

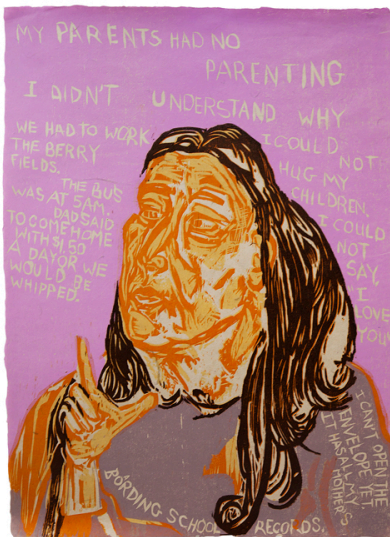
HYPERALLERGIC

“A Chance, A Voice”: Daniel Heyman Reimagines American Narratives

Daniel Heyman’s layered paintings, prints, and portraits possess an almost decorative lightness that often belies a more crucial and devastating truth.

Elizabeth Maynard
October 29, 2016

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Amid the nonstop circus of the 2016 election, you would not be alone if you missed the of the ongoing protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline by Dakota Tribal Nations, or that award-winning journalist Amy Goodman (only one of the many protectors, protestors, journalists, and filmmakers who have been arrested and charged) faced up to 45 years in prison for covering these actions before the charges were dismissed.



Daniel Heyman and Lucy Ganje, *My Parents Had No Parenting* from *In Our Own Words: Native Impressions* (2015-2016). Courtesy of the artists and Cade Tompkins Projects.

In a news cycle that cultivates short attention spans, it is alarming how quickly ecological and human rights violations are buried, and sometimes actively suppressed, in the ever-scrolling news feed along with the long history of such events.

When he was an undergraduate, the artist Daniel Heyman recalls, he would study in Dartmouth College's library beneath José Clemente Orozco's bold and caustic mural, *The Epic of American Civilization* (1932-34), an alternately ironic and horrifying depiction of American history. That narrative is woven through many of Heyman's works, which are currently on view at Cade Tompkins Projects in *Daniel Heyman: Dartmouth Collection and Native Impressions*. The exhibition features works he produced during his 2013 tenure as Artist in Residence at Dartmouth College, as well as a collaboration with printmaker Lucy Ganje called *In Our Own Words: Native Impressions 2015 – 2016*,



Installation view of "Daniel Heyman: Dartmouth Collection and Native Impressions" (2015-2016), Cade Tompkins Projects, Providence, Rhode Island

Heyman's layered paintings, prints, and portraits possess an almost decorative lightness that often belies darker imagery, a more crucial and devastating truth. While the two bodies or work remain distinct, they operate elegantly together to address the opacities of communication and the illegibility of suffering, whether imposed by social, political, and juridical conditions or inherent to the nature of pain and memory.

The *Dartmouth Collection* includes a variety of mixed-media works produced while in residence at Dartmouth, including studies of Orozco's mural. It is worth noting that Orozco was the

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college's second artist-in-residence after the program began in 1932, and that Dartmouth was founded with the specific aim of educating and converting Native American men.

Heyman's vibrant paintings are filled with recurring images: delicate cranes sourced from



Daniel Heyman, "Heart Fist (Dartmouth)" 2013, oil on mylar, 54 x 36 inches

Japanese textile and paper design, luscious multi-colored flowers in full bloom, fields of meticulously painted swirls evoking hand-made marbled paper, and a smiling gibbon. However, both *Heart Fist* (2013) and *To Ride the Son* (2013) include a motif based on the descriptions of torture he recounted in a series of works called the *Abu Ghraib Detainee Interview Project* (2006-07), while observing interviews between former prisoners and American lawyers in Amman and Istanbul. In the 2013 paintings, one hooded figure slumps on top of another on all fours.

