

Art [Interviews](#)

## Tanya Lukin Linklater Opens Up a Space of Contemplation

The Alutiiq/Sugpiaq multidisciplinary artist and choreographer communicates Indigenous movement systems and forms of knowledge through dance.



Erin Joyce September 4, 2024



Tanya Lukin Linklater (photo by Liz Lott, courtesy the artist)

“An open space of contemplation.” That is how Alutiiq/Sugpiaq multidisciplinary artist and choreographer Tanya Lukin Linklater described her embrace of dance during a recent phone interview with *Hyperallergic*. Speaking from the Wex, where she was installing her solo exhibition *Inner blades of grass (soft) inner blades of grass (cured) inner blades of grass (bruised by the weather)*, which recently closed on August 21, the artist shared that she is drawn to the medium because it “didn’t feel overly determined.” Rather, it maintains a porousness, a sense of potential and freedom, that she very much welcomes. Her show shares over a decade of her practice, communicating Indigenous movement systems and forms of knowledge through dance and open rehearsals, sculpture and installation, video, works on paper, and writing.

Lukin Linklater’s background is in theater. She studied at the [Centre for Indigenous Theatre](#) in Toronto, where she was introduced to choreography and dance under actors whose highly embodied style resonated with her, such as Alejandro Ronceria and Michael Greyeyes. “I was always a very physical actor,” she said. “And it may have been a little naive of me, but I saw [dance] as this form of potentiality in my own embodiment — about being in relation. It felt open as a form. Dance was a way I could create [more freely].”



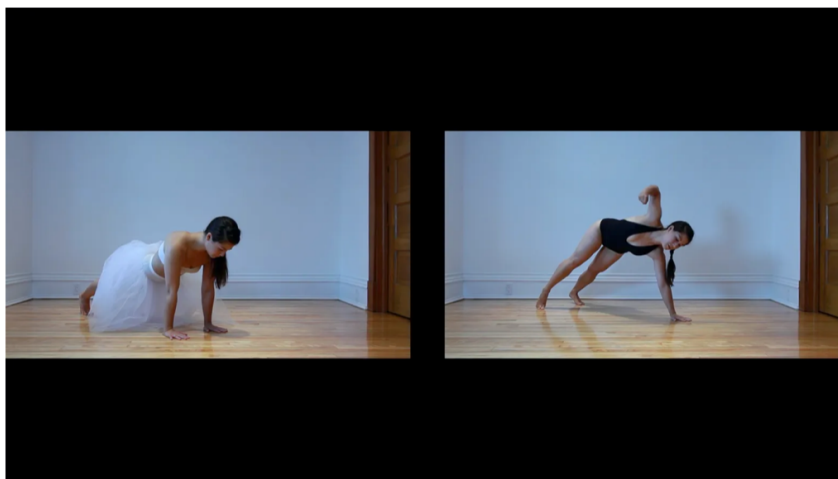
Still from Tanya Lukin Linklater, “A gentle reassembly” (2022) (photo National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver)

The artist makes work as resistance or perhaps antidote to what she describes as the “artificiality of stage dance and the theater.” Though Lukin Linklater acknowledges that museums and galleries are similarly restricted by hierarchies and strictures of power, the artists and audiences they represent, and the legacies of colonial violence they ensconce, there are specific reasons why she has chosen to place her work in the venue of the exhibition space and not the theater. “[My work] has to do with the history of archaeology, anthropology, and ethnography in museums and their relationship to Indigenous peoples,” she told me. She intervenes in the legacies of harm that these spaces have engendered and perpetuated via actions of mending and revision through her practice, just as other Indigenous artists such as Rebecca Belmore and the late James Luna have done through performance before her.

An example of this sort of intervention can be seen in the artist's 2016 work, "Slay All Day," for which Lukin Linklater collaborated with Toronto-based dancer Ceinwen Gobert. The work references reductive depictions of Indigenous peoples in media, specifically Robert Flaherty's 1922 film *Nanook of the North* — which, though labeled a documentary, actually featured an "Inuit identity" entirely constructed by Flaherty. Lukin Linklater's video features no sound, partially in allusion to Flaherty's silent film, and partially to emphasize her visual references to Inuit athletics as a choreographic citation.

