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IN A SOLO SHOW AT THE PORTLAND MUSEUM OF ART, PASSAMAQUODDY ARTIST JEREMY FREY TRANSFORMS AN ANCIENT TRADITION

by Murray Whyte

Jeremy Frey at his home studio in Eddington, Maine, in April.MICHAEL G. SEAMANS

EDDINGTON, Maine — Jeremy Frey hunches over in a chair in his home studio, shaving a long arc of black ash wood into a flat, tensile strand, even and slim. But the clock ticks with every stroke of his knife: Ash trees are dying in droves all over North America thanks to the emerald ash borer, a ravenous bug imported from Asia against which the trees have no defense. Soon, there won't be any ash left to harvest, which Frey does himself in the nearby woods, building his stockpile in a race against time. No ash means no weaving, his life's work.

"It's a bad beetle," he shrugs, not lifting his eyes from the wood. "So I guess this is the last hurrah of a thousands-year-old tradition," he deadpans, and keeps trimming. "If you can go out with a bang … "

Frey, 45, a registered member of the Passamaquoddy Tribe, is making sure of that. His basketry, built on generations of traditional Indigenous technique and spiked with color, form, and material inventions all his own, has broken open Indigenous weaving for audiences — and collectors — all over the world. Karma Gallery, the New York-based dealer that represents him, sells his pieces for anywhere from $20,000 to $100,000; collectors wait to own one, and museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York hold his works in their collections. Just this month, he traveled to Paris and Oslo to be honored with awards and accolades — the first time he'd ever traveled overseas.

The clock, meanwhile, is ticking in a much more immediate way, too: On May 24, the Portland Museum of Art will open "Jeremy Frey: Woven," his first-ever solo museum exhibition, a survey of 20-plus years of his work. When we met at the end of April, Frey was racing to the finish line. "A piece that size" — he pointed toward a work in progress, nearly three feet tall with sprigs of wood poking out in every direction — "usually takes me a month. I'll do it in two weeks."

“Woven” will be the first solo show the PMA has ever held for an Indigenous artist, and Frey has staked out the terms. “We’re not going to make it into an Indian Powwow,” he said. “This is going to be a contemporary art opening. We’re not doing an honoring ceremony, nobody’s going to dance. I’m doing it with a major nod to being Native, but I’m not going to perform for the audience. The show is the show. And I think, Natives in general, we end up performing a lot.”

To be clear: Frey isn’t rejecting his heritage and tradition, but the movement in recent years to yoke Indigenous art to broader apologies for centuries of colonial violence and indifference. Indigenous culture has lately magnetized the attention of American art institutions; its manifestations range from wholesale reinstallations of permanent collections at the Peabody Essex Museum and at the PMA itself, to the Venice Biennale, where Choctaw-Cherokee artist Jeffrey Gibson is the first-ever Native American to represent the United States. Add to that the quick-succession recent hiring of Indigenous art curators for the first time at major museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts Boston; institutional respect for — and investment in — Native culture has never been more clear.

Decades of behind-the-scenes work to restore Indigenous culture to the people who create and maintain it has become a very public affair. The federal government earlier this year introduced more stringent regulation on the collection and display of Indigenous culture, prompting sudden, outward change. Most prominently, the American Museum of Natural History in New York City abruptly shuttered its Great Plains and Eastern Woodlands galleries, filled with rubbery mannequins of Indigenous people and outdated displays of Native art and craft, to comply.

Frey, with his matter-of-fact, deadpan charm, manages to be political while refusing to be. “There’s so much focus on Natives right now,” he says. His focus is on his own work, not a grand statement about Native culture more broadly. “You get pigeonholed, shoeboxed — you just get stuck,” he said. “I went to the Indian Market [a major commercial showcase of contemporary Indigenous art and craft in Santa Fe] for years, and that was the pinnacle of what I could do as a Native artist. Now, to see my work in Paris, in London, it’s going to be at Art Basel in Switzerland. These are Native baskets, man. I mean, how much more can I honor my people? To me, that means a lot more than dressing up for the tourists.”

Ramey Mize, who co-curated Frey’s exhibition at the PMA with Jaime DeSimone, said Frey’s unease with being cast as a cultural emissary fits with his intentions.

“When I asked him, ‘What do you want to do with this project?’, he was very direct: He wants to bring beauty into the world,” she said. “Of course, they carry a lot — honoring what’s truly an ancient artistic tradition is at the core what he does. But Jeremy doesn’t want to instruct anybody on how to think or feel about the work. He wants it to speak for itself. That’s the balance we wanted to strike — that it’s more than the sum of its parts.”

Theresa Secord, a Penobscot weaver who founded the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance in 1993, brought Frey into the fold in 2000, when he was just starting out. In the exhibition’s catalog, she writes that his ingenuity was “not anticipated” by the founders. “Most of us were still weaving our “grandparents baskets” when Jeremy began working in the medium,” she wrote. His work “forever changed the tradition and the way our art is perceived.”

Frey’s baskets, frankly, astonish. Vibrant, toothy ridges cascade in uniform abstract pattern; their scale, often five-fold the size of their traditional forebears, seems to defy physics and even gravity. They carry heavy freight, as Frey knows — of an artistic tradition measured by millennia that’s among the world’s oldest, and of uglier, more recent history where they were made quickly and sold as a means to survive, colonialism having stripped people of land and wealth and reduced them to trinket makers for the tourist trade.

There’s a powerful poetic justice in the prices Frey’s works command — culture, reduced to tchotchke, now luxury objects of desire. But Frey’s personal connection to them might be the most powerful of all. He grew up home-schooled, taught to buck authority; when he eventually did go to school, he struggled to fit in. Right after graduating, he left Indian Township on the Passamaquoddy reserve, where he grew up, to work in kitchens in Portland’s rising restaurant scene.

The grind wore him down; he turned to drugs, and spiraled into addiction. In a 2014 Ted Talk, as he was rising to prominence in the art world, he talked about knowing that his path was binary: Either he would get clean, or he would die. He had what he called “a secret weapon: My mother,” he said, speaking haltingly. She told him to come home and she’d do whatever she could to help.

In those early frantic throes of withdrawal, he was struggling to quiet his mind. His mother was among the few in the community who had learned traditional weaving from an elder, years before. She knew its potential, and taught him the technique: Slow. Deliberate. Repetitive. It became his refuge. “It kept my hands busy. It kept my mind busy. It allowed me to sober up,” he said. “It literally saved my life.”

When “Woven” opens, it will inevitably be asked to tell the story of an ancient culture, brought back from the brink by a groundbreaking artist devoted to its radical evolution. But really, it’s another story, just a couple of decades old: Of the artist himself, looking into his own personal abyss, and stepping back from the edge to lead the way.