

# Art in America

INTERVIEWS NOV. 08, 2017

## Story Trader: An Interview with Wendy Red Star

by [Chloe Alexandra Thompson](#)



Installation view, foreground: Tanya Lukin Linklater (Alutiiq), *The treaty is in the body*, 2013-17, wooden tables, delica beads, American Spirit cigarettes. Left, wall: Marianne Nicolson/ 'Tayagila'ogwa (Scottish and Dzawada'enuxw First Nations People), *La'am'lawisuxw ya'xuxsan's 'nalax (Then the Deluge of Our World Came)*, 2017, acrylic and brass on wood. Center: Tanis S'eiltin (Tlingit), *Untitled*, 2017, Merino wool felt, thread, metal grommets and snaps, fresh water pearls. Background: Elisa Harkins (Cherokee/Muscogee Creek), *Fake Part 1*, 2014, fabric, feathers, beads, horsehair. Courtesy Missoula Art Museum and Slikati Photo + Video.



In 2016, I had the opportunity to see Wendy Red Star's photographs in "Contemporary Native Photographers and the Edward Curtis Legacy," a group show at the Portland Art Museum. The superimposed alterations in Red Star's photo work and collages indicate a breadth of knowledge, and a personal commitment to educating the viewer. In "Medicine Crow & the 1880 Crow Peace Delegation" (2015), Red Star uses digital reproductions of archival photographs, writing directly on the blown-up images of tribal members' explanations of their position, their garments, and the setting. Her self-portraits in the "Four Seasons" series (2006) present another response to history: a modern restaging of traditional scenes. For "*Um-basax-bilua* 'Where They Make the Noise,'" her solo show at CUE Art Foundation in New York this summer, she collaged photographs to create a visual history of Crow Fair, an annual tribal event established in 1904 (and the largest such event in the United States). At its start, Crow Fair was largely similar to county fairs elsewhere in the US. But in recent years participants have made an effort to center traditional customs. Raised on the Apsáalooke (Crow) reservation in Montana, Red Star makes work informed both by her cultural heritage and her engagement with many forms of creative expression.

Last year the Missoula Art Museum in Montana, which presented Red Star's first solo museum exhibition in 2011, invited her to curate a group show. The result, "Our Side," on view through February 24, 2018, with work by Elisa Harkins (Cherokee/Muscogee Creek), Tanya Lukin Linklater (Alutiiq), Marianne Nicolson/'Tayagila'ogwa (Scottish and Dzawadą'enuxw First Nations People), and Tanis S'eiltin (Tlingit). Each of the artists investigates questions of identity, language, and territory using a variety of mediums, including textiles, text works, video, and sound. I spoke with Red Star at her home in Portland.

#### **CHLOE ALEXANDRA**

**THOMPSON** In 2011 the Missoula Art Museum presented your work as a solo exhibition. Now you have been invited back to curate "Our Side." What did you want to accomplish with the show?

**WENDY RED STAR** I wanted to focus on four artists. As an artist, I'm sometimes approached to be in group shows with twenty-five or more other people. But in contexts like that, your work tends to get washed over in ways that doesn't aid you or Native artists in general. Indigenous artists need to have space for people to view their work. They need to be placed in the contemporary art section, not only a historical Native art section. They need to have solo

exhibitions, or at least smaller group shows so people can focus on the work.

**THOMPSON** Viewing the work, and the statements about the work, it seems that the politics of this show manifests as sewing. Tanis S'eiltin has physically sewn work in the show, but what I am contemplating is the calm and considered action of taking a needle in and through a fabric with thread.

**RED STAR** That is what is so beautiful. The works tie together. Perhaps that is what you see as sewing. The fact that we can insert our overlapping experiences into the artist's pieces and connect with them speaks to the strength of the work. A lot of responsibility and courage comes with showing Indigenous artists. I think that is why non-Indigenous curators of contemporary art can have such a hard time. They may be confronted with their own ignorance, and no one wants to feel ignorant. Even me.

**THOMPSON** What work you have asked of each artist is representative of these very individual experiences. These works seem to also be coming together to facilitate a larger conversation.

**RED STAR** My goal was to understand who Elisa Harkins, Marianne Nicolson, Tanis S'eiltin, and Tanya Lukin Linklater are as artists. It is also important to me to support artists. In my curatorial statement, I tell the origin story of the Crow people. The term *Bíluuke*, which means "I'm Crow and this is our side," describes my approach. I wanted to share this story with each artist, so that

they would in turn share their stories and the stories of their people.

Marianne Nicolson's four-panel painting [*Láam'lawisuxw yaxuxsans náalax (Then the Deluge of Our World Came)*, 2017] is based on an origin story, and sets the tone for the show. Nicolson says that her territory is full of pictographs, where the ancestors marked that land and their engagement with it. Her painting shows how colonialism has affected the people as well. There is a resulting duality in these depictions of her ancestors before and after contact. It's powerful. She makes the surface look like a slate or rock, as if trying to make the painting as close as possible to what you might see on the land.

