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HYPERALLERGIC

Filming Native American Performance Through a Decolonized Lens

In her three-channel video "Mother Drum," Dara Friedman avoids many of the problematic patterns non-Native artists often fall into when making art about Native American communities.



Dara Friedman, "Mother Drum" (2016), three-channel video, 14:33 min, installation view at Aspen Art Museum (all photos courtesy Tony Prikryl)

ASPEN, Colorado — The contemporary art world appears to be split by ethnic absolutism. The negative receptions of recent artworks such as Dana Schultz's "Open Casket" (2016) and Sam Durant's "Scaffold" (2012) were the result of artists acting as new authors to a history experienced in bodies and environments to which those artists don't belong, a chasm that empathy alone cannot bridge. However, Dara Friedman's three-channel video "Mother Drum" (2016) is a powerful example that it is possible to work at the complex intersection of race, history and art in ways that are important, respectful, and exciting.

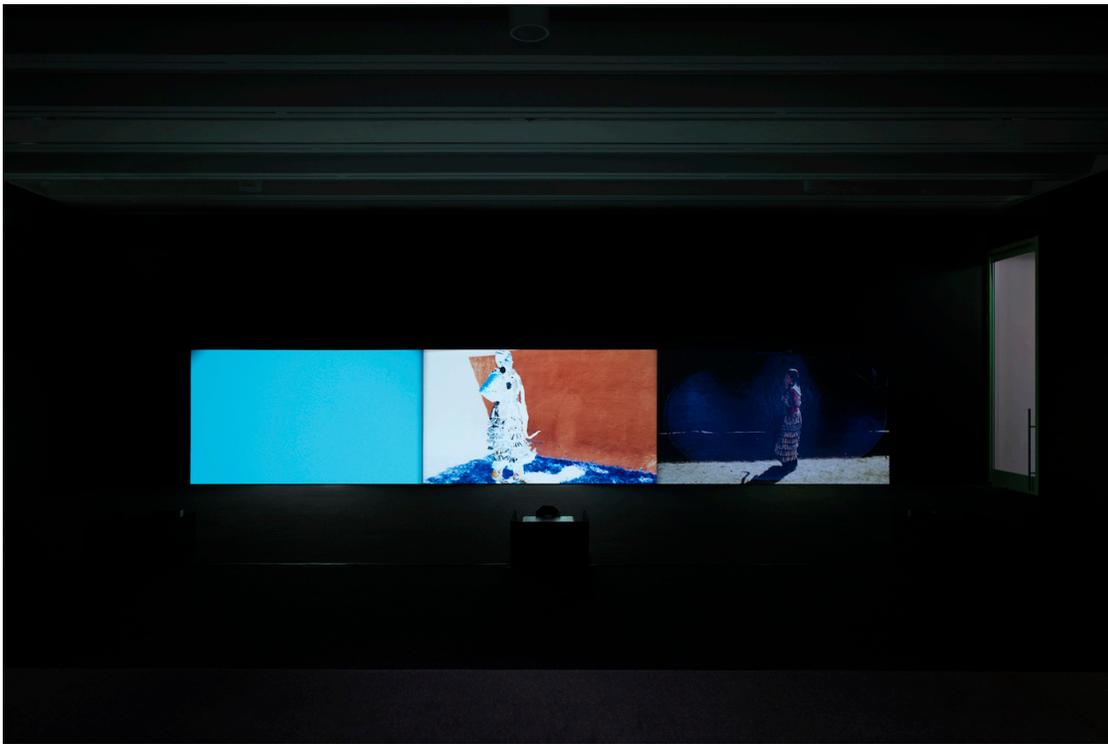


Dara Friedman, "Mother Drum" (2016), three-channel video, 14:33 min, installation view at Aspen Art Museum

"Mother Drum," currently on view at the Aspen Art Museum, contains footage of performances filmed at Swinomish, Coeur d'Alene, and Crow Reservations. Friedman, an outsider to the Native American communities, makes compelling interventions through film that insist sound and movement are the focus. The result is the presentation of acts anchored in tradition and place, without the veil of nostalgia, romanticism, or past pageantry smothering the art forms. The purpose of the Jingle Bell dance, Round Dance, or Drum Circles are only fully legible to "insiders" in their respective communities. "Mother Drum" compellingly makes the case that indigenous art performance can be universally compelling to contemporary art audiences within a decolonized paradigm.

