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Holland Cotter
Raven Chacon: *A Worm's Eye
View from a Bird's Beak*
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ART REVIEW

Raven Chacon's Sound-and-Art Symphony

At the Swiss Institute, a Pulitzer-Prize winner makes art warmed —
socially and spiritually — by hope.



Installation view of "Raven Chacon: A Worm's Eye View From a Bird's Beak" at the Swiss Institute, which includes the artist's new video installation "For Four (Caldera)." via Swiss Institute; Daniel Pérez

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By Holland Cotter

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Raven Chacon: A Worm's Eye View From a Bird's Beak

A single work of art can get into your system and stay there. I've been living with — haunted by — one by the Navajo composer and sound artist Raven Chacon since encountering it in the 2022 Whitney Biennial.

Titled [“Silent Choir \(Standing Rock\),”](#) it had no visual element. It consisted entirely of an audio recording Chacon taped in 2016 of a voiceless protest by hundreds of No Dakota Access Pipeline demonstrators facing off with the police near Standing Rock, N.D. You could easily have missed the piece unless you stopped and let your ears adjust to its liminal audibility. Even then, the only sound was the rustle of breathing, of bodies shifting and of the high-up buzz of surveillance helicopters.

The same year as the Biennial, Chacon was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for music for a different, more traditionally “musical” piece, “Voiceless Mass” (2021). Scored for a church pipe organ and a chamber music ensemble, it did have a visual component: the majestic interior of the Roman Catholic Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in Milwaukee, where it was first performed.

What both works shared was a conceptual grounding in the politics of history and place. The witnessing silence at Standing Rock read as an anthem of resistance to the long-continuing colonialist desecration of Indigenous land. In an ecclesiastical setting, the music of “Voiceless Mass” became an orchestrated remembrance of the Christian church’s [attempt to expunge Native American spiritual culture](#). (Chacon has described himself as having been raised “halfway in the Catholic Church.”)



“Silent Choir (Standing Rock),“ 2016. Raven Chacon made an audio recording of a silent vigil by people protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline near Standing Rock, N.D. via Raven Chacon

Neither piece is included on the lucidly spartan exhibition titled [“Raven Chacon: A Worm’s Eve View from a Bird’s Beak”](#) at Swiss Institute, which is about as object-filled, object-focused as a sound artist’s survey can get. And the show’s selection of 11 other early and current works, stretching over disciplines and encompassing printed scores, video installations, and a mural, gives a sharp sense of what makes this artist’s output so remarkable.

Born in 1977 in Fort Defiance, Navajo Nation, in what is now Arizona, Chacon spent early years in Albuquerque, N.M., learning classical piano and playing — sometimes on instruments of his own invention — in local rock and noise bands. After moving to Los Angeles to study experimental composition at California Institute of the Arts, he worked with the Native American Composer Apprentice Project teaching young Native musicians on reservations.

In 2009, he joined the activist Native American collective Postcommodity, participating in the design of, among other things, the group’s monumentally bizarre land art project [“Repellent Fence/Valla Repelente,”](#) a two-mile-long line of giant balloons imprinted with eyes and breaching the U.S.-Mexico border. Since 2018, he’s pursued a solo career in sound-based work, much of it performative and collaborative.

The earliest entry here, “Field Recordings” (1999), is a straightforward sound piece. For it, Chacon recorded, at different times of day and night, ambient natural sounds at three remote sites on Navajo land in New Mexico. He then amplified the recordings to maximum roaring volume, so that each seems to document not bird calls and breezes but terrestrial eruptions and gale-force winds. Clearly, “empty” desert landscapes aren’t empty after all. They’re sonic power-places, if we know how to listen.

The show’s most recent work “For Four (Caldera)” (2024), a four-screen wraparound video installation, is set in a similar Southwestern landscape, and one that actually did erupt, volcanically, many eons ago. At compass points around an indentation in the earth stand four female vocalists, meditatively singing as if in response to the open vista surrounding them. Whether their song is praise or lament, though, is a question. The issue of power, in this case destructive, is at play here too. A few miles from the performance site stands Los Alamos National Laboratory, birthplace of the atomic bomb.



“Field Recordings” (1999), a recording of places in the Southwest chosen for their quietness, which are then amplified to their maximum volume. via Raven Chacon



Still from “For Four (Caldera),” 2024, which features four women standing on a volcanic hollow in the Jemez Mountains of New Mexico, expressing what they see through song. via Raven Chacon

