

“Urban Iroquois” prepares for exhibit



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Southern Illinois University Edwardsville’s College of Arts and Sciences works diligently to promote high-quality scholarly and creative activities, public services, and cultural and arts programming for the University and its surrounding community.

On this week’s episode of Segue, SIUE’s premier radio show that discusses ideas and issues on campus and beyond, Greg Budzban, PhD, CAS dean, interviews Jeff Thomas, an internationally renowned photographer, about his visit to SIUE’s campus and his photography exhibit at the Edwardsville Art Center.

The episode will air at 9 a.m. Sunday, March 25 on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

On Wednesday, March 21, the Departments of Anthropology, Historical Studies and Philosophy welcomed Thomas to campus for a screening of a documentary about his work. After the film, Thomas presented a lecture, titled “A Necessary Fiction: An Urban Indian in the Archives.”

Thomas’s exhibit, “Birdman Rising: Conversations beyond Colonialism,” has its opening reception at the Edwardsville Art Center at 6165 Center Grove Road this Friday, March 23rd from 6:00-8:00 PM. The exhibition runs at the Arts Center from Friday, March 23 through Friday, April 20 and will be open to the public from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Wednesday through Friday, and 11 a.m.-3 p.m. on Saturdays.

“Birdman Rising” showcases Thomas’s photographic works along with Native American artifacts from the SIUE University Museum collection juxtaposing the contemporary and prehistoric local environments, and the peoples who interacted within them. It looks into and beyond colonialism to the pre-colonial glory of the Mississippians in order to create a dialogue about living in a world beyond colonialism today.

“Can you talk about your work in photography and how it emerged in your life?” Budzban inquires.

“In 1979, I had a serious car accident, and I was left with a permanent disability, a spinal cord injury, which left me unable to work again,” Thomas explains. “I was only 24 years old at the time, and my wife and I had a young son. I had to find a way to reinvent my life, and so I chose my prior interest in photography.

“One year later, I had my first solo exhibition in Buffalo (New York). From there, it emerged from looking at the history of photography, and what it did or didn’t say about Native American or North American indigenous people.”

With Thomas’ own experience as an “urban-based Iroquois,” he wanted to express the complications involved with much of the young, native populations moving into cities and living their lives with “an invisible cultural existence.”

“Photography was a way that I could place myself within that conversation to say, ‘this is here, and this is what I see; it might not look native to you, but it’s native in terms of what I am familiar with,’” Thomas says.

“I’m fascinated with this notion of the ‘urban Iroquois,’” Budzban says. “Early Native American photography showed native culture as more of a curiosity, and I’ve looked at your work and it’s clear that you’re trying to expand that idea of what it means to be a Native American and being an indigenous person in this culture.

“How does one stay true to one’s self and culture in a completely different environment?” Budzban inquires.

“That was my fear, as well,” Thomas says. “There was no framework for native people to address urbanization, and I had to experiment and find my way. I looked at early street photographers and documentary photographers at the time, and I wondered how I could bring together some kind of image that was consistent with my own culture.”

As a teenager, Thomas spent a lot of time travelling with his grandmother back and forth from Buffalo to the Six Nations of the Grand River reserve in Ontario, Canada. His relatives instilled foundational ideals of cultural and environmental preservation, activism and traditional values in the young man’s mind, which translates into his work to this day.

While researching the contemporary pow-wows, Thomas came across the Mississippians, particularly the Birdman.

“There’s a lineage that stretches from the presence to that, and I was looking for the earliest occurrences of the Birdman, or the feathered headdresses used in those pow-wows, and I found it in the Mississippian,” Thomas says. “I found the urban culture of the Cahokia so interesting, and they broke the perceptions that Indians were supposed to live on some sort of specific reservation.”

Cory Willmott, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Anthropology, had actually met Thomas in the 1980s in Ottawa, and invited him to come to the University for a screening of his documentary and to discuss his research. This point of contact allowed a relationship with the University Museum and the Edwardsville Art Center, as well as the wider community.

His work photographing Mississippian culture from the Cahokia region now coexists in harmony with some of the University Museum’s prized artifacts in his exhibit.

To hear more of the conversation between Budzban and Thomas, tune in at 9 a.m. Sunday, March 25 to WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

By Madelaine Gerard, SIUE Marketing & Communications