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THE ASPEN TIMES

Q&A: Artist Dara Friedman on 'Mother Drum'



Dara Friedman, Mother Drum, 2016, Three-channel video, 14:33 min. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome.

Dara Friedman traveled the American west in the summer of 2015 to film the Native American jingle dress dancing and drumming traditions with the Swinomish in Washington, the Coeur d'Alene in Idaho and the Crow in Montana.

The result is her 2016 three-channel film, "Mother Drum," which opens at the Aspen Art Museum on Friday.

The Aspen exhibition follows the opening of "Dara Friedman: Perfect Stranger" last month at the Perez Art Museum Miami, which marked the first career survey of the German-born, Miami-based video artist's career. It drew national attention from the art world and included "Mother Drum" along with works dating back to 1991.

Friedman found Aspen to be an oasis when she arrived this week.

"I came off the flight from Miami on two hours of sleep and feeling really rough," she said Tuesday during a break from installing "Mother Drum." "But you arrive here and everybody has drunk jolly juice, so why bother being tired when you can be happy. That's really nice. It's amazing to be here."

Andrew Travers: Tell me about the experience of filming "Mother Drum." How did you find your collaborators and decide where to shoot?

Dara Friedman: It was complicated. Normally when I start a work I know what I'm after. Here I did, too, I just didn't know how to get there at first. What I was interested in was how everybody says "ceremony is important," "ritual is important." I wanted to know why.

In Miami, there had just been this archeological dig where they uncovered the city center of indigenous peoples of Miami — the Tequesta — and I got super-excited about it. Nobody else seemed to care. I tried to draw awareness to this and I thought perhaps I could do that by engaging with the local tribes around Miami. But that didn't happen, so I cast a wider net to see if anybody wanted to play with me to try and figure out this thing that I was interested in.

So I went to this website, powwows.com, and I bought an ad saying I was a filmmaker and artist looking for dancers to make a film with. I got responses from all over the country. Then I plotted a course of action — I drew a line on the map from Swinomish, Washington, to Crow Agency, Montana.

AT: Was it a passive experience? Were you filming powwows or staging events for the film?

Travers, Andrew. "Q&A: Artist Dara Friedman on 'Mother Drum'". The Aspen Times. 14 December 2017. Web.

DF: I brought a 40-foot-long, eight-foot-high black duvetyne backdrop and I would clip it up on a fence or on two trees to isolate the dancers. And they danced or drummed very specifically for my camera. I don't want the viewer of the work to be passive. I find that grotesque. And I never want to be a passive viewer. I want it to be something you agree to do together.

AT: What is the ideal viewing experience for "Mother Drum?" You want people to sit and be immersed in it?

DF: Yes, we're building a bench and there are subwoofers built into it. So just come in and allow yourself to be there. At first it might seem loud, but just stay with it. Put down your phone, it'll be fine. It's a thing I love about a museum: that you have to enter physically — more and more that's really important.

AT: How did you make choices with the post-production of "Mother Drum?" The visual effects on the dancers and drummers, these blocks of color you inserted?

DF: I started with two screens, and then three screens. The breakthrough for me was figuring out that I could bring these color fields into the work and that was a way to bring my own presence into it. That felt like, "Oh, this is how I can be more fully a part of this experience." And the other footage — you'll see a bird that's from the archeological site down in Miami and there are scraps of other things that were happening. But not too many ingredients. It's about having a few ingredients and working them quite hard.

AT: Your films have been this career-long inquiry into dance and communication through movement. What new did you learn in making "Mother Drum?"

DF: I learned that dance, the jingle dress dance and other dances, are physical prayer. They're not performances, they're prayers. I learned about the Mother Drum — that's the big round drum that six or 12 people play to give the Earth's heartbeat. And it does have a heartbeat rhythm. So I learned that if we anthropomorphize the Earth and give the Earth a body we can learn an awful lot.

The jingle dress dance is a healing dance. And while I was in Montana I learned that my dad had colon cancer. And while I was editing he was on the other side of my studio wall. So I was conscious of his presence and I started to think about the internal physical body, what happens when you eat food and it goes into your body and goes past your heart and into your digestive system and this cycle of things. Thinking about this and the Earth's heartbeat, the connection was very real. And it was helpful. These two unrelated things were touching up close and making a lot of sense.

—Andrew Travers