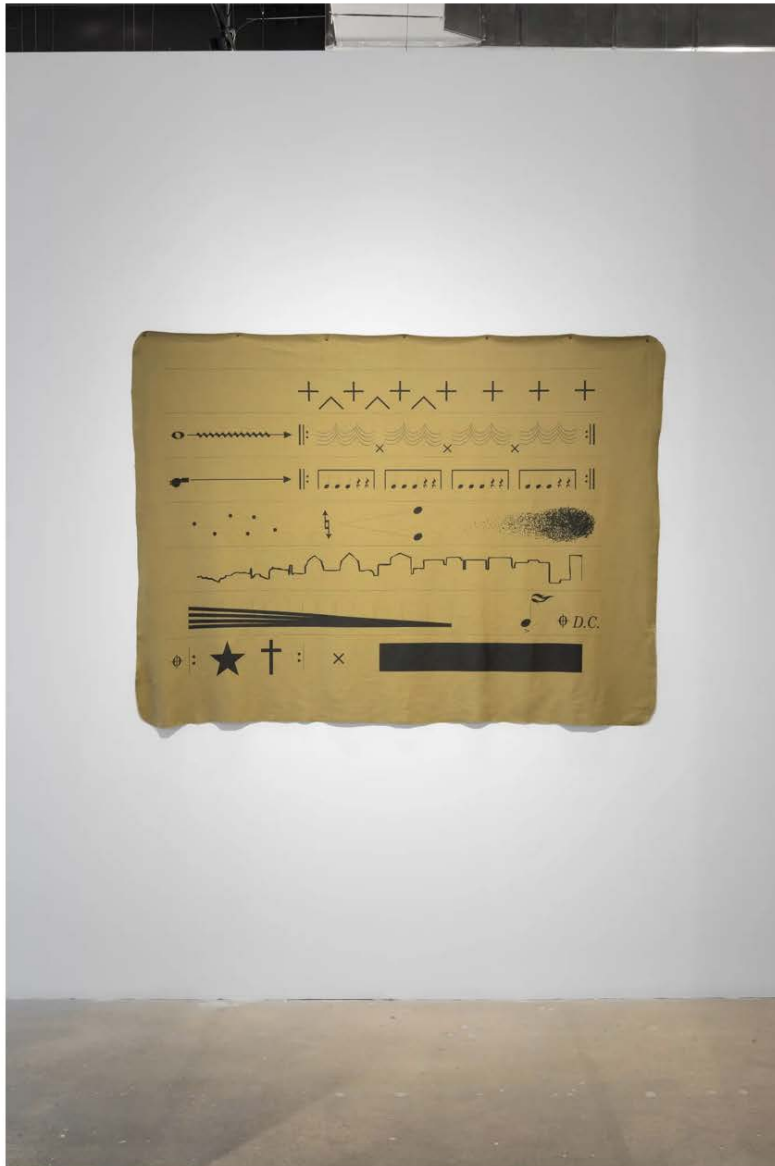
If these works are about the politics of place, others focus more squarely on history. The sound composition titled “Report” (2001), performed in a short 2015 video, is scored entirely for firearms — revolvers, rifles, handguns, shotguns — with an ensemble of performers shooting on cue. Although composed almost a quarter of a century ago, it’s a perfect fit for our trigger-happy moment.



“Report,” 2015, a sound composition performed in a video, is scored entirely for firearms, with an ensemble of performers shooting on cue. via Swiss Institute; Daniel Pérez

And some compositions orchestrate specific cultural histories. “American Ledger No. 1 (Army Blanket)” (2020), which opens the show, is one. A sound piece, it is present only as an object, a score, printed as a set of pictographs on an olive drab military blanket.

The pictographs, invented by Chacon and used in many works, serve as both narrative symbols and performance notations. In this case, on one level they tell the story of the founding of the United States as a symphonic drama of organized violence. As performance directives, they provide cues for an unorthodox orchestra of instruments, among them a police whistle, an ax, and a lighted match.



"American Ledger No. 1 (Army Blanket)," 2020, a narrative score for performance telling the creation story of the founding of the United States. via Swiss Institute; Daniel Pérez

As to the work's duration and execution, the only directions Chacon gives are that it should run "at least 13 minutes" and be performed by "any number of musicians with any number of non-musicians." Indeed, one of Chacon's guiding principles is that much of his work be available to amateur performers. A 2005 Yoko Ono-like work titled "Scream Out of Each Window" is an example. It exists in the show only as a takeaway printed text, which reads in full:

For a family to perform,
For as long as they want,
In a tall building,
On different levels, toward the same direction,
Scream out of each window.

And, in fact, versions of this piece are likely being performed — as life, not as art — in New York City neighborhoods every day.

Scores like this one bring to mind the work of the pioneering composer John Cage, to whom most sound artists, including Chacon, are indebted. But there's a dimension to Chacon's output — I'll call it the Indigenous dimension — that sets him on a wide track entirely his own, and that's what this survey — organized by Stefanie Hessler, director of Swiss Institute, and Alison Coplan, chief curator — reveals. Politically, it can be a dark dimension, but in Chacon's art it is also warmed — socially and spiritually — by hope.

A beautiful 2015 sound-and-object installation in the show, "Still Life No. 3," recounts the Navajo creation story, both in texts engraved on glass panels and as recited by a woman in an audio recording. The words on the glass panels are fixed. In Navajo and in English they say what they say. In a woman's recitation, however, played with asynchronous timing through multiple speakers, elements of the story of birth and fruitfulness, of a people coming into being, overlap and repeat, to create a narrative that is perpetually moving out of the past, into the present, and forward into the future.

Raven Chacon: A Worm's Eye View From a Bird's Beak

Through April 14 at Swiss Institute, 38 St. Marks Place; Manhattan; (212) 925-2035, swissinstitute.net. (Chacon will present a solo improvisational noise work, "Knowledge of Wounds" at [Performance Space New York](http://PerformanceSpaceNewYork.com), a few blocks from Swiss Institute, on Feb 15.)

Holland Cotter is the co-chief art critic and a senior writer for the Culture section of The Times, where he has been on staff since 1998. [More about Holland Cotter](#)