About Carl Beam

Carl Beam was born in 1943, on West Bay, Manitoulin Island, to an Ojibwe mother and German father. Beam graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Victoria in 1974, and continued his studies in the Masters of Fine Arts programme at the University of Alberta.

Beam is a pivotal figure in Canadian Art. His work is represented in distinguished public collections including National Gallery of Canada, Art Gallery of Ontario, the McMichael Collection, Harvard University, the New York Public Library, the Albright-Knox Gallery, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Thunder Bay Art Gallery to name just a few.

Although he had formal art training, Beam also had a number of life experiences not specifically related to art-making. He culled images from his own life experience and frequently juxtaposed them with historical and contemporary images, thus relating the “personal” with the larger “societal” picture. Stylistically his technique is more connected to Rauschenberg than to the Woodlands or traditional native art styles. His innovative techniques, in fact, have been emulated by a new generation of artists – native and not.

Never one to rest on his laurels, Beam continually challenged himself as an artist. He constantly experimented using new mediums and techniques in order to fully explore the visual discourses which he created. During the early 1980s in New Mexico, Beam mastered Anasazi pottery techniques and a decade later applied adobe rammed earth architecture to the construction of ecologically-sound buildings on Manitoulin Island, Ontario.

His painting *The North American Iceberg* became the first contemporary aboriginal artwork purchased by the National Gallery of Canada in a new effort to build a contemporary collection of aboriginal art. The acquisition was notable because it was the first Native artwork the gallery purchased as a piece of contemporary art rather than ethnographic art. Since that time the National Gallery has purchased dozens of his important works for their collection.

The paintings, prints and constructions of Carl Beam stand at the cutting edge of contemporary art and push insistently at its boundaries. The autobiographical cast of his work and his use of personal, commercial, and classic imagery from the histories of art and photography offer complexities of style and content that place this work within the vanguard of Post Modernism and its self-conscious deconstruction of tradition, both historic and aesthetic.

In 2000, Beam became a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts. He was also among the recipients of a 2005 Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts. Beam passed away July 30th, 2005 at the age of 62.

A retrospective of Carl Beam’s art opened at the National Gallery of Canada in October, 2010. It will be on tour across North America until late 2013.
Detailed Synopsis

Born in an Ojibwe community on Manitoulin Island, Carl Beam’s illustrious art career was cut short after his death in 2005. The documentary begins at that point not long after Beam received the Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts.

His story is then introduced by his wife Ann, who recounts some highlights of their life together as well as his art career. His daughter Anong follows with her thoughts about preparing for her father’s retrospective at the National Gallery of Canada.

Following the introduction are 11 sequences that each highlight specific parts of his life and his art:

**Aakideh** – As Anong Beam explains, Beam was given the Ojibwe name “Aakideh” as child meaning “one who is brave” or “braveheart.” Even as a youngster, the elders in the community saw this quality in him through his actions. This quality would prove important as an adult in relation to his art. His wife Ann says he would always “tell it like you want to tell it” and “don’t be afraid of what you want to say.”

**Forced Ideas** – Beam was sent to a residential school like many other Native youths. This experience impacted him greatly in the years to come. Those years resulted in him losing much of his Ojibwe language. To Beam, the residential schools contributed to cultural loss for generations of aboriginals. Later he relates his experience through his artwork as well as the challenges facing Native culture in North America.

**Altered Egos** – This was the title of the first series of works Beam exhibited in the early 1980s. These artworks came out of early years as artist and the subjects were very much about his own life experience and sense of himself. Curator Dr. Elizabeth McLuhan and wife Ann offer their recollections about Beam from that time. His journey as artist begins in a “dark place” but his work is transformed as he starts a new life with his wife Ann and daughter Anong. As McLuhan says, Beam was able to “transform the personal to the political.”
**Burying the Ruler** – It begins with an archival clip of Beam “Burying the Ruler” – a seminal image found in many of his works. His wife explains “his art is always about layers” and that the ruler image was a “distrust of grids and systematic thinking found in science.” Canadian Art editor Richard Rhodes explains that Beam offered a lesson about Native history and its impact on North America. He adds Beam’s works served an education function to help reclaim history that was overwritten by “white” history.

**New World** – Another archival clip shows Beam installing a graveyard of crosses on a beach in the Dominican Republic in 1989, roughly where Columbus had landed. This was the beginning of his landmark Columbus Project works. Though Beam admired “the discover” in Columbus he had issues with the political New World. Then Richard Rhodes and Greg Hill explain the importance of *The North American Iceberg* work and how it addressed directly the idea that Native history and culture was as legitimate as European/Western cultures.

