

Art Trip: Duane Linklater at Soft Power

Rosie Prata, *The Globe and Mail*, 25 November 2019



Duane Linklater, *can the circle be unbroken 2*, 2019, digital print on linen, iron red dye, cypress yellow ochre, blueberry extract, charcoal, 120 x 240 in. (305 x 610 cm)

For Soft Power, on view to Feb. 17 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Omaskeko Cree artist and 2013 Sobey Art Award recipient Duane Linklater has created five “flat sculptures” – digitally printed and naturally dyed linen canvases sewn in the shape of tepee covers – and named them for one of the most famous songs in country music, the Carter Family’s *Can the Circle Be Unbroken*.

First released in 1935, the song grieves the death of a mother and hopes that the circle of kinship that binds family, friends and community will continue despite the loss of its ancestral linchpin. The group adapted the song from a Christian hymn written in 1907.

Except that isn’t the whole story, of course. Much of the Carter Family’s raw material was sourced with the help of Lesley Riddle, an African-American “song catcher.” It’s well established that the entire genre of country music is indebted to the songs of enslaved people. The banjo, which entered Appalachia via white minstrel shows, has been played in the Caribbean since the 17th century.

Also in the 17th century, English settlers started trading floral fabrics – inspired by the paintings of Dutch masters such as Ambrosius Bosschaert, whose work Linklater has digitally printed on his canvases – with Cree people. In beading and other crafts, European floral designs came to replace traditional Cree geometric patterns.

Perhaps if Linklater’s non-functioning tepee covers were assembled onto tripod poles, the circular form of this Indigenous architecture could become unbroken – but that’s not how they’re meant to be viewed. History is never so clear-cut. The pieces must be seen in the context in which they’ve settled, and it’s up to us to patch their meaning together.