Opera as Epistemological Indigeneity

**TC Cannon’s A Remembered Muse**

Elysa Poon  
**School for Advanced Research Center**

In 1978, artist TC Cannon created *A Remembered Muse*, subtitled *Tosca* after Giacomo Puccini’s opera, as a commissioned painting for the Santa Fe Opera’s 22nd season program cover. At this time, Cannon’s lifelong love of operatic drama and staging, combined with gallery representative Jean Aberbach’s heavy involvement with the Santa Fe Opera Guild, led Cannon on a natural path into opera’s society. Cannon’s resulting product, produced in the wake of the Red Power movement, utilized the key characteristics of opera itself to publicly transgress preconceived notions of “Indianness.”

According to Mosco Carner, Puccini’s *Tosca* was originally based on the text by playwright Victorien Sardou, whose “ingredients for *Tosca* were sex, sadism, religion and art mixed by the hands of a master-chef ... served on the platter of an important historical event,” Napoleon’s 1800 invasion of Italy and his victory at Marengo. Puccini’s opera simultaneously focused on the drama of those salacious ingredients to create a more theatrical production and capture his audience, while employing verismo (ie, realism) to evoke the starkness of those historical events.

Similarly, Cannon used these operatic techniques as a method for transmitting knowledge, using drama to lure his audience and verismo to convey the historical context of everyday life in his painting. Cannon transforms his *Tosca* into a flurry of motion and drama, a visual representation of the operatic experience. In the painting, his two figures are not simply singing along with or listening to the music; they are experiencing *Tosca*, acting out its emotional rollercoaster. Their intensely theatrical expressions reflect those of operatic performers, the female figure seeming to wail *Tosca’s* tragedy as her own.

Additionally, Cannon does not waste the opportunity of his program cover placement to publicly critique the social status of opera and the outsider-imposed nonrelationship between Native people and classical music— the assumption being that only truly cultured people, presumably Anglo, listen to opera. Cannon accomplishes this by creating a sense of continuity from past to present, juxtaposing a *Tosca*-playing phonograph in the center of the room with an image of the martyred Kennedy brothers. While the image as a whole reflects the scattered belongings of everyday life, individual elements evoke both the difficult reservation period of the 19th century and the civil rights movement of the 1960s. *Tosca* is rooted both in the past and present, displaying cultural specificity, continuity and wealth. Verismo.

Thus, within this context, the woman in the painting is not simply belting out *Tosca’s* tragedy, nor is the man in deep thought about opera. The remembered muse is not Sardou or Puccini’s tragic *Tosca*, but the frustrations of Native America itself. Here, that *Tosca* is an opera becomes essential as it is the issues that opera as an institution brings up that hold the key to this painting. Cannon’s *Tosca* is a call to arms in which he masterfully transmits his knowledge of the visual, theatrical and aural arts through the public critique of the operatic institution and the historic mistreatment of Native people.

Elysa Poon is an art historian and program coordinator for the Indian Arts Research Center at the School for Advanced Research Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Elizabeth Briody and Antonio Chavarria are contributing editors of Anthropology Works, the AN column of the AAA Committee on Practicing, Applied and Public Interest Anthropology.

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