

# MISSOULA *Independent* **Free Thinking**

TOP STORY

## **In MAM's 'Our Side,' Elisa Harkins interrogates Native authenticity, and herself**

Erika Fredrickson  
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In a video piece titled “Fake Part I,” Elisa Harkins perches on a white pedestal in the middle of a crowded gallery singing into a microphone. The scene almost evokes a lounge act, the way Harkins gracefully sweeps her legs to the center of the platform and leans back as if on a grand piano. It’s an entertaining spectacle, but unlike a performance from a Hollywood crooner, the meaning and tenor of the performance aren’t easy to pinpoint. Harkins is barefoot and dressed in a white dress and Cherokee headdress (normally reserved for men), both of which seem to be created from authentic designs, but glossily reproduced. The music carries similar juxtapositions of old and new: It’s a melody derived from 1820s Native American sheet music, which Harkins rearranged as a synth-filled electronic song and added her own lyrics. “Die. Don’t die,” she sings, over and over. She rolls across the pedestal and eventually stands to shimmy along with the beat. “Get the money,” she sings. The audience bobs along, though with some uncertainty. It seems like a moment to enjoy, but the title, with the word “fake” in it, and the fact that Harkins is a performance artist, offer clues that there’s more to think about here. Underneath the sheen are complex issues that are as emotionally charged in Missoula as anywhere else, starting with: What’s authentic about this experience? What’s fake?

The “Fake Part I” video, filmed in 2014 at the Mint Gallery in Valencia, California, is part of a group exhibition at the Missoula Art Museum called *Our Side*. *Our Side* features work by Harkins, Tanya Lukin Linklater, Marianne Nicolson and Tanis S’eiltin—all First Nations contemporary artists—and was curated by Wendy Red Star, a Crow artist who grew up in Billings and now resides in Portland, Oregon. Red Star is known for creating work that confronts romanticized characterizations of Native Americans, and the artists she’s chosen for this show seem to be breaking down the mostly non-native expectation that Native American art should look a certain way. Harkins’ story—like those of the other artists—doesn’t fit into a tidy box. She is

Cherokee/Muscogee, was adopted into a non-native family and grew up in Miami, Oklahoma. When she was younger, she didn't think much about her identity, or what being part of an indigenous community might mean.



**1-888-ART-FAKE**

"Fake Part II" is a performance art piece in which Elisa Harkins calls the Indian Arts and Crafts Board to turn herself in for making inauthentic Native American art.

"I didn't really know about indigenous artists," she says. "I didn't know about Jimmie Durham. I didn't know that you needed a [Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood] card or you needed to be enrolled. Growing up, no one ever asked me what my tribal affiliation was or my blood quantum. They'd just say, 'What are you?' And I'd say 'Oh, I'm Cherokee and Muscogee Creek. But in the art world, it's a really hot-button topic, and especially right now it's coming to a boiling point."

"Fake Part I" addresses Harkins' struggle with the idea of her own authenticity, but it's "Fake Part II," that really puts a fine point on it. That video, which is also part of MAM's exhibit, almost seems like a comedy sketch: Harkins, wearing a graffiti T-shirt, sunglasses and baseball cap, calls up the Indian Arts and Crafts Board (1-888-ART-FAKE) to turn herself in for her "inauthentic" performance in "Fake Part I." It's a piece that makes fun of the 1990 Indian Arts and Crafts Act, a law that was intended to quash mass-producers of fake

Native American art and other cultural appropriators. But Harkins turns it into a story about what it means to feel like an outsider in her own culture in a way that's heartbreakingly sincere.

"I think it's very complicated," she says. "If you really look at the fine print, the act is really dissuading people, based on blood quantum and enrollment, from identifying with their culture, and it also sort of eliminates the culture by doing that."

The way Harkins executes her art—through dance and electronic music—stems from early experiences. In high school, she studied under Moscelyne Larkin, a ballerina in the internationally renowned all-Native American dance company the Five Moons, which includes one of the most famous Native American ballerinas. In 2010, she was in a bike accident that caused severe injuries. "I had so many fractures in my head, it was like an egg dropped and broke," she says. "My mouth was wired shut and I just was sitting with my laptop and I couldn't do anything else. Somehow, I had the idea to take this Cherokee flute music, and I started playing around with it."

A few years later, she enrolled in graduate school at the California Institute of the Arts, where she combined electronic music production with performance. For her upcoming performance at MAM, Harkins, who is now enrolled with the Muscogee tribe, will sing in Cherokee and English along with ceremonial songs that she's put to disco beats. She says that her art pushes boundaries, even within Native American art communities, and that she's been largely well-received. For instance, one day at the 4 Winds 7 Clans Gallery in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, she met some women making traditional Cherokee baskets and finger-woven felt. She showed them her YouTube channel and the video of her on the white pedestal singing and dancing in a headdress.

"They thought it was awesome," Harkins says. "They were like, 'What are you doing? You have a headdress on! Oh my gosh!'" she laughs.

"I think people are generally really supportive. I encourage people to be critical and have a dialogue with me about these things. But I definitely have a position when it comes to these politics."

**Elisa Harkins performs at MAM Fri., Dec. 1, at 6:45 PM, followed by an artist panel discussion featuring Wendy Red Star.**