. In *Kilowat Hours* (1992), a group photo of Beam with his mother and new baby sister; the photo-emulsion and acrylic work on canvas has Beam's trademark drippings to partially obscure the images.³⁰ The same family photograph is repeated in *Turtle on Left* (1992) and in *Time Dissolve* (1992) along with other family photos, a portion of *The Avignon Pieta* (c1460), and film-frames of running animals.³¹ Beam has circled in red paint each image of himself. *Shadow I* (1992) repeats the group photo with Beam that is diagonally up from the centre in *Time Dissolve*, but doesn't circle his own image here. The large group photograph in *Time Dissolve* is repeated in *Semiotic Converts* (1989), where an arrow

²⁹. Ryan, 1999, 41.

³⁰. Carl Beam, *Kilowat Hours*, 1992, photo-emulsion and acrylic on canvas, 1.5 x 2.1 m. Ill in Carl Beam, *The Columbus Boat*. Curated by Richard Rhodes. Toronto: The Power Plant, 1992, #9, 14.

³¹. Carl Beam, *Turtle on Left*, mixed media on St. Armand hand-made paper, 27.9 x 38.1 cm. Ill in *The Columbus Boat*, #42, 37. Carl Beam, *Time Dissolve* (1992), photo-emulsion and acrylic on canvas, 2.1 x 2.7m. Ill in Carl Beam, *The Columbus Boat*. Curated by Richard Rhodes. Toronto: The Power Plant, 1992, #4, 9.

points to one figure in the back row with the cursive text "l'artiste."³² Another version of *Semiotic Converts* (1989) displays the school group in the lower portion of the composition under the image of a traffic light.³³ Ian McLachlan identified the traffic light as "large and threatening." And "out of the cross-referencing there comes a sense of danger that those happy-looking people might not have been fully able to escape. We learn the signs of a dominant culture so thoroughly that even when we think we're free, we may be expressing other people's meanings rather than our own - semiotic converts, in other words."³⁴ Again, the same photograph appears in *School Reunion* (1992) with the head of Beam circled while the text reads: "...what can actually be taught when the lesson is not known to the teacher." Beam did, however, learn about halos. Above, next to a standard textbook image of Columbus, a photograph has an arrow pointing to the "school where I went to school."³⁵ *Forced Ideas in School Days* (1991) presents a group of school children, including a smiling young Carl Beam, with part of a *Crucifixion* (1456-59) by the Renaissance artist Andrea Mantegna juxtaposed with the photograph of an Apache healer. The text, written in a small cursive hand, reads, in part, "we were supposed to change from being Native to non-native...." All of these images of Beam as a pupil or the participant in a class reunion are presented straightforwardly, but the titles or the short, fragmentary texts suggest that this aspect of his life was not as a rosy one. He attended a Roman Catholic residential school at Spanish, Ontario, near Espanola. At the time when these art works were produced, the problems and abuses of the residential schools were making front-page headlines in Canada. Beam adds his visual take, with barbed texts, on these issues.

³², Carl Beam, *Semiotic Converts*, 1991, mixed media on St. Armand hand-made paper, 27.9 x 38.1 cm. Ill. in *The Columbus Boat*, #29, 34.

³³. Carl Beam, *Semiotic Converts*, 1989, etching on paper, 122 x 81 cm. Il in Ryan, 1999, #105, 202.

³⁴. As quoted by Ryan, 1999, 201.

³⁵. Carl Beam, *School Reunion*, 1992, 55.9 x 76.2 cm., mixed media on St. Armand hand-made paper. Ill. in Carl Beam, *The Columbus Boat*. Curated by Richard Rhodes. Toronto: The Power Plant, 1992, #19, 26.

In a series called *Burying the Ruler* (1991-1992), a part of The Columbus Boat project, Beam's photographic image displays the artist shirtless, wearing a broad-brimmed hat over his long hair, blue jeans and sandals. In his hand he holds an ordinary wooden ruler. Beam buried the ruler in the sand in the Dominican Republic, not far from the landing site of the first Europeans. He was commemorating the Taino tribe, the original inhabitants who became extinct fifty years after Columbus arrived.³⁶ This photograph has been transferred and multiplied onto to paper, canvas and other materials; one example has the image attached to the door of a constructed box. This is Beam's humorous approach to making his art more practical because "more people buy furniture than art...."³⁷ Standing in a barren landscape, Beam's self-image here adopts the male bohemian, anti-bourgeois identify cultivated by so many artists with the "untamed mane of hair" and the "slightly scruffy" clothing to construct himself as a worker, a creator of culture joining, for instance, Van Gogh and Jackson Pollock with their "worker artist" personae.³⁸ The ruler, a measuring instrument, has multiple interpretations including being a symbol of colonial domination for "surveying and sectioning Aboriginal lands," an instrument of punishment in Indian residential schools, and as an indication of linear thinking, perceived to be "un-Indian and un-natural."³⁹

Exorcism (1984) is a large-scale composition with images drawn from eclectic sources. In addition to the photo-transfers on the plywood surface, there are also arrows, tomahawks and barbed wire projecting from the surface.⁴⁰ On the left side, there is a large scale Egyptian guardian figure from the entrance of Tutankhamen's funerary

³⁶ . Joan Murray, *Carl Beam: The Whale of Our Being* (Oshawa: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2002), 8.

