Composer Raven Chacon Carves Out a Space in San Francisco

Emily Wilson on December 5, 2022.

As part of his Capp Street artist-in-residency at the Wattis Institute in 2021, Pulitzer Prize-winning composer, performer, and artist Raven Chacon taught a graduate course at California College of the Arts, Scores for Sound and Narrative, as well as started an online radio station, Radio Coyote.

During that time, Chacon, who comes from Fort Defiance, Ariz., within the Navajo Nation, talked with Wattis Director and Chief Curator Anthony Huberman and Assistant Curator Diego Villalobos about percussion and how he uses drums as a composer. These conversations helped form Drum Listens to Heart, a wide-ranging exhibition at the Wattis in three chapters: Sept. 1 – Oct. 15, Nov. 9 – Dec. 17, and Jan. 17 – March 4, 2023. Chacon’s score mimicking the layout of a flag, American Ledger No. 1, now hangs outside the Potrero Hill gallery and is part of all three chapters.

Villalobos organized the performance series that goes along with the exhibition, and it started with Chacon’s Drum Grid (2010). In the final performance in the series, at The Lab on Feb. 25, 2023, the composer and others will perform American Ledger No. 1. A note on Chacon’s website specifies that the piece is “for many players with sustaining and percussive instruments, coins, axe and wood, a police whistle, and a match.”
There's a big group of performers from the Bay Area performing the score, and it's being conducted by Andy Meyerson from The Living Earth Show,” Chacon said about the upcoming performance. “The score moves from the chronological history of the land the United States is built on, and it talks about slavery, economy, and the Industrial Revolution.”

Chacon says that percussion ends up in lots of his works. “I like to think about these different worldviews where the drum is used not only as a musical instrument but as a learning tool, or in ceremony, or as a device for warning,” he said. “We were having these discussions about the idea of percussion being any kind of sound that ends up being a physical experience, like explosions or bombs.”

And Villalobos says Chacon is the perfect person for this series exploring percussive as an adjective. “It’s a lens to take the conversation out of music and art and become more about social/political issues,” Villalobos said. “Percussion comes from a heartbeat, and if we’re talking about the heart, we’re talking about the body.”

Chacon’s score on the flag, present throughout the series (although it might later be displayed on an Army blanket), acts as a kind of metronome, Villalobos says. And Drum Grid was an introduction to thinking about music outside of its normal realm.

“We all have an idea of what drumming is, and it takes on a lot of different roles,” Villalobos said. “With the first performance, we wanted to address the origin story of music in a way.” He compares Drum Grid to a game of broken telephone, with more than a dozen people playing the sounds they hear from other drummers. “We’re thinking about the drum as a tool, and Raven’s work is very much thinking about, ‘What role does drumming play in a community?’”

Many of Chacon’s pieces are similarly public works. “People that are just walking around the neighborhood heard music played on the street corners using drums,” Chacon said about that October performance. “It confounds people in their assumptions, and the idea that it could raise questions is what propels me to do some of these things.”

Chacon has spent a lot of time in the Bay Area, including recently coming out in November to perform a sonic meditation on the occupation of Alcatraz in the former prison’s hospital wing as part of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive’s show Undone: Art and Histories of Incarceration.

“That was definitely a highlight,” Chacon said. “San Francisco has such an inspirational new-music community, and I like to go there and see concerts in noise and experimental music.”

Drum Listens to Heart is currently on display at the Wattis Institute, and Raven Chacon will join in the final live performance associated with the exhibition at The Lab on Feb. 25, 2023.

Emily Wilson lives in San Francisco. She writes for radio, print, and the web, including Smithsonian.com, Daily Beast, 48 Hills, Hyperallergic, Latino USA, Women’s Media Center, California Magazine, and SF Weekly. She also teaches adults getting their high school diplomas at City College of San Francisco.