

Eiteljorg museum to showcase glass artist's Indigenous creation story

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Although ravens are associated with death in many cultures, the birds signify a cosmic beginning for members of the Tlingit tribe in the Pacific Northwest.

In Tlingit mythology, a specific white raven known as Yéil brought light to Earth.

Preston Singletary, one of the world's top glass artists, used the folklore of his ancestors to create the solo exhibition "Raven and the Box of Daylight." The show that's been presented at five museums, including the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, opens Nov. 8 at the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art.

"Raven is pretty much the central figure of most of the mythologies—the stories that were developed and retold for hundreds of years," Singletary told IBJ. "He has the distinction of having brought order to the world, so to speak."

Singletary, who grew up in Seattle, said Tlingit (pronounced "Kling-it") people passed down stories of Raven capturing boxes filled with the sun, moon and stars and then liberating the light.

But Raven isn't a traditional hero or a character who follows a straight path to success. He's a shape-shifting prankster defined by mischief and ambition. Singletary said the bird is vain, funny and demanding.

"Raven sometimes sets off to do one thing, and he fails. But he fails up," Singletary said of Raven's knack for accidental achievement. "His activities ended up benefiting humankind."

There's nothing accidental or imprecise in Singletary's work. "Raven and the Box of



Artist Preston Singletary poses in his Seattle studio. The exhibition "Preston Singletary: Raven and the Box of Daylight" is scheduled to open Nov. 8 at the [Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art](#). (Jovelle Tamayo photo courtesy of the American Craft Council Library and Archives)

Daylight” features 60 pieces of glass artwork displayed across 5,000 square feet. Image, a literary journal, described the exhibition as “a series of interrelated objects [working] together to create a totalizing experience that is almost theatrical.”

Singletary crafted blown glass, sand-carved glass, kiln-cast glass and even totems cast in lead crystal. The exhibition features video, soundscapes and recordings of Tlingit elders telling parts of the story.

Kathryn Haigh, the Eiteljorg’s CEO since 2023, said “Raven and the Box of Daylight” is a landmark exhibition for the museum.



Kathryn Haigh

“It embodies everything that I’m trying to do as a new leader, which is to amplify contemporary artists who are Native and then also do something a little bit different and innovative for us,” Haigh said. “We’ve never had an immersive, multisensory exhibition like this.”

Lisa Pelo, a glass artist who operates her Hot Blown Glass studio in Hendricks County, said she’s eager to see Singletary’s work in the context of dramatic lighting at the Eiteljorg.

“The color contrasts in his Native American images are just gorgeous,” said Pelo, who once attended a glassblowing demonstration by Singletary in St. Louis. “The work has depth of color while appearing to have an internal glow.”

Research and development

Singletary said his artistic process is made up of continual trial and error as he replicates traditional Tlingit forms in the fragile, complicated medium of glass.

Early in his career, Singletary mimicked basic objects such as dishes, bowls and spoons.

“As my skills evolved, I was able to make more complex things,” he said. “The more success that I found with material and exhibiting work, it gave me the wherewithal to make more work.”

“Raven and the Box of Daylight” includes representations of fish, human figures and a full-sized canoe.

Singletary said he draws designs on paper before executing works in glass. Four employees assist him at his West Coast studio.

Singletary’s pieces that feature sandblasted details—such as eyes—are multi-stage efforts.

“First you have the glass-forming process, and then I’ll cover the piece with this rubber stencil,” he said. “I’ll draw directly onto the form, responding to the proportions of the object itself. I’ll try to adapt the designs within the confines of that shape. After it’s drawn, I’ll cut out the stencil and do a sandblasting process.”

Pelo, a former glass program manager at [Indy Art Center](#), said Singletary’s skills at cold working—the methods of altering or decorating glass after it has cooled—are elite.

“Some of his detail is so tiny, and you want to be super neat and clean on that surface,” Pelo said. “You can’t chip it, because that just causes you a whole bunch of additional cold working.”



