

waka kuaka

The Journal of the Polynesian Society

VOLUME 133 No. 1, MARCH 2024

SPECIAL ISSUE:

in a room, in a house, on an island, in an ocean



The Polynesian Society

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Polynesia. Perhaps this book will also encourage Indigenous Marshallese researchers to document their own stories in the future. Certainly, all people would benefit from these fundamental human rights lessons. The songs and stories are significant and powerful, and the critical notions therein demand to be common knowledge.

Note

1. “Artivism” is a portmanteau word combining “art” and “activism”. Artists use their artforms as a way to communicate injustice or to educate and increase awareness. The goal is to fight for social change and motivate people towards change.

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Exhibition Review

To Move Between: Healing and Resistance. Alanis Obomsawin, Artspace Aotearoa, 2 Sept.–4 Nov. 2023, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand.

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Film plays an important role in Indigenous activism and representation, with an increasing number of directors and producers sharing stories from their own perspective as First Nations and Native American people. The growth in the North American film industry and increasing inclusion of Indigenous voices is thanks to Alanis Obomsawin’s (Abenaki Nation) nearly 60-year career with the National Film Board of Canada. Artspace Aotearoa, a contemporary artist-led gallery, presents their annual programming in response to a question that guides their curatorial practice throughout a given year. In 2023, they asked, “Where does my body belong?” While the curatorial shows each answer this question distinctly, they also provide gallery visitors with a string of ongoing conversations, contributing to layered understandings of place and belonging.

To Move Between: Healing and Resistance showcased the last 50 years of Alanis Obomsawin's work in First Nations film. The exhibition was a timely enquiry into belonging, relationality and what happens when these ways of being are interrupted and restored. A singer and storyteller, Alanis Obomsawin is renowned across Indian Country and the film industry for her commitment to truth telling and her investment in the wellness of future Indigenous generations. Four films were exhibited, along with documentary heritage and artist drawings, courtesy of Obomsawin and the National Film Board of Canada. This exhibition marked Alanis Obomsawin's third visit to Aotearoa, coinciding with her 91st birthday.

The reflective floors and grey walls of the Artspace Aotearoa gallery offered a soothing retreat from the bustle of Friday afternoon on Karangahape Road. The exhibition map labelled the east wall with the first work, "1", and I wondered if this was intentional, to move in the direction of sunrise to sunset. A flat-screen television was mounted at standing height with speakers evenly attached to each side. *Sigwan* (2005) poured softly into the gallery space. Viewers followed the story of a lonely young girl who finds refuge in the forest with her relatives from the Bear Clan. They offer comfort and medicine to the girl, who feels that she is not welcome in her own community. Through acts of kinship, a cheerful resolution is found, and the girl is reunited with her village. The speakers and long, minimal bench centred in front of the television screen contributed to the subtle storytelling environment of the short film's installation. Sitting there, I was reminded of my niece and my own Bear Clan relatives in Dinétah (Navajoland), waiting for my return.

A dark curtain separated off the south screening space. *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993) was projected on the wall in full scale. Wireless headphones, hung on the shoulders of four folding chairs, eliminated external sound and created an almost private viewing experience within the gallery. The award-winning documentary followed the Mohawk Resistance camp of Kanehsatake, where Obomsawin spent 78 days filming the standoff between Mohawk land defenders, the Quebec police and the Canadian army. For the viewer, seated in a cushioned chair and safely veiled behind a thin curtain, the screening of *Kanehsatake* served as a poignant reminder of ongoing settler violence and Indigenous land struggles overseas. The screening was accompanied by the original film poster and reproduced archival drawings of the north shores of Montreal, on Mohawk land.

Along the west, a tube television rested at an incline, facing up. The retro viewing experience was enhanced by two headphone sets plugged into the television. *Poundmaker's Lodge: A Healing Place* (1987) told the story of an Indigenous-run alcohol and substance use support centre located just outside the city of Edmonton, revealing through individual interviews and

group sessions how substance use took root in First Nations communities. Obomsawin positioned the story within the larger context of colonisation and the lasting impact of forced assimilation on Indigenous lives. Further, she demonstrated how culturally based interventions within Native communities are crucial in the healing journey for our relatives living with addiction.

The Cabinet, an additional space on the west side of the gallery, contained documentary heritage of moments throughout Obomsawin's career. The adjoining Reading Room screened *We Can't Make the Same Mistake Twice* (2016) on a flat-screen television mounted below a bookshelf. While this was the longest film exhibited in the gallery, I didn't feel the passing of time or a pressure to leave before the documentary was finished. I was grateful for the pocket of privacy this installation provided as I reflected on my own grandparents' experiences in a federal Indian boarding school.

The layout of the exhibition demonstrated thoughtful consideration for the viewer's experience. The installation showed clear intention for gallery visitors to engage with each of Obomsawin's films in their full length. The speakers and headphones, with obvious utilitarian purposes, contributed to distinct storytelling environments. Often the narrator in her work, Alanis Obomsawin's voice flowed from the headset and into the listeners' ears.

While I moved through the space in the natural direction of the sun, a particular order was not necessary. The screenings emanated a sense of interconnectedness and spoke freely to one another, creating a single, non-linear narrative that floated throughout the gallery. During my visit, I reflected on how beautiful my First Nations relatives were. I was comforted by familiar Native faces and voices and saw glimpses of my own family in each film. Across the ocean and over 10,000 kilometres away from my homelands, *To Move Between: Healing and Resistance* created a liminal space for me to exist, fully, in two places at once.

The inclusion of Alanis Obomsawin's work as part of the 2023 curatorial theme is incredibly fitting. While the North American continent is effectively Indigenous land, it is cut across by arbitrary borders and settler governments. Tribal nations existing along the US–Canada border, including the Abenaki of the Northeastern Woodlands, must navigate government-imposed regulations of belonging on our own land. Obomsawin's work presented some of the earliest narratives told from a distinctly Indigenous perspective, shifting Indigenous North America out of the Western gaze and into our own canon. To see her work positioned in the contemporary art space, in an international context, was a welcome blessing.