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Andy Battaglia
Raven Chacon: *A Worm's Eye View from a Bird's Beak*
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Raven Chacon Summons Earthy and Ethereal Sounds from Landscapes and Guns

Raven Chacon.
Courtesy John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

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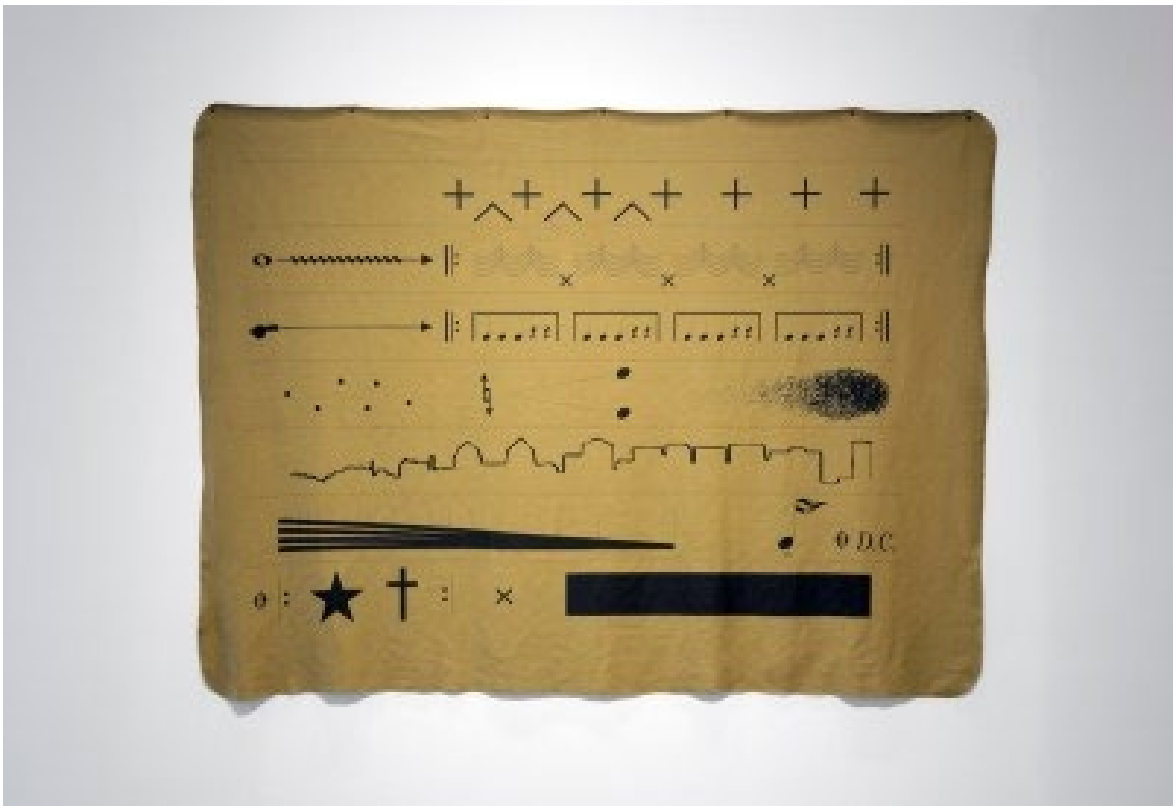
Drawing on music, video, and installations that evoke the presence of environmental sights and sounds, **Raven Chacon** is a composer and artist whose work focuses in part on land and its many different inhabitants. Born in Fort Defiance, Navajo Nation, and currently based in Upstate New York and New Mexico, Chacon (Diné) has created compositions and artworks inspired by a distinctive sense of place, however specific or impressionistic that sense may be.

He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2022 and was named a MacArthur Foundation Fellow in 2023. His current exhibition at the Swiss Institute in New York, touted as his first major institutional solo show, features 11 works dating back to 1999 and is accompanied by companion show sharing the same title—"A Worm's Eye View from a Bird's Beak"—at Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum in Tromsø, Norway. (The New York exhibition is on view through April 14; the Norwegian show continues through September 1.)