“Basket” is a collection of 2016 sculptures of blown and sand-carved glass. The exhibition “Preston Singletary: Raven and the Box of Daylight” is scheduled to open Nov. 8 at the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art. (Photo courtesy of Preston Singletary)



Cutting edge

The Eiteljorg, which opened at the intersection of Washington and West streets in 1989, has a long-running commitment to exhibiting and acquiring contemporary Native art.

The museum launched its biennial Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship in 1999. The recently announced class of five artists for 2025 includes Cannupa Hanska Luger, a New Mexico resident who blends science fiction with personal experience to create monumental installations.

Each fellowship artist receives \$50,000, and the museum will spend more than \$100,000 overall to purchase works by the artists.

Haigh said Singletary’s exhibition is a continuation of the fellowship program’s mission to “elevate and amplify these artists who are truly working in the contemporary art world and the fine art world.”

Singletary, who has not yet made an in-person visit to the Eiteljorg, said he’s aware of the fellowship program.

“It’s quite an honor to be able to show there,” he said.

“Raven and the Box of Daylight,” which has been called Singletary’s magnum opus, made its debut in 2018 at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington.

“I’m flattered and honored that it will continue to be seen by more and more people,” Singletary said. “It’s an effort that I would find really hard to duplicate because of the amount of work that went into the exhibition. It was about three years building the show, but many more years prior to that learning about Raven and all these different stories.”

“Preston Singletary: Raven and the Box of Daylight”

Who: Preston Singletary is a contemporary artist who incorporates themes of his Tlingit heritage in glass creations.

What: Singletary's "Raven and the Box of Daylight" traveling exhibition will be on display at the Eiteljorg museum following stops at museums in Tacoma, Washington; Wichita, Kansas; Washington, D.C.; Norfolk, Virginia; and Oklahoma City.

When: Nov. 8 to March 9

Where: Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, 500 W. Washington St.

Tickets: \$20, or free admission for museum members

Info: Visit eiteljorg.org.

Source: IBJ research

Indiana glass

Pelo credits Indy Art Center for fostering the education and practice of artistic glassblowing in central Indiana. The glass program began when Indy Art Center opened its current facility at 820 E. 67th St. in 1995.

After studying glass art at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, Pelo moved to Indianapolis in the 1980s and found limited opportunities for working at furnaces where temperatures reach 2,000 degrees. She said Indiana's hot shops with public access were located in Corydon at the southern end of the state and in Elwood, a community about halfway between Indianapolis and Fort Wayne.

Zimmerman Art Glass, a Corydon company that opened in 1942, continues to produce bottles, bowls and vases. Elwood has hosted a glass festival since 1971.

Pelo took over the glass program at Indy Art Center after its first instructor, Ed Francis, left to become an art instructor at Tidewater Community College in Virginia.

After natural gas was discovered in Indiana in the 1880s, the northern part of the state became a center for production glass. Dunkirk and Albany, two communities northeast of Muncie, were home to multiple glass factories.

"It's fascinating to go to Dunkirk and go to Albany to see the glass museums and see how many factories existed," Pelo said. "Fabulous plateware and decorative pieces were created before the companies either went out of business or moved out of Indiana."

Before Singletary focused on studio art, he made glass paperweights and Christmas ornaments in a factory.

He attended his first workshop at the Pilchuck Glass Center, a facility north of Seattle co-founded by iconic glass artist Dale Chihuly, in 1984.

Indianapolis is home to one of Chihuly's largest works. The 43-foot "Fireworks of Glass" tower was installed at the [Children's Museum of Indianapolis](#) in 2006. In 2020, [Newfields](#) acquired a 1996 Chihuly piece titled "Mexican Rose and Aventurine Chandelier."

Eiteljorg CEO Haigh said "Raven and the Box of Daylight" is an opportunity for Singletary to make a mark in Indianapolis.

"Everyone knows Chihuly," Haigh said. "My goal is for everyone to know Preston Singletary."

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