

Kayne Griffin Corcoran

Art in America

Dara Friedman

NEW YORK, at Gavin Brown's Enterprise – Over the past decade, German-born, Miami-based artist Dara Friedman has made numerous works that apply the techniques of structuralist cinema—she studied with the legendary avant-garde filmmaker Peter Kubelka in the '90s—to the subject of the performing body. *Dancer* (2011) is composed of roughly forty short segments capturing dancers working in virtually every imaginable style who were solicited by the artist to perform for her camera around the streets of Miami. Friedman employed 16mm film and a vintage hand-cranked Bolex camera for the piece, adapting her camerawork for each segment to match the specific dancer's movements, and recorded the sound separately, amplifying the effect of the staccato cuts by intentionally allowing the soundtrack to fall out of sync with the image. *Musical* (2007) similarly involved filming hired performers in public space—this time dozens of singers, each of whom delivered a single, seemingly impromptu performance in a public location in Midtown Manhattan.



Dara Friedman: *Mother Drum*, 2016, three-channel video, 14 minutes, 33 seconds; at Gavin Brown's enterprise.

For her most recent work, *Mother Drum* (2016), Friedman turned to Native American traditions, traveling to powwows at three reservations—those of the Swinomish in Washington, the Coeur d’Alene in Idaho, and the Crow in Montana—over the course of summer 2015 to film the performances of Fancy Dancers and drummers. At Gavin Brown’s Harlem outpost, the three-channel video installation was projected on a single massive screen spanning the length of the gallery’s first-floor exhibition space. The film runs on a continuous loop, alternating between segments of individual dancers, groups of drummers, and animals in the landscape, allintercut with abstract, monochromatic fields of bright color.

Mother Drum is, among other things, a particularly impressive feat of video editing. Friedman employs a litany of postproduction effects, often pairing seemingly straight footage with more overtly manipulated shots in order to foreground the camera’s mediating role in the viewer’s encounter with the dancers. The three projections appear to fall in and out of sync over the course of the film’s fourteen minutes. One especially captivating sequence displays close-up shots of a lone female dancer viewed from three different angles simultaneously, with the sound produced by her regalia as she moves layered to hypnotic effect. Elsewhere, the projections show different imagery: a young drummer juxtaposed with the moonlit silhouette of a horse drinking from a spring, or dancers walking through a parking lot bracketed by saturated blocks of red and green.

Like the performing artists in Friedman’s previous works, the dancers and drummers in *Mother Drum* perform directly for her camera. She solicited participants via an online advertisement, and filmed them separately from the broader context of the powwows she attended. One benefit of Friedman’s formalist approach is that it allows *Mother Drum* largely to avoid the ethnographic gaze typical of documentary film; there is no false pretense here of authentic, unmediated access to Native American traditions, nor does the artist attempt to explain them on the performers’ behalf. But cleaving the performances from any broader context introduces problems of its own. The Fancy Dance is a distinctly modern form, developed in the early twentieth century in response to colonialist suppression of indigenous religious ceremonies, and is explicitly intended to be performed for spectators, often in competitions at intertribal gatherings. But none of that is evident in the film or its framing for the exhibition. Friedman cites the 2014 discovery of remnants of an ancient Tequesta settlement under a construction site in downtown Miami as her original inspiration for the project, implicitly linking the film’s contemporary dancers and drummers to a two-thousand-year-old archaeological find in an entirely different part of the country. Though *Mother Drum* is formally stunning, it unfortunately treats Native American cultures as a single, undifferentiated entity that exists out of time.

— Rachel Wetzler