

Starting From Home:

An online retrospective of the work of Dana Claxton

Curated by Tania Willard, Secwepemc Nation

This online retrospective of Dana's work follows the artist's path, weaving together her work, experiences, and ideas. Dana's career spans different mediums, but all her work is rooted in her worldview as a Lakota woman. From installation to performance to single channel video works, her commitment as an artist is to the Aboriginal community. Dana takes her work as an artist into the community through Aboriginal media initiatives like Indigenous Media Arts Group (IMAG), the Independent Aboriginal Screen Producers Association (IASPA), her arts administration, and her curatorial work. Dana's work is as multi-layered as the artist herself—artist, moderator, panelist, arts promoter, supporter, and more. As a curator, I didn't know where to begin so..

I am starting from home.

Starting from grandmothers and ancestors, land and sky, rage and beauty, Dana Claxton weaves images, sounds, and ideas together with a sense of balance, subversion, and hope. Dana's work is situated in place, remembering, and history, bringing these elements together in surreal homages and explorations. Dana's work is part of a journey—the journey of identity of self and Nation (both Indigenous nations and Canadian Nationhood), the journey of history, and the journey of the spirit.

Dana is of Hunkpapa Lakota ancestry; her heritage is linked to an important historical injustice spanning the US and Canadian colonial borders: the migration of Sitting Bull and his people to Canada. The effects of colonization, discrimination, and systemic racism on Aboriginal people and on the artist's own family history fueled her early work. In an early single-channel video work, *I Want to Know Why* (1994), Dana screams, "I want to know why!" In her cry for answers, the injustice and colonial foundation of Canada and the US is revealed within the personal tragedy of her mother's and maternal grandmother's early deaths and her great grandmother's migration to Canada. Dana frames the suffering of her grandmothers and her mother within the context of Canadian colonialism and the injustice of American history.

Dana's great-great grandmother fled the US, her homeland, during a heightened period of American imperialism and Indian wars. Citing the mass hanging of Dakota men in Minnesota, still one of the largest mass hangings in the US, Dana says, "When the people saw that—if you can imagine seeing 39 men being hung—you just knew it was no longer safe for you and your homeland." In *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux*, a 2003 four-channel video installation, Dana traces the history of the resulting Lakota and Sioux settlements in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Dana's family reserve in Wood Mountain, Saskatchewan is an area of Lakota settlement; her family traces its roots to the migration of Sitting Bull and Dana's great-great grandmother's journey. In discussing the amount of research needed to create *Sitting Bull and the Moose Jaw Sioux*, Dana comments on the way many Aboriginal artists become historians in some capacity, uncovering the truths of Aboriginal experience that are buried under layers of colonial histories.

Dana is careful to point out that although this injustice has fueled much of her work, the beauty of Lakota culture and teachings are equally a part of her work, another layer. In *Landscape #1* (2004), Dana subverts the Canadian tradition of landscape painting by

Indianizing her relationship to it and by bringing a new understanding to the land, creating a decolonized landscape. In *Landscape* we see the land, home, and place through the artist's eyes in which the plains and the sky have a power in their starkness. This starkness—the minimalism of the plains landscape—is echoed within Dana's aesthetic: the poetically stark sets she uses and the attention to space in her works bear a resemblance to this landscape of home.

In Lakota culture there are sky teachings, and for Dana the plains' sky is an influence in her work. In an interview with the artist, she talks about Lakota teaching: "I have been taught through Lakota teachings and spiritual teachings that it's all about the sky. It's all about how the sky will tell you everything that you need to know. It's about watching and pondering, and about how the sky will show you things." Dana interprets the sky in her works in the sense that the sky shows us the intangible—ideas and inspirations, a sense of the sacred. In her surreal approach, Dana's works act like the clouds in the sky, shifting to show us new things, new layers and images—endlessly.

Dana also talks about the Western influences she grew up with, such as the surrealist black-and-white movies of the 40's that are echoed in her early work. However, Dana's surrealism is also grown from culture and poetry, as in *The Red Paper* (1996), where an all-Aboriginal cast mimics Elizabethan dialogue. *Red Paper* is a turning of the tables, and in this cultural shift the barbarity and oppressive legacy of colonialism is revealed. The unique brand of surrealism evident in Dana's work (e.g. *10, The People Dance*, and *The Heart of Everything That Is*) is loaded with cultural signifiers and with the politics of decolonization.

This political focus is apparent as a thread running through Dana's career. Within the works of beauty and the works of rage there is always a passion for justice. In the 2004 four-channel installation *Rattle*, Dana talks about the subversive nature of the piece in its depiction of beading. Flanking the rattle, the visual prayer, are examples of beadwork. Dana says that this was a subversive act: She took beadwork, relegated to craft and museum, and blew it up to flood the gallery walls with the beauty of beading, reclaiming the gallery space for Aboriginal art expressions. These subversive acts can be seen in the way that Dana breaks down the language of art in *Waterspeak* (2002). Here Dana has left behind artspeak to explore waterspeak.

A more visceral sense of the political act in Dana's work is seen in her 1997 performance and installation, *Buffalo Bone China*. In the performance Dana smashes pieces of China and later makes four bundles and places them in a sanctified circle while an experimental video of buffalo plays. Feeling the loss of the buffalo, the backbone of Plains spirituality and sustenance, the artist uses a rubber mallet to destroy plates and bowls. The breaking of the china refers to the use of buffalo bones in the making of bone china during the period of exploitation and decimation of the buffalo. This rage can be seen to ebb and flow in Dana's work. For example, in the 1999 performance *Ablakela*, Dana explores the sacred, creating a calm before the storm in the wake of millennial anxiety. However, works like *Ablakela* are still political in the way they subvert dominant Western ideas and art traditions. In *Ablakela*, Dana projects the images of offerings: a feather, a rock, bear grass, and the calm reflected in the peyote healing songs sung by Native American Church singers Primeaux and Mike. This calm stands in protest to the anxiety, the pace, and the ways of Western society.

In an interview with the artist, Dana states, "Once an angry Indian always an angry Indian!" followed by a hearty laugh shared between the artist and interviewer. Our laughter, our cultures, and our spirituality are our survival and this survival becomes another layer, another part of the journey in Dana's work. Her practice chronicles these histories—the personal and the political—in a way no textbook can ever retell these stories. She tells these stories with heart and spirit, bringing these histories to life, relating them to her own family and journey. **"I'm influenced by my own experience as a Lakota woman, a Canadian, a mixed-blood Canadian, somewhat of an academic, and my own relationship to the natural and supernatural world. That whole bundle of experiences goes in to the artwork. I think that's where the multi-layering comes in, because I've had a very multi-layered life."**