Lukin Linklater plays with different spans of time — choreographic time as a work in process, filmic time and its ability to expand and contract, and static time through two-dimensional works and the written word. These expressions of time are conveyed in her approach and process. The artist embraces the temporal experience of the audience members and dancers, as well as invocations of memory and Indigenous lexicons of movement built over generations. "I think about powwow dances as improvisational," she said. "It is happening in real time and... it's not set. There is a kind of movement vocabulary that the dancer draws from, but they're also thinking about intentionality, and embodiment of specific ideas like grasses, or they're dancing for other people's healing. So there's a kind of activation that's occurring. And if we really believe that dance does something, then that happens in the making of contemporary dance."

Lukin Linklater carves out a space to meditate on visualities, ideas, and histories while stitching together physical gestures: "It's about not feeling compelled to perform," she says, "but allowing that interior process to then inform the movement and inform the body." This insistence on process is a form of de-colonial action and resistance: "It makes me think about Indigenous peoples persisting with and staying with who we are despite the onslaught of federal policy in the US and Canada that tried and tries to strip us of who we are," she adds. Lukin Linklater emphasizes that that process isn't about turning out work that is legibly Indigenous. "Rather, it's about staying with the work — staying with the process," she says. "Sometimes [that] means the work is very slow. It is laborious — it can be really hard for me — but I work to facilitate space that is ethical and supportive, that honors the agency."



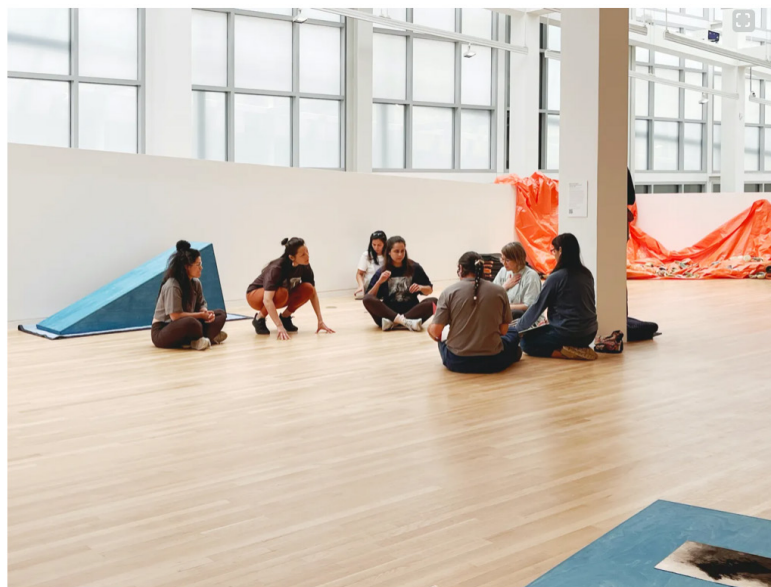
Film still from Tanya Lukin Linklater, "Slay All Day" (2016) (image courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver)



This slow laboriousness also manifests in Lukin Linklater's writing. Though her writing may be one of the more challenging facets of the artist's practice, it is one of the most vital. Lukin Linklater's 2022 book, *Slow Scrape*, employs poetry and documentary to illustrate the horrors of settler violence against Indigenous peoples in all of its manifestations. "First it was poems, then there were banners, then a score for performance. But then later, it became a book," she said. The resulting work is a container to hold oration and movement — language and histories — and serves the vital function of providing access to the artist's community in Alaska, who does not often have the opportunity to see the work installed in galleries or performed. "I'm really trying to document the histories that I am working with and towards," she said. "The writing helps situate the work within specific lineages and histories — and also in the present moment."

In the show at the Wex, the artist was commissioned to create new work born out of site visits to the Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks in Newark, Ohio, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization's most recent World Heritage Site. "Structure of Sustenance Three" (2024), a sculpture in seven parts activated by performance, relates back to the land, Indigenous stewardship, technologies, innovation, and cultural practices. In the work, the painted birchwood structures emerge from the gallery floor as architected mounds, some sitting on furniture pads or near dollies, giving the feeling that movement could occur at any time.

This work and others serve as a wedge between ongoing storms of colonial violence and Indigenous futures. "I have been thinking a lot about weather in this movement — not just in terms of climate change, but weather as also flux," she said. "It is always shifting and changing — there are ways in which we read it through sensation and the body." It's balance, a tension between harmony and discord: "We have storms that come in — they are both life-giving and havoc-wreaking." Lukin Linklater's works serve as a way to weather these storms, a form of memory that recalls and records history for the future.



Still from Tanya Lukin Linklater, "Scrape soak steam pour crack sew bend brace." (2024), open rehearsal with dance artists at the Wexner Center for the Arts (image courtesy Catriona Jeffries gallery)