

November 22nd - February 15th

Teach Me a Song

Elisa Harkins

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For several years, Elisa Harkins' practice has been engaging in an ongoing exploration of Indigenous language and song. Her performance *Wampum / DSW JSJA* has her performing a suite of electronic music in a combination of Cherokee, English and Muscogee (Creek) to electronic dance music, some of which is inspired by of sheet music of Indigenous music notated by musicologist Daniel Chazanoff in the 20th century. Another project, *Hymn*, focuses on a hymn that was sung on the Trail of Tears and continues to be sung in the Muscogee (Creek) language in christian churches today.

A starting point for this exhibition came when Harkins met Osage elder Louis Gray. Gray, along with his sister, the artists Gina Gray, hitchhiked from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe in 1973 to join the occupation of Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation where he joined up with the American Indian Movement (AIM). While participating in the AIM movement, Gray learned the *The AIM Song*, an intertribal song that was adopted as the official AIM anthem. Harkins invited Gray to teach her the song, echoing the same spirit of nation to nation sharing and exchange through which the song itself was developed and

disseminated, and how Gray himself first learned it. Harkins arranged a session with Gray to record him teaching her *The AIM Song*, which he performs on hand drum and voice.

Learning *The AIM Song* from Gray was the inception of *Teach Me a Song*, this process developed from here and was repeated as Harkins began working with two more collaborators. In one of her collaborations, she works with Don Tiger, a Muscogee (Creek) language teacher and one of the last fluent speakers of the language (and from whom Harkins has been learning the language). His song, titled *No. 1 Sofke Sipper*, incorporates acoustic guitar, drums, and turtle shell shakers (locvs).

In another collaboration, she invites Mateo Galindo to share a song with her. Galindo—a Tulsa, Oklahoma based media artist and co-founder of the curatorial platform Atomic Cafe with Malinda Thurz-Gallindo—teaches Harkins the song *Sunpit*. Composed for acoustic guitar and voice, the song tells a narrative of a dystopian future, where families live underground and must travel to a specific “sunpit” in order to see the sun. Though Galindo himself is not Indigenous, Harkins work with him considers parallels and relationships between the themes of Chicanafuturism in his work and the notions Indigenous futurism present in some of her work.

In the gallery, these recordings are presented alongside a trio of sculptures. Working with various textiles, Harkins has made shawls that use found stools as armatures. Each of these sculptures stands as a performer in the gallery, individually voiced, playing back the song associated with it. With Gray's song, an upside down American flag is refashioned into the shawl, fringed and adorned with a vintage AIM patch. Alongside *No. 1 Sofke Sipper* Harkins has quilted ribbon through the middle of the shawl, drawing from Seminole patchwork along with a fringe along the bottom. This sculpture is adorned with tin can shakers that mimic the turtle shell shakers used in the recording of Tiger's song. The shawl that performs *Sunpit* sports a down filled red backing, brightly colored patch, and bright orange draping that functions as a sort of dystopian futuristic streetwear. These textiles pose as sculptures in the Gallery and are also indexing the performers of the songs. Inspired by Harkins' collaborations they are a material translation of various elements of the songs.

At the core of Elisa Harkins' exhibition, *Teach Me a Song*, is a radical gesture of reimagining what ethnomusicology is. As a specific area of study under the more broad field of anthropology, ethnomusicology—it's methods, frameworks, philosophies—

have largely been developed from a colonial position. Though it broadly aims to cultivate and develop knowledge around both cultural practices as well as musical form and theory, its practices are often oriented in an acquisitive way, where an individual from a settler colonial position is recording, transcribing, or otherwise collecting the music of another culture.

These three examples are the start of what Harkins hopes to be an ongoing project. While in residence at Western Front, Harkins used her time to arrange two more teaching sessions with Victoria-based multimedia artist Eli Hirtle and Vancouver-based artist Cheyenne Rain LeGrande. Though these recordings don't figure directly into her exhibition here, this work will contribute to future iterations of this project. In that sense, *Teach Me a Song* is a proposal for a form of continual study, one where the problematic structures of power and hierarchy that are at the foundation of ethnomusicology are recalibrated, making space for intergenerational and intertribal dialogue and collaboration to lead the work.

—Pablo de Ocampo & Simranpreet Anand

Artist Biography

Elisa Harkins is a Native American (Cherokee/Muscogee) artist and composer originally hailing from Miami, Oklahoma. Harkins received her BA from Columbia College Chicago and her MFA from the California Institute of the Arts. She has since continued her education at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Her work is concerned with translation, language preservation, and Indigenous musicology. Harkins uses the Muscogee and Cherokee languages, electronic music, sculpture, and the body as her tools. She has exhibited her work at The Broad Museum, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, documenta 14, The Hammer Museum, MCA Chicago, MOCA North Miami, and Vancouver Art Gallery. Harkins is currently a mentor at the School of the Art Institute Chicago, she is a Tulsa Artist Fellow, and she is an enrolled member of the Muscogee (Creek) tribe. This is her first solo exhibition.

List of Works

1. *Sunpit*, 2019

Dimensions variable

Antique stool, table leg, fabric, patch,

Sunpit sung by Mateo Galindo

2. *AIM Song*, 2019

Dimensions variable

Antique stool, table leg, American flag,

AIM patch, *The AIM song* sung by Louis

Gray

3. *No. 1 Sofke Sipper*, 2019

Dimensions variable

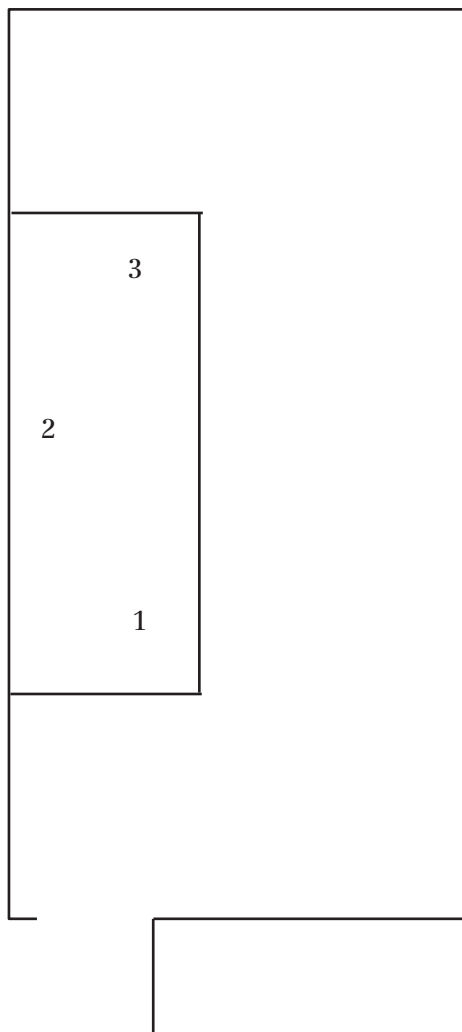
Antique stool, table leg, fabric,

Seminole patchwork, leather, shakers,

No. 1 Sofke Sipper performed by Don

Tiger

Exhibition Map





303 East 8th Avenue
Vancouver, British Columbia
V5T 1S1 Canada

Tuesday to Friday
11:00am to 5:00 pm
Saturday Noon to 5:00pm



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