# **EXHIBITS NEWSLINE**

Have you seen an interesting new exhibition lately – something that touched you, made you laugh, or moved you to action? Consider writing about it for Exhibits Newsline! Entries should be brief (300 words max), breezy (tell what made it so great), and include three to four high-res images.

For more information, email: NAMENewsline@gmail.com.

## Finding Truth in the Surreal at Lezley Saar's *Diorama Drama*

**CRAFT CONTEMPORARY** Los Angeles, California

On a recent visit to L.A. with a museum colleague, I dropped into Craft Contemporary to see artist Lezley Saar's recent work in a solo show titled *Diorama Drama*. We'd spent the morning across the street, diving deep into prehistory at the La Brea Tar Pits, so I was ready for a dose of beauty and whimsy. This exhibition delivered.

Inspired by natural history dioramas, Saar set out to create, "a space, emotion, and story that one can be sucked into and hopefully transported somewhere." Unlike the displays at most museums, visitors could walk into these tableaux to closely examine each individual work (fig. 1).

The exhibition's design was simple. Brightly painted walls and plinths with contrasting theatrical curtains suggested a script in which each character and object had a role and a purpose (fig. 2). Combined with the artist's twists on traditional museum display techniques, the mood was somewhere between church and carnival; velvety Victorian nostalgia tipped into creepy objectification and exoticism.



Fig. 1. The artworks were described in a printed handout; their titles held just enough story to leave me intrigued and bewildered.





 $Fig.\$  2. Each group of work included large painted banners, collages, elaborately costumed mannequins, and small tabletop cabinets of wonder.

The succinct curatorial text noted that these dioramas, "illustrate (Saar's) belief in finding the truth in the surreal and her agency as an artist and a biracial woman to construct her own reality." She invited me, her viewer, to do the same. Were these characters from the past or the future? Were they guiding me to the truth or selling snake oil? I wonder how many of our visitors ask themselves similar questions as they stand before our historical or scientific displays (fig. 3).

This exhibition checked lots of boxes for me:

- It invited me to explore at my own pace and direction, to closely examine objects I found fascinating and to skip over others.
- The design created context without pulling my attention from the works on display.
- It made me look at familiar things in a new way.

I left delighted and energized.



Penny Jennings, Immediate Past President of NAME



Septime, a collector of breezes, hoarder of voices, and gatherer of olfactory ephemera, once changed her lover into a lake to protect him. 2019.

### Revisiting the Past, Indigenizing the Future

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY (AMNH) New York, New York

As museum anthropologists, we were interested to visit the recently reopened Northwest Coast Hall, first created in 1899 by Franz Boas, who is often credited as the father of American anthropology. Our research often emphasizes the representation and narration of museum object collections; however, contemporary exhibition practice is also a vital field of study, particularly in imagining new dynamics between museums and communities. We were encouraged by how the exhibition confronts its past incarnation by addressing the realities of previous relationships while also modeling the relationships that still might develop among museums, anthropologists, and Indigenous Peoples. While the hall's location renders it a popular thoroughfare, its narrow shape represents a design challenge alongside a curatorial opportunity to reach a broader audience (fig. 1).

Large panels outlining AMNH's commitment to collaborations with First Nation communities, including co-curation, first caught our attention and alerted us to the shift in the museum's approach to community engagement for this exhibition (fig. 2). As we wound our way through the labyrinth of cases, we found distinct voices from each Nation emanating Fig. 1. Overview of the new Northwest Coast Hall: Pacific Northwest Cultures exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History.





Fig. 2.

Introductory text by Tribal co- and consulting curators.

#### Fig. 3. Label incorporating

Label incorporating Indigenous language.

#### Ts'uuwaay | The cedar tree

Our Nation considers the cedar tree our sister. Haida oral histories have recorded that after the last ice age receded, the first tree to grow on Haida Gwaii was the pine. Then came spruce, hemlock and finally the ts'uu, or red cedar. From ts'uu, we can make clothing, houses, food containers and canoes like the one hanging in this hall. To sustain our people, we need old-growth forests. For this reason, the Haida Nation has long fought to protect our homelands from unsustainable industrial logging and other extractive practices that degrade our territories.

this grouping expanded and integrated within the main exhibition sections. What resonated most with us, though, was the abundance of first-person accounts in heritage languages from First Nations cultural practitioners, eco-cultural stewards, and leaders that wove together the exhibition's underlying message – the need to bring ancestors and belongings home.

Amanda J. Guzmán, Assistant Professor, Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut

**Carolyn Smith** (Karuk), Assistant Professor, University of California, Berkeley

through narratives and objects. Multimedia experiences interpret the critical historical context of the 1884 ban on traditional Indigenous ceremonies and confiscation of ceremonial regalia by the Canadian government. The curatorial partnerships delve deeper into the legacies of residential schools and environmental degradation, disrupting traditional Western understandings of anthropological collections and interpretations of Indigenous Peoples. Consequently, the exhibition rejected the past curatorial standpoints of abstraction and neutrality.

Vividly written text panels are personal and nuanced. These panels, which describe the survival of cultural practices and lineage preservation amidst traumatic histories, are shown with carved wooden belongings and regalia. Each multivocal section expresses the place-based past and present lived experiences of Northwest Coast Peoples. This text-heavy exhibition tackles the continued impacts of racism and cultural genocide on First Nations communities while balancing these narratives with hope, resilience, and revitalization (fig. 3). We were pleasantly surprised by the inclusion of contemporary art by emerging First Nations artists but would have liked to have seen