The layered images of the collage-like paintings offer one view only to confound it. The smiling gibbon crowned with flowers in *Heart Fist* is superimposed over sketchy contours of torture victims as well as a child-sized skeleton, its cartoonish-looking hands clasped where the gibbon's heart might be. The differing visual languages and the translucence of the judiciously applied paint leave the viewer disoriented and mistrustful — beneath the candy-colored oils laid over a smooth surface of Mylar is a fist for a heart

and the imagery of suffering and death.

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry argues that pain is marked by its inherent inexpressibility and that torture is a structure of *unmaking* the world of its victim through the very unsharability of their experience. Indeed, we rely on referential descriptors when trying to communicate our pain: it feels *as if* ... Part of what Heyman's paintings accomplish is to point to the instability of language and the sign, and how easily communication is confounded, whether intentionally or through the very impossibility of conveyance.

Even so, Heyman's work has long reckoned with the significance of voice even in the face of this obstruction. His *Abu Ghraib Detainee Interview Project*, features portraits of Iraqi detainees surrounded by swirling fragments of their stories, painted quickly so that he would complete the work by the end of the interview. In these works, Heyman aimed for as direct a representation as possible, as if he were attempting to resist the manipulation of these stories for the purposes of others.



Daniel Heyman “Artists Books” partial view of accordion book, size variable, watercolor on paper

The new series of prints, *Native Impressions*, revisits visual-textual portraiture with images of six men and six women, community leaders of the tribal nations of North Dakota. Each portrait consists of two sheets of earthen-toned paper made from mulberry and flax indigenous to the region, with one sheet by Heyman and one by Lucy Ganje. Much like the Abu Ghraib series, Heyman’s woodcut portraits feature the figure surrounded by swirling text, transcribed from their oral histories, while Ganje’s letterpress printed broadsheets include more interview excerpts, riffing off Heyman’s color palette in different typefaces, sizes, and orientations.

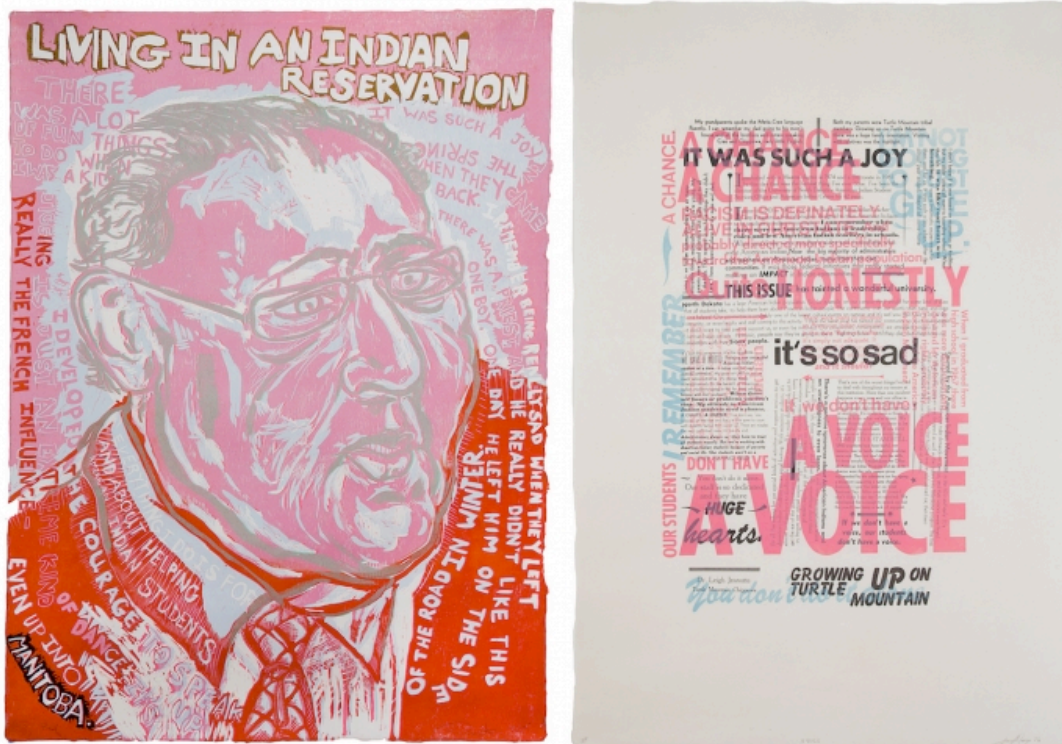
Together, the sheets hint at a more complete possibility of portraiture — subjects depicted both visually and “in their own words,” a distinct counterpoint to the current silencing of resistance actions, and a poignant response to the 19th-century American legacy of depictions of native peoples, such as George Catlin’s ethnographic portraiture and Frederic Remington’s fantasies of the “Old West.” (Yale University’s Beinecke Library has purchased an edition of Heyman’s prints to act in dialogue with their holding of Catlin’s *North American Indian Portfolio*, 1844.)



