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ARTFORUM

Review: Dara Friedman



Dara Friedman, *Mother Drum*, 2016, HD video, color, sound, 14 minutes 33 seconds.

The question of ownership lurks at the edges of Dara Friedman's new three-channel HD video, *Mother Drum*, 2016. The work seems to ask: To whom does this land, this neighborhood, this building belong? Having begun the project after the 2014 discovery of an ancient Tequesta Indian village not far from her home in downtown Miami, Friedman traveled to several American Indian reservations in the Northwest to film dancers and drummers. *Mother Drum* may not explicitly address the connections between its origin (the unearthing of sacred ground at a high-rise construction site) and its screening room (Gavin Brown's space in Harlem, a former brewery that the dealer has described as an "urban secular cathedral"), but the video underscores such connections nevertheless, revealing a critical edge that tempers the reverential optimism of the artist's previous works. It is only one of the ways in which *Mother Drum* feels like the beginning of a phase of the artist's production.

As she has done in the past, Friedman found her individual subjects through an open call (for *Musical*, 2007–2008, she found singers through ads on Backstage.com; for *Dancer*, 2011, in the *Miami New Times* and on the Miami Art Museum website and Craigslist.com; for *Mother Drum*, on PowWows.com), and again they perform for her camera. But in this film, there is a difference: Earlier, a singer would catch the camera's eye or a dancer would look directly into its lens, but here, Friedman mostly goes unnoticed. Only once does a subject acknowledge her presence, when a group of teenagers walk across a parking lot in beaded regalia, presumably leaving a competition, and one of the boys gives her a

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sideways glance. The men in the drum circle appear not to notice when the flash, often the only source of light in a shot, blinks off and on repeatedly, and Cynthia Jim, the magisterial dancer at the center of the film, looks to have turned her gaze inward. The camera, too, keeps its eye to the ground, remaining trained on the bedrock near the Miami home of Ishmael Bermudez (the subject of Friedman's *Well of Ancient Mysteries*, 2014) and the trampled grass beneath the feet of a young dancer. Her liberal use of image mirroring, superimposition, and solarization reinforces the sense of insularity and introspection.

Friedman studied with the Austrian filmmaker Peter Kubelka, and the influence of his profoundly poetic structuralism is palpable, from the shifts between light and dark to the flickers of color that separate shots. She is particularly dedicated to the independence of sound and image, and chants and drumbeats drift in and out of synch with the pictures on the screens. The effect can be a bit heavy-handed, as when she overlays the rhythmic throb of a heartbeat with close-ups of a drum being struck. But it can also be poignant, as the sound of Jim's breathing drowns out the melodious clinking of metal ornaments on her dress. Kubelka's example is most recognizable, however, in the deep respect with which Friedman approaches her subjects: "We're not going to shoot anyone," she once said in an interview. Her generous approach means that the films are often far longer than the average gallery visit. *Musical* is nearly an hour long and *Play (Parts 1 & 2)*, 2013, forty-five minutes, making the nearly fifteen-minute *Mother Drum* relatively brief in comparison. Like its predecessors, the new film need not be seen from beginning to end (there is no narrative arc to follow) but even more than earlier works, it rewards watching in its entirety. To see only the young girl spin and stamp across the screens would risk missing the full ramifications of the restraint and compassion in Jim's movements and the chants of the lone elder woman among the all-male drum circle and the longing in that girl's song as it trails off into silence, as if unsure to whom it belongs.

- Rachel Churner