"Mother Drum" is organized into three sections, presented in a continuous loop with no discernible beginning or end. The transitions between sections are sometimes seamless, with overlapping melodies or superimposed footage projected across a long screen. Other interludes are more abrupt, with fields of color or sudden breaks in the soundtrack.

In one segment, a Drum Circle is seen at nighttime under a spotlight that isolates the musicians and leaves the surrounding space bathed in darkness. The camera lingers long enough on the Circle that the viewer's restless eye eventually stops studying the drummers' diverse ages, clothes, and hairstyles. The vibrations sent out from the drum penetrate the body of the listener and uncomfortably reverberate through the chest. The choir of voices rises above the drum's steady pulse, which remains present throughout the more than 14 minutes of "Mother Drum." Even when the drum is silenced, its absence is palpable.



Dara Friedman, "Mother Drum" (2016), three-channel video, 14:33 min, installation view at Aspen Art Museum

In another sequence, Shuel-let-qua Q:olosoet, also known as Cynthia Jim, wears an ornate dress of the cone-shaped beads called Jingle Bells. The galloping rhythm of the bells is determined by her movement, a combination of toe lifts and shuffling steps. The sounds of the Drum Circle waft in and out as the camera oscillates between her face and feet. The dusty earth underfoot rises in small clouds as if conjured from its slumber on her command. Periods of silence accentuate the economy of her movements. When the footage of a second Jingle Bell dancer replaces Jim, the footwork changes slightly. Friedman superimposes footage from the interior of a heart chamber over the dancer's image, and the organ's pulse syncs with the swinging bells.

The rhythm slows and the melody changes drastically with the introduction of a young teenage boy dressed in white. He keeps time with a hand drum and sings under a spotlight that reveals only him and the green grass underfoot. Near the end of his solo, the lyrics transition to English — "Baby, you're mine ... tonight" — indicating the popular song style of a round dance. The music of the Drum Circle returns with a quickening pace, chasing the untraceable pattern of his new dance. He appears to levitate as one foot is always departing the ground and every limb swings energetically, arms extended by dance sticks in hand.

"Mother Drum" is a fugue, a repeating musical motif designed to run in an infinite loop. The melodically independent sections are unified by running around each other and within each other like an echo. This notion of melody as subject, produced by the performers within the film, is a hallmark of Friedman's work. Her piece "Dancer" (2011) features candid footage of performers in the streets of Miami, but the video's soundtrack comes from outside the frame of Friedman's camera. In "Musical" (2007–08), the song and the environment are emphasized, but dance does not really factor into the piece. In "Mother Drum," the filmed artists create all the

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sound and movement. The absence of a specific sense of place in the piece is unique within Friedman's oeuvre. It allows all other elements to become more pronounced, resulting in something rooted in tradition that nonetheless defies any historical trappings.

The practice of non-native artists leveraging the subject matter of American Indians has a problematic past. Artists such as Edward Curtis and Frederic Remington often mixed different regional tribal clothing and ceremonies as if they belonged to a single, shared tradition from which artists of European descent could borrow as they pleased. Friedman did not solicit the artists in "Mother Drum." Each responded to an open audition call with a performance of his or her choice.

In museum literature, Friedman identifies the participants' tribal affiliations, but she also acknowledges their unique contributions by emphasizing the nuances of each performance. Common features of powwow music can encourage audiences to believe the songs are alike. However, the same song can accompany different dances and their purposes can be distinguished by the style of dress or the gender of the dancer. Throughout "Mother Drum," Friedman's camera stays in one place long enough to allow viewers to understand the melody, the rhythm, the steps, the pace before she introduces something new. She sharpens outsiders' eyes and ears without pandering or diluting the acts themselves or reducing the dialogue to facile takeaways.

The creative narrative of White America with Native America is on its own loop, despite dynamic interventions by celebrated artists. Wendy Red Star, James Luna, and Adrian Stimson have often confronted white spectatorship in their work, and this creates space for the conversation to move forward, but sometimes the interruption becomes the sole focus of the conversation. Although it is tempting to criticize Friedman for creating a piece that transposes work by Native American dancers and musicians into a contemporary art setting, what she accomplishes with "Mother Drum" is to expose art historical cycles without giving them a platform or casting the performers' contributions into the shadows.

—Kealey Boyd