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Kate Meadows
Raven Chacon: *A Worm's Eye View
from a Bird's Beak*
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Raven Chacon makes music of symbolic objects, landscapes and alternative histories

The Swiss Institute introduces the experimental scores and performances of the Navajo sound artist and composer to New York in *A Worm's Eye View from a Bird's Beak*.

by Kate Meadows | Published on : Feb 19, 2024

38 St. Marks Pl
New York, NY 10003

info@swissinstitute.net
swissinstitute.net

Tel +1 212 925 2035
Fax +1 212 925 2040



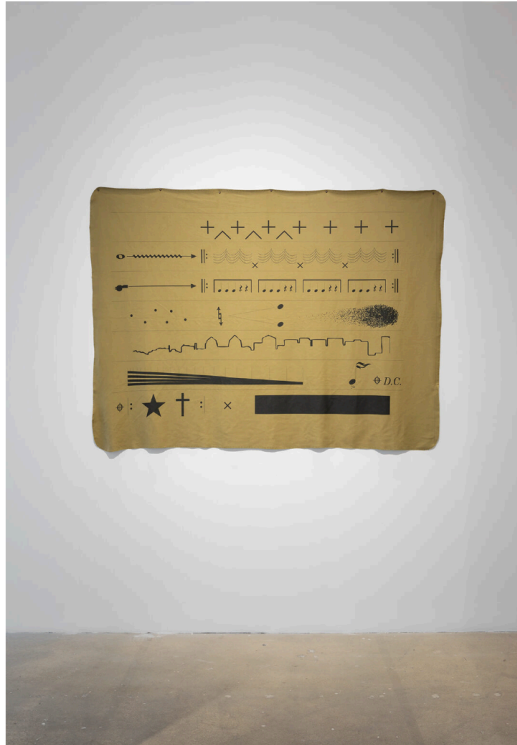
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*For a family to perform,
For as long as they want,
In a tall building,
On different levels, toward the same direction,
Scream out of each window.*

Scream Out of Each Window (2005)
- Raven Chacon

This text, printed on paper takeaway copies stacked and tacked to the wall in the stairwell, is the last thing one might see before reaching the rooftop of Raven Chacon's exhibition *A Worm's Eye View from a Bird's Beak* at **New York's** Swiss Institute, curated by Director Stefanie Hessler and Chief Curator Alison Coplan. Once up top, one encounters **interdisciplinary artist** and composer Chacon's pictographic score *Vertical Neighbors* (2024) on the building's outside facade. According to the instructions, one set of musicians is to perform from the ground and another from an elevated position. When activated, *Vertical Neighbors* harnesses sound on two strata of physical space, gesturing towards the Diné/Navajo concept of past, present, and future coexisting in vertically-aligned dimensions, and recalling the text in *Scream Out of Each Window*(2005). In a seminar at the New School in New York in 2017, Chacon remarked that the text is a transcription of a recurring dream, "coming to me not quite as a nightmare, more like a puzzle." This transcription seems to have brought *Vertical Neighbors* into existence, nearly 20 years later.

That *A Worm's Eye View from a Bird's Beak* unfolds on multiple levels of this tall building is fitting, making for a layered capsule of Chacon's 30-year oeuvre in sound, video and performance. The architectural qualities of the Swiss Institute seem to echo the artist's explorations of verticality and simultaneity as alternatives to Western narrative structures. Chacon's expansive practice brings forth Navajo cosmogony, radical approaches to musical composition and references to Indigenous scholars including lawyer Ánde Somby and writer Gerald Vizenor. Placing these elements in tension with conventional wisdom, he stages new conceptions of American **history** and uncovers hidden connections between time and place, the natural world and its occupants, Indigenous erasure and resilience.



Installation view of *American Ledger No. 1*, 2018, Army Blanket, Raven Chacon

Image: Daniel Pérez, Courtesy of Swiss Institute

On display at the exhibition's entrance, *American Ledger No. 1, Army Blanket* (2018) makes use of both sonic and visual symbols to narrate a story of violence and land appropriation by the **United States** in descending chronological order. The score is made to be displayed as a flag, a wall, a blanket, a billboard, or a door; its instruments include coins, axe and wood, a police whistle, and a struck match, inviting both musicians and non-musicians to participate. Careful intervals of overlapping sounds laid out by Chacon in this score indicate a sense of infinite repetition, that the reverberations of past events of colonial upheaval continue into the present and future. In a short text printed within the exhibition's monograph, Chacon imagines a new meaning for the musical technique of the counterpoint: "I am speaking about the contrary motion of navigating a world that assumes where you are going because of where you come from." By assigning open-ended metaphor to the fixed rules of composition, he implies a release from static positions and destinies, while shedding the ideologies attached to Western European musical tradition.



