

Indigenous Art History Gets a Rewrite, With an Emphasis on Performance, in a Standout Show Upstate



BY ALEX GREENBERGER  September 5, 2023 1:50pm



Eric-Paul Riege performing among his sculptures during the opening of "Indian Theater" at the CCS Hessel Museum of Art.

PHOTO KARL RABE

Earlier this summer, the artist Eric-Paul Riege was in a sunlit gallery of Bard College's Hessel Museum of Art, twisting and turning around his woven artworks that hung from the ceiling. Visitors were encouraged to do so, too, but he was the only one who seemed to heed his own invitation. At one point, he knelt down on the ground, using his hands to grab the tassels of one work and pull it toward him, its large fiber circle tilting away from the ground as he did so. The sculpture's threads made hushed crunches alongside the jingles of Riege's outfit.

The Diné artist's pieces were part of a series called "jaatloh4Ye'iitsoh," which he has said can be translated to "earring for the big god." He's stated that all his art is active, even when it seems static, thanks to the gravity that holds it down to earth. These are performance pieces, even though they appear simply to be sculptures.

A similar contradiction runs throughout many of the artworks in the show that contains these works, "Indian Theater: Native Performance, Art, and Self-Determination since 1969." This exhibition's title suggests a sprawling performance art survey, but the result is something other than that—and that's actually a good thing.

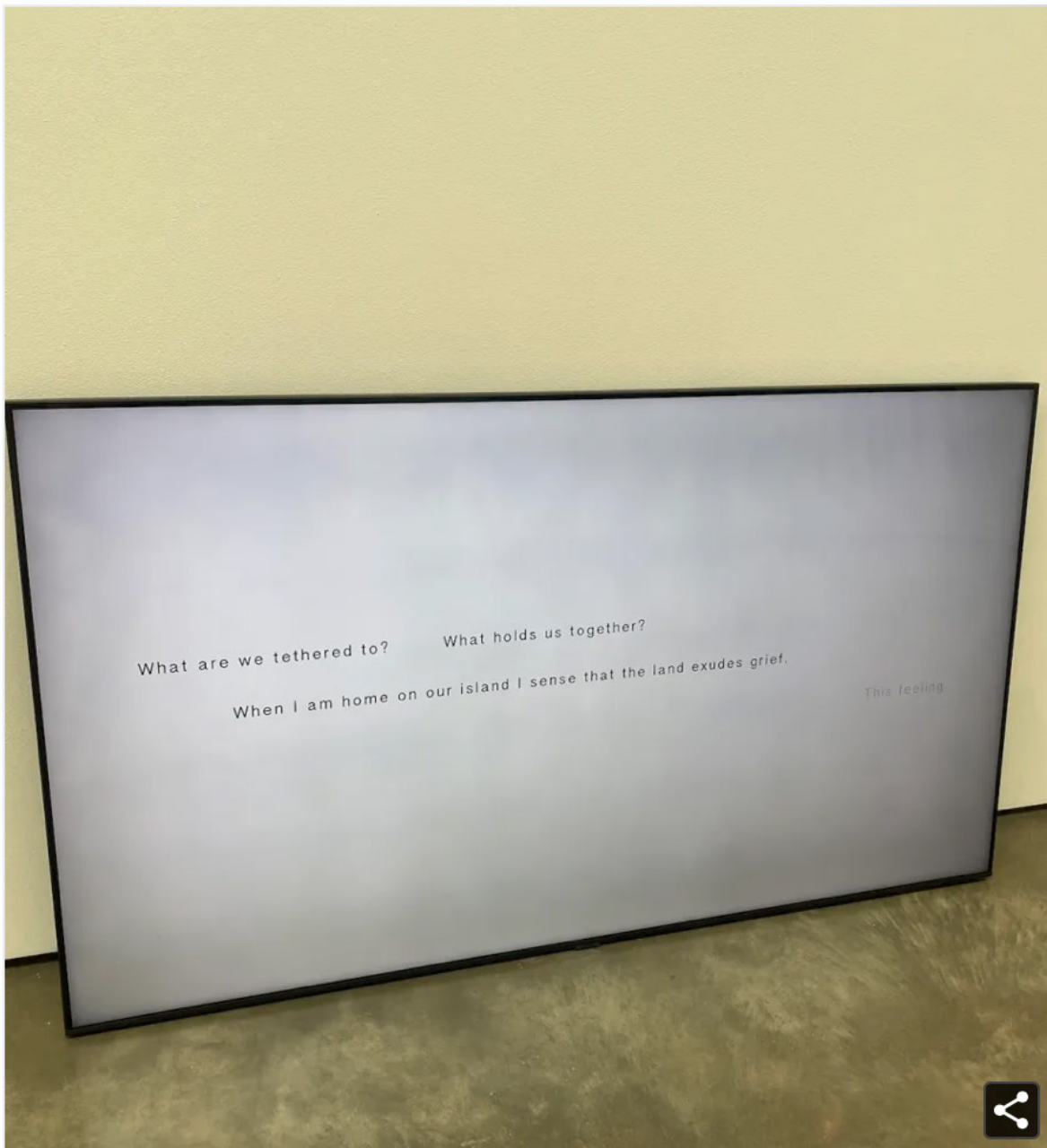
Much of the works curator Candice Hopkins (Carcross/Tagish First Nation) has included are sculptures, photographs, or videos; some have been activated at various points in the show's run, though most remain the same. Note the comma separating "performance" and "art" in the show's name. She's suggesting that, for a number of Native artists working right now, performance doesn't only take the form of art. It can also be a component of everyday living that allows them to hide and reveal parts of their identities, undertake rituals imbued with meaning, and craft statements about their peoples' oppression by colonialists, both past and current.

"Indian Theater" is a rarity in more senses than one. Sizable shows devoted to Indigenous artists are still unusual in US institutions—not just in ones like this museum in Annandale-on-Hudson, two hours outside New York City, but ones all across the country. And smart group shows, particularly ones with lofty conceptual goals, are becoming an endangered species in museums, which can sometimes seem fearful of intellectual posturing, opting for empty-calorie blockbusters as a result. This show feels like a treat because its guiding ideas are so knotty.

Sometimes, "Indian Theater" can grow blurry. It's hindered by gangly, overlong wall texts that aren't always necessary, and some of its works' relations to the curatorial conceit are vague at best. What the show lacks in clarity, it makes up for in challenging art.

Below, a look at the finest works included in this exhibition.

Tanya Lukin Linklater, *Event Scores for Afognak Alutiit 1-3 (Abridged)*, 2016–20



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Photo : Alex Greenberger/ARTnews

The most achingly beautiful work in this show is a soundless video composed solely of black text set against a white background. The words that appear in this work by Tanya Lukin Linklater (Alutiiq/Sugpiaq) can be tough to parse, yet across its few sentences, a sense of loss emerges with clarity. “What are we tethered to? What holds us together?” the artist’s text asks. “When I am home on our island I sense that the land exudes grief.” Then another clipped phrase follows: “This feeling.” The other words fade away as those two remain on screen.

Lukin Linklater’s title suggests that the text in her video may function like word scores: loose instructions for a performance to be enacted. Yet the phrases rarely stick around long enough for viewers to comprehend how to even perform them. The disappearance of these sentences mirrors the dying out of Native languages and the people who knew how to communicate using them. Artworks like this one are part of the effort to make sure they do not disappear for good.