Daniel Heyman and Lucy Ganje, *It Helped Us to Breathe* from *In Our Own Words: Native Impressions* (2015-2016). Courtesy of the artists and Cade Tompkins Projects.

Like the *Dartmouth Collection*, however, these works resist any easy consumption or interpretation. Heyman’s treatment of the text challenges the viewer, with words wandering around the page, sometimes enveloping their speaker like halos, as in “They Would Speak in Dakota,” or cutting across the figure, as in “That Place Doesn’t Exist Anymore.” Sometimes they whisper — the light, almost iridescent peach in the negative space of “It Helped Us to Breath,” combined with the serpentine path of the text, make the bulk of the words illegible. Only particular words and phrases stand out: “provide,” “back in the day,” and perhaps most poignantly, “we spoke in the dormitories, it helped us to breath[e], but never outside,” recalling the sitter’s experience with speaking Lakota while in mandated boarding school — the liberating power of speech, its chronic institutional silencing.

In kind, Ganje’s compositions are bold and engaging, both obscuring and highlighting words that evoke the recurrent themes of religious, political, and ecological colonization, as well as the pride and difficulty of “growing up on the rez.” The narratives include past stories of forced conversion and isolation, hard labor conditions, but also contemporary outrage over



Daniel Heyman and Lucy Ganje, *It Was Such a Joy: Portrait of Leigh Jeanotte* from *In Our Own Words: Native Impressions* (2015-2016). Courtesy of the artists and Cade Tompkins Projects.

environmental abuse and social injustice — “oil” and “water” emerge throughout the
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broadsheets, pointing to the current resistance by Standing Rock Sioux (one of the nations represented in the portrait series) against the Dakota Access Pipeline.

Ganje's typography is often organized along a cardinal axis, but occasionally words, phrases or whole paragraphs disrupt this neat alignment, forcing the viewer to pause and shift perspective to continue reading. As gallery owner Cade Tompkins pointed out, the process of unfolding one's oral history can be arduous. It's a great show of vulnerability to tell one's story to a stranger, and Heyman and Ganje ensure that the complexities of and the hitches in this unfolding of narrative are approximated in our attempts to discern image and text — the viewer as witness must continually reorient to accommodate the intricacies of the story.

While paintings like Catlin's and Remington's suppose an image of the Native as disappearing or disappeared, just as contemporary news coverage would have us shift to the spectacle of the election, Heyman and Ganje's portraits insist on confronting the contemporary experience of American Indians through the individual voice, all the while acknowledging the profound difficulties of performing, recording, and interpreting oral histories of people historically and continually denied a voice. Heyman, driven by conviction, grapples with the intrinsic complications of articulating suffering and stories untold. There are no easy answers here, but there is a sense of what's needed to redress victimization and violence. In Heyman and Ganje's print, "It Was Such A Joy: Portrait of Leigh Jeanotte," bold pink letters proclaim, "A CHANCE, A CHANCE, A VOICE, A VOICE."

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