**The Whale of Our Being** – Beam often focused on issues of extinction – both in nature, knowledge and human terms. His Whale of Our Being works focused on state of the world and that “what happens to whale happens to us.” He also brought in celebrity images like Jennifer Lopez to illustrate how everyone is obsessed with trivial pop icons when they should be focusing on environmental destruction.

**Crossroads** – Crossroads was the last series of works Beam created. He often used images of musicians in his work but also had a loved playing guitar and had a passion for the blues. Family members recall this great passion and how it was incorporated into his art. As his daughter Anong says “music was huge for him.”

**Family** – Anong Beam recalls that her father felt everyone was family. His wife Ann then recounts there early days in New Mexico creating ceramic works and paintings. Both Ann and Anong explain the significance the iconic Shaman Family imagery in his artwork and what it means. Background about his personal family history is also revealed.

**Margins: Food/Shelter** - Ecological issues became an important focus of Beam’s works by the 1990s. He felt that many of the “environmentally-friendly” lifestyles and methods of previous cultures had been lost to the detriment of contemporary society. Beam expresses his views about this topic along with footage of the family’s landmark adobe house on Manitoulin Island. His daughter Anong points out that Beam predicated people in the future would make money from “green” alternatives.
**Observer** – Beam was never afraid to tell people what he thought. Through his works, he addressed head on important issues that faced society and aboriginal people. Curator Virginia Eichhorn explains that his art and his activism was about what was good from a culture and using that for the greater good. Part of this was his quest to preserve the Ojibwe language through radio. Daughter Anong and son-in-law Mark explain how and why they took up this quest and brought his Ojibwe language station to air.

**Artist Flying Still** – Dr. Allan Ryan begins by saying “Carl is still with us” because of his artwork and the legacy he left behind. Much of that legacy is the focus of the National Gallery's retrospective exhibition opening in fall 2010. Curator Greg Hill explains the importance of what Beam left behind. Not only was he a role model for future artists, but much of his ideas continue to live on through his wife and daughter, who are also artists.
Directors’ Statement

Robert Waldeck and Paul Eichhorn

We set out to make a documentary that offered the audience a true sense of who Carl Beam was... what his artwork was about... how his artistic legacy continues today. What we didn’t want to do was make a film that was merely a “biographical” treatment presented in a birth to death chronological order. And instead of trying to cover every single element of his life and art career, we decided to offer essential details about his life while focusing on his years of making art.

Obviously, making a documentary about a visual artist opened up an array of visual opportunities. It allowed us to incorporate artworks, archival photos, personal writings and even video and audio captured by the artist. Beam documented all aspects of his art practice as well as more personal moments such as a numerous family trips and moments at home.

Telling the story of someone who is no longer present is obviously a challenge. But we were able to give him a voice through his family, friends, artistic collaborators, and most importantly, his artwork.

Much like Beam’s artworks, we assembled the documentary through a multiple of layers: interviews, archival material, artworks and more. This layering of different materials provides the complete picture of who Beam was and what his artwork was all about.

Finally, the “personal” was always a significant part all of this artist’s body of work. Beam made himself and his life experience a key part of his art. He often juxtaposed his life with historical and contemporary images. Obviously, we felt this “personal” element was vital to understand who the artist was as well as to fully appreciate the art that he made and the artistic legacy he left behind. Through stories about his early years on Manitoulin Island to his years attending a residential school to the recollections of those who worked closely with him on landmark exhibitions, viewers are able to get to know Carl Beam as well as his art and idea.
The Directors

Robert Waldeck
Robert Waldeck is an award-winning filmmaker whose films have been screened around the world. In 2004, Robert formed W.E. Productions with Paul Eichhorn. Their 2008 documentary, *A Growing Season*, won the Jury Prize for Best Documentary at the Local Focus Film Festival and the film has also been screened worldwide. His experimental short films have also won awards at numerous film festivals. Along with his film work, Robert is an accomplished visual artist and has exhibited his art at galleries throughout North America. He has also taught visual and media arts in secondary schools and universities. Robert has a Masters of Fine Art degree from the University of Waterloo and a Bachelor of Education degree from Western as well as being a member of the Documentary Organization of Canada.

Paul Eichhorn
Paul Eichhorn is an award-winning filmmaker, who is now taking his experience as an accomplished writer and editor in print and applying it to moving images. He linked up with Robert Waldeck in 2004 to form W.E. Productions. The two collaborated on the documentary *A Growing Season* in 2008. This film has been screened around the world and was named the Best Documentary at the Local Focus Film Festival. Along with directing short films, Paul has previously provided his expertise as a film and video programmer to several organizations. He has also written extensively about film and video for numerous publications and was a regular contributor to *Take One: Film and TV in Canada*. Paul is a member of the Documentary Organization of Canada.