³⁷ . Allan J. Ryan, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*. (Vancouver/Toronto: UBC Press and Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 55.

³⁸ . Amelia Jones, "'Clothes Make the Man': The Male Artist as a Performative Function," *The Oxford Art Journal*, 18:2 (1995), 19,21-22 [18-32].

³⁹ . Ryan, 1999, 51.

⁴⁰ . Carl Beam, *Exorcism*, mixed media on plywood, with arrows, tomahawks and barbed wire, 213.0x610.0x91.0. Collection of the Thunder Bay Art Gallery.

chamber. Beam has transformed the sculpture into a two-dimensional presence surveying the rest of Beam's composition. This figure not only reflects the distant past, but also records the great interest in Tutankhamen's treasures as they toured the world in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Among the concerns of the artist in *Exorcism* is misused nuclear power. There is a trio of figures in modern dress whose monochromatic presence is exaggerated by the exuberant brushwork around them. The figures stand behind a cross which is placed as if it is a grave marker, and above is the stenciled text: "Meltdown Notation: Energy Returning to Energy in Time Allotment Sequential Modulation." The accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant occurred in 1979; the Chernobyl accident was later, in 1986. Beam's text helps to explain the spectral appearance of his trio of figures. On the right side of *Exorcism*, Beam includes a raven, a shaman with raised arms, flying eagles, handprints, texts, and painterly applications of paint. All of the images that he collects together here refer to death or dying and the possibility of a nuclear catastrophe that would speed up the demise, not only of Native culture, but also of everything. Technically this is not a self-portrait in the usual sense, but it does display in different locations across the surface, the handprint, and a specific note of the artist's presence. The handprints direct attention upward in the same manner as the shaman, the gesture denotes "reverence, supplication or communication with the sky and mores specifically, to the Great Spirit..."⁴¹ Moreover, Beam is expressing his view that everyone "has to have personal responsibility for world events. You have to respond personally."⁴² It is this personal response to events and situations that makes Beam's work unique.⁴³

41 . Joan M. Vastokas and Romas K. Vastokas, *Sacred Art of the Algonkians: A Study of the Peterborough Petroglyphs* (Peterborough: Mansard Press, 1973), 70.

42 . McLuhan, 1984, 6.

43 . Patricia Vervoort, "Aesthetic Warriors: The Battle for Identity," *Ayaangwaamizin: The International Journal of Indigenous Philosophy*, 2:2 (2000), 164-165.

In Beam's *The Artist with Some of His Concerns* (1983), a mixed-media work, incorporates photographic transfer images and features, in the centre, a photographic self-portrait of Beam.⁴⁴ This image of Beam, behind a fence, includes the assassination of Sadat, horse heads, and eagles on the right. To Beam, the eagle was "a messenger, ...a metaphor for the higher self...the God-self, if you will."⁴⁵ Beam then is centered between the present assassination, the past of horses, and the eagles of the future. He is here with his concerns, present situations found in the news, Native history and himself as a contemporary Canadian involved with all these issues. *The Artist With Some of His Concerns* is not only a particular watercolour, but also a title that aptly describes Beam's entire *oeuvre*. As a person and as an artist, he is involved in all of these different aspects of his world and ours.

Beam's career as an artist and as a person exploring his own place in world is the message of all these art works. It is possible to follow Beam through various life experiences and interests. In the process, we also are allowed to view his changing physical appearance and his moods, whether anger or humour, as revealed through texts and titles. Beam's self images do not convey an egotistical view of himself whereas they might if he had flattered himself, had worn designer clothes or even had combed his hair. To be truthful, unhappy, hard working and caring are not qualities attached to an artist with a big ego.

The self-portraits of Rembrandt and Van Gogh are considered today to be documentary evidence of their lives and appearances. Beam's work too offers documentary evidence of his appearance alongside issues that concern him and everyone else in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Beam's view of himself amidst his world of images, both contemporary and historical, situates his life in context. With

⁴⁴. Carl Beam, *The Artist with Some of His Concerns*, 1983, watercolour on paper, 101.6 x 150.7. Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Toronto. Ill in McLuhan, 44.

⁴⁵. McLuhan, *Egos*, 11.

assassinations, the extinction of animal life, pollution of the air and water, dying Native customs, residential schools and reserves, Beam's world as we observe it through his eyes and through his art is a tragic place.

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