Below, Chacon talks about four works that counted as highlights during a walkthrough of his Swiss Institute show.



Raven Chacon: American Ledger No. 1 (Army Blanket), 2020.
Daniel Pérez/Courtesy Swiss Institute

American Ledger No. 1 (Army Blanket), 2020

This is part of a series of scores that take on the form of a flag. You read it like a score—from left to right, top to bottom—and inside of it is a chronology of what I call the creation story of the land that the United States is on. At the top is a blank area: there weren't even humans yet. As you go on, you come to a landscape, with stars and mountains—part of a world view that's emerging as people live on the land for the first time. Anytime you see a cross in one of my scores, it's a kind of notation for percussion.

Then you move down a line and this wavy tone gets played, as a continuation of this world view that's maybe oscillating and changing. These waves can be interpreted as sounds going up and down. Every time you see an X, it's a chopping of wood, like

with an axe. Then it moves to building ships and coming over the ocean to the Americas, and to building a new colonies. And on the next line, you have a police whistle that gets blown and starts a rhythm—with three notes and two rests—that is the Three-Fifths Compromise, which [in 1787] introduced slavery to the economy.

Then there's a point in the score when coins are thrown, with cities being built in the Industrial Revolution. That gets interpreted through a line that is not necessarily for pitch; it could be a change in tone, a change of volume, a change of tempo. Then you have an acceleration, a kind of crashing that is also becoming unified. I like to call it a corralling of the sound, where you have all this activity that becomes motor-rhythmic.

Then it stops with the lighting of a match and a symbol, a "D.C. al coda" with crosshairs. In musical terms that means go back and play the whole thing again, but it is also a reference to Washington, D.C. Then you come to the end and see a star again, a Christian cross, one more chopping of wood—and whatever happens next, in which every sound that has existed in the composition gets played together all at once.

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Daniel Pérez/Courtesy Swiss Institute

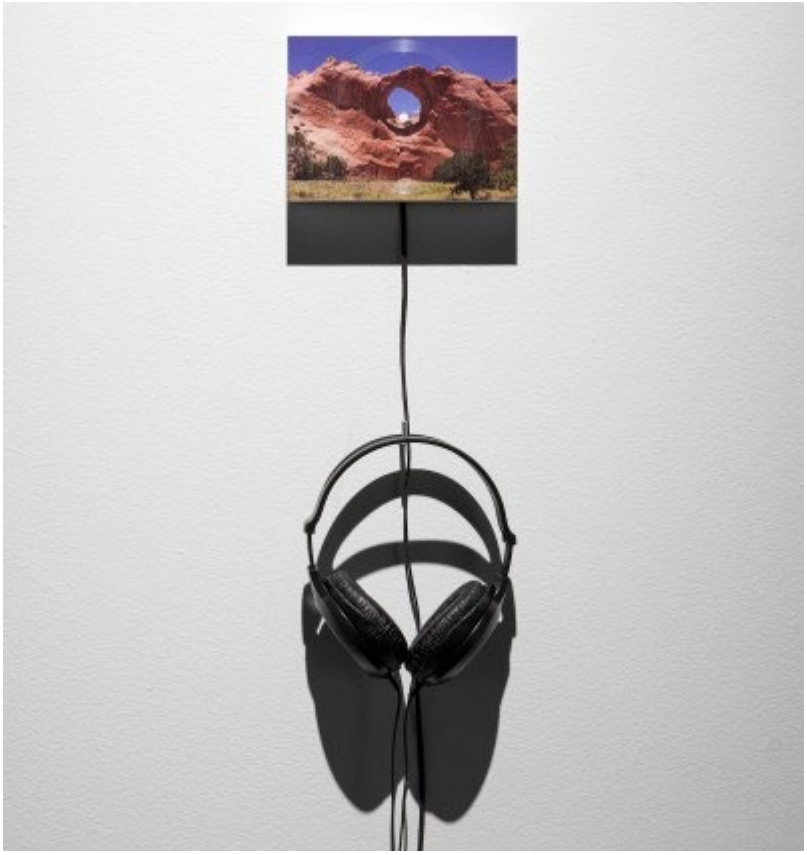
Report (2001/2015)