Installation view of *Still Life No. 3*, 2015, Raven Chacon
Image: Daniel Pérez, Courtesy of Swiss Institute

The disruption of linear history is introduced in *Still Life No. 3* (2015), a **sound installation** that takes command of the Swiss Institute's first-floor gallery. Speakers are fastened to the ceiling in a downward curve, and from them come the Diné Bahane story of creation, featuring the emergence of people from four worlds below into the current world. The story, delivered aloud in a woman's voice, plays multiple times at once using a stereo delay unit. The echoes cross one another, mimicking the repeated and intertwined segments of the story itself, muddling chronological sequence and enabling the mutual influence of multiple temporal perspectives. The story is transcribed in both English and Navajo on glass panes circling the room, without clear demarcations of start or end. They can be read by shadows of the engraved but otherwise invisible text on the glass, cast at different angles from a coloured light. While foregrounding a tradition of oral history, *Still Life No. 3* offers a multiplicity of ways to process information through different orientations and sensory experiences.



Installation view of *Report*, 2015, Raven Chacon

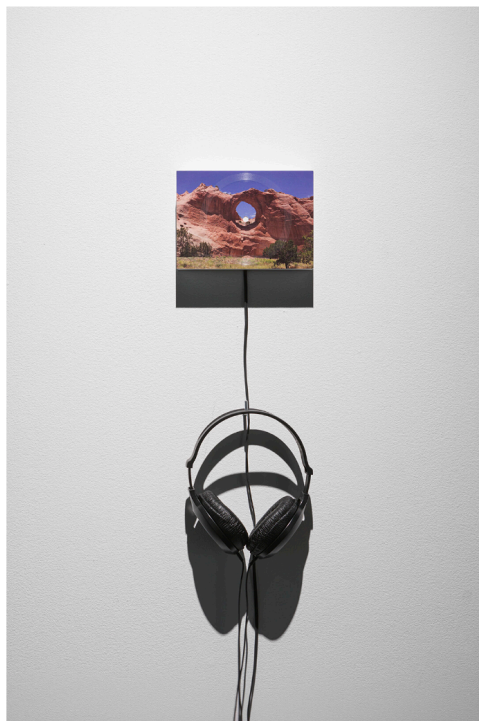
Image: Daniel Pérez, Courtesy of Swiss Institute

In a smaller back room, we are offered the first opportunity to witness a striking performance of one of Chacon's scores, *Report* (2001), documented in a 2015 video. The camera cuts between two sets of players, capturing the transformation of firearms from instruments of destruction to those of percussive music. Although each gun remains static in tone, a complex rhythm is generated by staggering their shots with silence, which allows one to hear the prolonged echoes of their blasts in the New Mexican landscape. *Report* gestures towards the history of gunfire within the land, while rewiring it as music through timing and intention.



Field Recordings, 1999, Raven Chacon
Image: Daniel Pérez, Courtesy of Swiss Institute

On the walls of the Swiss Institute's top floor is a series of listening stations dedicated to the oldest of Chacon's work on view, *Field Recordings* (1999), which glean, amplify, and loop ambient noise from specific locations in the American Southwest, each with a relationship to the Navajo Nation, yet chosen by the artist for their reputation of quietness. The presumed lack of habitation in these areas, the conflation of silence with emptiness, is turned on its head by these blaring sonic artefacts—acknowledging that the land itself has a sound independent of its occupants. Chacon builds further on the acoustics of landscapes in his video installation *For Four (Caldera)* (2024), inviting us to stand in the centre of a veiled structure surrounded by four screens. Each screen flashes alive in sequence to show four people singing improvisationally on opposing ends of a volcanic hollow. Their voices encircle and mesh and the camera slowly revolves in imitation of their layered sounds, which makes for an eerie sirening effect, not unlike the wind making rounds in a rocky valley. As in other of Chacon's works, *For Four* aligns performers in a responsive, synchronous relationship with one another and their environment. The camera's seamlessly oscillating point of view makes this work feel particularly present, drawing us into its active system of relation.



Installation view of *For Four (Caldera)*, 2024, Raven Chacon

Image: Daniel Pérez, Courtesy of Swiss Institute

As its title suggests, *A Worm's Eye View from a Bird's Beak* is concerned with expanding worldview in all directions as it traverses wide-ranging unconventional perspectives, places contradictory concepts in harmony, and inverts rigid hierarchies of power and knowledge. Chacon's first monograph, published by Swiss Institute, Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum and Sternberg Press on the occasion of the exhibition, offers a more comprehensive purview of the artist's work and expands upon his concerns with contributions from a variety of scholars, conversations with the artist, and images of Chacon's installations across the globe. The exhibition's installation seems sparse at first, but its measured ascension from floor to floor demands a patient listening ear—teaching us to listen closer, wider and deeper so that we might pick up on truths lurking at the very limit of our perception.

Raven Chacon: A Worm's Eye View from a Bird's Beak will be on view from January 25 - April 14 2024 at the Swiss Institute.