

# In two Denver exhibits, artist Cannupa Hanska Luger connects viewers to the ground beneath their feet

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By Ray Mark Rinaldi

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Cannupa Hanska Luger plays down the moment when he became a famous artist. After all, the 39-year-old reasons, he has been making art for years now and he's done well enough, accumulating gallery representation, serious collectors and an impressive list of museum and university exhibitions for his resume.

And the moment, he says, wasn't even about an actual piece of art. It came out of a video he concocted in just a few hours.

But it arrived last November when the world was watching, at the height of the now-famous protests over the proposed Dakota Access Pipeline at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. Luger's 4-minute, 43-second film, edited by his friend Razelle Benally, showed how to construct a "mirror shield," a make-shift piece of armor designed to protect the protesters. The object was simple, just some Masonite cut out with a jigsaw, with a few strips of cord attached for handles.

The shields, however, also had adhesive mirror foil glued to their fronts, forcing potential aggressors — law enforcement officers and private security guards engaged by the energy companies — to see themselves as they approached the people they were about to toss out of their encampments, to gaze in reverse and see their own humanity as they threatened the humanity of the Indians and their supporters who chose to stand in the way of construction as a means of protecting their water supply.

Thousands of people made the shields and shipped them to the camp at Standing Rock — and both the mainstream and visual arts media took notice.

The shields were, of course, symbolic, but creating them allowed people to show their empathy for an environmental movement, to *do* something.

"The statement kept coming up: 'I'm one person. What can I do?'," Luger said in an interview last week.

"Well, that video was about how one person could make six shields. And those six shields could stand in front of 20 people in prayer on the front lines. And those 20 people stood in front of the whole camp, which was several thousand people. And those people were in front of eight million people downstream."

The shields, Luger points out, are just part of a larger body of work that aims to connect people to the land around them and to consider the consequences of how we treat it. Two examples of his efforts are on display in Denver galleries currently.



Cannupa Hanska Luger in Santa Fe, New Mexico. (Ray Mark Rinaldi, Special to The Denver Post)

At the Center for Visual Arts, Luger and fellow members of his art collective, the Winter Count, are part of the group show “WaterLine: A Creative Exchange,” which features an international lineup of artists focusing on threats to the world’s water supply. Luger’s showiest piece is called piece is called “This Is Not a Snake” and is constructed from oil and chemical barrels, old tires and other refuse, which come together in the form a snake, about 30-feet long, with a ceramic head at either end. It is ominous and very bit the “monster” Luger describes it as.

At RedLine, he is producing two related works. A performative piece, which features a small troupe of local dancers, and an immersive installation that has his now-familiar shields set before landscape videos captured via drones in the air.

The gallery works are different but “both are disembodied parts of the same body,” he says, and they both focus attention on the ground beneath our feet.

“By opening up conversation around landscape and giving landscape a voice,” he said. “You are then talking about everything that’s connected to it — the people, the plant life, the water itself.”

That conversation about earth and water, Luger says, is crucial to Winter Count’s mission of employing art as activism. He calls it a way of “weaponizing my privilege.”

“Working in the art industry gives us all these tools. You have access to media, access to institutions and, through those, access to communities,” he said. “We started asking ourselves what’s the point of having this level of privilege if you’re not doing something to help us all.”

Luger’s background is a combination of American Indian and European: “Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota, Austrian, and Norwegian,” as his official bio puts it together. He was born and raised on the Standing Rock Reservation, and much of his focus is on issues that are important to native people.

During the protests, he drove his own vehicles back and forth between Glorieta, New Mexico, where he lives and Standing Rock eight times, delivering supplies — water, blankets, wood stoves, jackets, “whatever anybody could offer at the time” — to the protest camps.

His art, he said, is another way of supporting indigenous causes. Though it comes at things in a less direct form.

“There are all these conversations around ‘de-colonization.’ But what were really interested in is re-indigenizing people’s thinking,” Getting folks to see things from a deeply historical and native perspective, encourages them to understand and respect the oldest of American ideals and traditions. “De-decolonizing,” he said, “puts the important work of change on the victim.”

His ideas are clearly at work at RedLine, the performance piece, “CauseLines,” features dancers improvising movement around aerial views of “river-lines, tree-lines, road-lines, pipe-lines” as the exhibition statement sizes up the visuals. It is extrapolated from a lost native custom that had musicians composing works inspired by ridge lines in nearby hills. As the peaks along the vista rose and fell, the tones of the songs would, as well. “CauseLines” expands that to include movement.



Activists participate in an art project conceived by Cannupa Hunska Luger, from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, at Oceti Sakowin Camp on the edge of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation on December 3, 2016 outside Cannon Ball, North Dakota. (Scott Olson, Getty Images)

Luger sees it as way of drawing lines between traditions of his ancestors and the high-tech capabilities of his own generation, which are represented by the drone-captured footage.

The CVA show has several parts and works in conjunction with other pieces from his Winter Count partners Nicholas Galanin and Merritt Johnson. Luger contributes a series of human-like forms made out of black ceramic pieces, steel and nylon cords, all suspended from the ceiling.

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Cannupa Hanska Luger's series of human-like forms titled "We Have Agency."  
(Provided by the Center for Visual Art)



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They appear graceful, but precarious — half flying, half falling — and evoke both the strength and fragility of humanity. Each of the bodies holds a knife and they are held together with a single, nylon cord — cut it anywhere and the whole piece falls apart.

Luger also presents his giant, curving snake. By transforming refuse — the rusty, jagged, rubbery, unrecyclable junk produced by industrial exploitation of the land and its minerals — into an anthropomorphic object, he gives a relatable form to environmental and social misdeeds that are often considered in the abstract.

His monster is man-made, but not just by him. It is derived from the bad habits of a hundred years of digging deeply into the earth to capture its oil, while neglecting the things that already flow on its surface. There is a lesson in that, he says.

"If people chose waterways over oil ways, that would set a precedent in the United States," he said. "And if it sets a precedent in the United States, it sets a precedent all over the world."

CVA's *"Water Line: A Creative Exchange"* continues through October 21. The gallery is at 965 Santa Fe Drive. Info at 303-294-5207 or [msudenver.edu/cva](http://msudenver.edu/cva).

RedLine's exhibition, *"Land Trust,"* starts with its annual *"48 Hours"* exhibition, performance and lecture summit, which runs this weekend, Aug. 11-12. Then the show continues through Aug. 27. The address is 2350 Arapahoe St. See the weekend's schedule and get more information at 303.-296-4448 or [redlineart.org](http://redlineart.org).



Cannupa Hanska Luger's "This Is Not a Snake," on display at the Center for Visual Art in Denver. (Provided by the CVA.)