This is an infamous piece I wrote 23 years ago when I was thinking through some compositional frustrations. I was wanting to find an instrument I couldn't control, [for which] I didn't have the agency to control the volume, the pitch, the timbre, or any of the musical parameters I had been working with. I was trying to think: what can I use that would be just the most blunt, limiting instrument? I thought about drums, but you can play those very quietly, and you can change the pitch.

Around that time I was doing a lot of hunting and practicing shooting with friends out in the desert, and I thought, I can just write it for guns. I didn't think of it as some kind of pro-gun or anti-gun statement. But because the people I could find who could read music and shoot guns to perform it were a bunch of

drummers and percussionist guys, it looked like I was trying to form a militia. So it kind of just sat around as a conceptual piece.

About 10 years later I started finding different people who wanted to do it. I found more women who had guns in New Mexico, and I started to wonder what it would mean if we made a video of it being performed. The video was filmed in 2015 with women, people of color, some Indigenous folks. A lot of my work is about histories of places and certain landscapes, and this piece raises lots of questions: Where is this place? What are they shooting at? Are they training for something? That music could raise those kinds of questions was interesting to me.



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Daniel Pérez/Courtesy Swiss Institute

Field Recordings (1999)

This is the first piece I ever made. The idea was to go to different places I'm very familiar with, two of them on Navajo Nation land, to find locations that would be very quiet. I took a recorder and put it there for an hour on a very quiet day: no cars, no people, no airplanes. I ended up with three very quiet recordings of these places and went back to the studio and turned them all the way up to the maximum, as a way to magnify and amplify them. I didn't treat the sounds at all.

I didn't know what sound art was when I made this. I was like, What do I do with this—put it out on CD? It wasn't until later that I realized it was the kind of thing that could be exhibited. Then I started making these postcards that are also flexi-discs you can play on a turntable. The idea was to make something like tourist mementos. I have a few pieces like this that critique people's thinking of "deep listening," or going to places in the Southwest and meditating and having profound experiences in silence—the tourist nature of going to places like Monument Valley or places in the Navajo Nation and sending postcards to friends.

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For Four (Caldera), 2024

This piece can be performed in any valley that was created by some kind of disruption. This valley is a volcanic crater, from an eruption millions of years ago. Over one of the hills is Los Alamos National Laboratory, where they developed the atomic bomb. Within the piece there are four singers who sing the contour of the landscape as a melody. They start in different cardinal directions offset by 90 degrees. As one of the singers pivots, the next one begins, so it becomes a kind of musical round, with all of them singing the same landscape with a delay. After we shot this, I asked the singers and some of them were interpreting things like densities of trees with a little trill or some vibrato. They have the freedom to interpret the landscape as they will. The only thing we set up was to have a starting pitch for the first one, so there would be some kind of locking in, harmonically.

These are mostly classical singers I collaborated with in New Mexico. In fact, one of them is one of the shooters in *Report*. But another version of this piece in Norway has a much different sound. That one has joikers, who practice a tradition of Sámi singing that already is influenced by the landscape, whether literally by the contours of the horizon or something more about stories within a place. There are songs about mountains or rivers that joiks come from. Putting four joikers together is a kind contradiction, because they're so personal, but it creates very dynamic contours as well. Putting them somewhere with a prompt to sing the landscape in addition to joiks that already exist was quite different than the original idea. It was nice for me to learn about joiking. It's very, very old tradition.

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Raven Chacon