

Art in America

REVIEWS MAR. 17, 2017

Duane Linklater

NEW YORK,
at 80WSE

by Elizabeth Buhe



View of Duane Linklater's exhibition "From Our Hands," 2016-17, at 80WSE.

In this exhibition, which originated at Mercer Union in Toronto, Duane Linklater offered an assortment of artworks by himself and by family members that raised urgent questions about how institutions of power systematically grant—or deny—access to spaces, narratives, and property. Linklater, who is Omaskêko Cree from Moose Cree First Nation in Northern Ontario, borrowed the show's title, "From Our Hands," from a touring Ontario exhibition held over three decades ago that presented Indigenous craft, including the work of his paternal grandmother, Ethel Linklater.

For his show, Linklater built steel-and-concrete armatures on which he exhibited five of his grandmother's resplendent beaded works: pairs of mitts, mukluks, baby boots, and slippers made of hide, fur, and wool. The placement of these supports at arm-length's remove on large plywood islands prevented close scrutiny of the works they elevated—a subtle cue, perhaps, that we should attend to these objects' conceptual significance rather than, as we are encouraged to do with artifacts displayed behind glass in ethnographic museums, marvel at their skillful construction. Linklater here raised questions about how Indigenous objects are valued differently by the communities from which they come and the colonialist institutions that often archive them. He continued this line of inquiry in *Accession* (2016), a framed digital print of a museum's object file that valued his grandmother's baby boots at twenty-two Canadian dollars in 1985.

Sculptures made up of perforated steel studs, powder-coated in red or white, sandwiching thin strips of drywall and plywood ("Untitled Problems," 2016) stood in small groupings in the first three galleries. Reaching two-thirds of the way up toward the ceiling, these works performed no evident structural purpose, yet they allude to the materials of an industrialist class made wealthy by construction

projects on lands once belonging to Indigenous people. Faux fur, rawhides, partly rolled carpets, inkjet printouts of a buffalo in profile, and felt blankets atop or beneath the sculptures speak to economies of trade, while the sculptures' dimensions—which reflect the width of Linklater's chest and his height with arms extended upward—render them anthropomorphic, like so many figures occupying, or reclaiming, the space.

Linklater's excavation of the museum is literalized in *What Then Remains* (2016), a steel beam configuration that spells out the work's title along three walls of the venue, which were exposed for the exhibition's duration. He adopted the phrase from Justice Sonia Sotomayor's charged closing remarks for a 2016 United States Supreme Court case that upheld a tribal court's jurisdiction to try a non-native man accused of sexually abusing a thirteen-year-old tribal member on native land. After Linklater's show ended, Sotomayor's words became a permanent substructural fixture of 80WSE, left intact and covered over with drywall. If the trial was a reminder that Indigenous sovereignty is subject to the Supreme Court's whims, Linklater here reversed that colonialist logic by symbolically recoding a non-native space as Indigenous.

The exhibition also included a contribution by Tobias Linklater, the artist's twelve-year-old son. A high-spirited stop-motion video based loosely on the cult Nintendo game *The Legend of Zelda*, the work—*Origin of the Hero* (2016)—seemed to serve as a strategic yet tender plea for the representation of artwork by future generations of Indigenous artists in Western institutions. Unlike textbook examples of institutional critique, the careful staging of works in this show offered a profoundly personal statement, providing an ingress to lived Indigenous realities that this country has so often, and so ruinously, hidden from view.