**THOMPSON** Those materials have a lot of weight.

**RED STAR** They speak to the cultivation of the land. The works in the show are tied together by their use of similar materials: beads, shells, references to wampum and trade. Interconnection is very important to Indigenous people.

**THOMPSON** I have been reading Lukin Linklater's text installations, large forms that house texts about hunting and beading. How do you view the landscape they both create and reference within the gallery setting?

**RED STAR** For *The Harvest Sturdies* [2013-17], she interviewed her partner's aunts about beading, making moose-hide mitts, hunting, tanning, and garment design. She translated the information into these poetic visual texts. For Lukin Linklater, who is not Cree, the

beadwork designs of these Cree women are a way of learning about the community and the land.

When they talk about hunting moose, they are alluding to the confinements, the restrictions on Indigenous people to certain territories where they have hunting rights. The two tables in the work, *The treaty is in the body*, are based on the tables that Lukin Linklater used as a child. She talks about them as a place where the family would gather. She includes blue delica beads, cylindrical seed beads that are quite uniform in diameter, making a very fine, calculated type of beadwork, and includes the American Spirit cigarettes as symbols of cultural appropriation.

**THOMPSON** S'eiltin and Lukin Linklater both work with cultural material. Could you speak to the relations you see between their work?

**RED STAR** S'eiltin also uses traditional skills and makes work about trade, but it still has deep roots in Tlingit culture. I love the work of Northwest Coast peoples and how almost all of it has a conversation written all over it, from the carving on spoons and the weaving to the adornment of their outfits with the family crests. These details say exactly who they are and where they come from. These are things people don't even have to say because they are embedded in their clothing. For S'eiltin, using ancestral design or historic objects as a jumping-off point allows her the freedom to envision more futuristic outfits.

Yet all the garments and the designs are still rooted and tied to the anchor of Tlingit culture, I enjoy thinking about that. Her untitled sculpture

alludes to the octopus bag, which originated in Canada. Through exchange, each tribal nation that received it would add designs to the octopus bag; it came to express the idea of fluid trade.

**THOMPSON** Could we investigate how Elisa Harkins's two-channel video addresses ideas of both cultural appropriation and fluidity of tradition?

**RED STAR** In her 2014 performance *Fake, Part 1*, Harkins wore imitation powwow attire while singing "Die don't die / Get the money" to reinterpret Cherokee flute music from the 1820s, set to a techno beat. For *Fake, Part 2*, she called the Indian Arts and Crafts Board hotline and reported herself for the illegal acts she committed in the first part of the performance. It's funny that Harkins turned herself in because a performance like that wouldn't even be on their radar. While I understand the importance of the 1990 Indian Arts and Craft Act, I don't feel that I fit its definition of Indian art. I'm an enrolled tribal member, but I don't think they were thinking about the type of work that I make.

**THOMPSON** It seems that the IACA is mostly a protection for commercial work or the retail sale of traditional work. When you walk into a "spiritual" store, they have sacred items or things based on sacred items that may or may not be made by people of the corresponding tribal affiliations.

**RED STAR** Yes, and what do you do with a person who is from one tribe making another tribe's work? Do they get in trouble? It's Native-made.

**THOMPSON** It's amazing to hear Harkins describe her experience at the end of the *Fake, Part 2* portion of the video, where she speaks of being adopted and not having the direct connection to her culture that she would have had growing up on the rez. I hear an urban Native experience of feeling displaced in her identity. It's a gray area as far as the Indian Arts and Crafts Act is concerned. If we actually look at the history of colonization, the history of removal, and the cultural ruptures that result from it, then where do post-colonial experiences of Indigeneity fit in? What is Native art, and who can make that? As a Cree woman who has never been to my own reservation, I often wonder myself.

**RED STAR** Who gets to tell you what that is? When you look into the Indian Arts and Crafts Act, it says you have to be enrolled in a federally recognized tribe, so we're falling back on the government's standard. There was a time when Duane Linklater went on social media and told people to turn him in to the Indian Arts and Crafts board, call 1-888-ARTFAKE. It made me laugh. I thought I could get turned in, too, because I feel like a fraud according to their definition of Native art.

For Linklater and for me it was a joke, but Harkins actually made this work. It feels very authentic, even when she's trying to tell you that she's not authentic. The twist is that she is now enrolled in the Cherokee tribe. She lives near her community in Oklahoma.

**THOMPSON** The way that this show is laid out reads as participatory. As you walk through the space, there are interventions guiding

your path, and these dialogues playing into each other.

**RED STAR** The works aren't totally segregated. Like you said, they are sewn into each other. I remember being told I make political art as an undergrad, when I didn't have any knowledge of contemporary art. I made an installation where I brought lodge poles on the hours-long drive from my reservation and erected them on campus, which I had found out was traditional Crow territory. My professor said I made very political work. I was shocked. I thought I was just stating the truth. Years later I understood why my professor thought of my work as political. It resides outside the colonial norm and that can make people uncomfortable. The artists in "Our Side" aren't afraid of that. If we as Native contemporary artists are to be included in the mainstream, we need more shows like this out there, along with more concentration on individual Native artists and their voices.