

EXHIBIT REVIEW

Drone Warriors: The Art of Surveillance and Resistance at Standing Rock. Exhibit at the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology. PROVIDENCE, RI: BROWN UNIVERSITY, MAY 11, 2018–APRIL 30, 2019.

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Between April 2016 and February 2017, indelible images of police violence against protestors on tribal reservation and unceded lands in Standing Rock, North Dakota, circulated on the national news and social media. The American public bore witness to law enforcement using tear gas, rubber bullets, concussion grenades, and water cannons against protestors as winter temperatures in the region plunged below freezing. These images generated widespread public interest in Energy Transfer Partners' proposed Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), a \$3.8 billion, 1,172-mile-long pipe intended to carry 500,000 barrels of oil per day across the states of North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Illinois. In North Dakota, the construction plans aimed to extend the pipeline upriver from Lake Oahe, the Standing Rock Sioux Nation's only source of drinking water. The DAPL proposal thus sparked serious concerns about the contemporary state of Indigenous sovereignty, settler colonialism, and environmental racism.

Drone Warriors: The Art of Surveillance and Resistance at Standing Rock takes up these concerns by revisiting the actions of the Water Protectors, the Native and non-Native protestors who opposed the proposed DAPL. This informative exhibit highlights how photographic drone operators Myron Dewey, Sean Turgent, Dean Dedman Jr., Brooke Johnson Waukau, and dozens of others turned to drone technology as an innovative response to the pipeline and its defenders. They produced videos and photographs of the pipeline construction and the militarized encampments housing Morton County police, National Guard, and DAPL security forces to document political and environmental transgressions. At the same time, they created powerful images of the landscape and the #NoDAPL Movement to tell their own narrative of the events.

Entering the gallery space through the museum's glass doors, museumgoers are met with tracking shots of the Mni Sose, or the Missouri River, on a flat screen television mounted on the wall at eye level. To the left, a series of Dewey's aerial photographs lines the walls, capturing the beauty of "Lakota ancestral lands, herds of bison grazing in the prairie, and the linkages of waterways," according to a nearby panel. These opening images establish the landscape's relationship to Indigenous culture as well as its natural beauty. As one moves through the exhibit, a visual story unfolds of this natural world under threat. For example, on other televisions mounted nearby, museumgoers seated on stools can take in aerial video of the buffalo "surrounded by twenty foot deep trenches and razor wire."¹ To be sure, the narrative of the endangered Lakota lands is a deeply moving one. At the same time, opening the exhibit with images of unpopulated land risks re-inscribing a colonial perspective that ignores the Indigenous communities who inhabit it, seeing it instead as empty and ripe for resource extraction.

Perhaps in an effort to dampen this effect, a glass case nearby showcases the rich variety of cultural artifacts born out of the DAPL resistance. These include several posters by Lakota visual artist Gilbert Kills Pretty Enemy III and graphic screen-printed fabric featuring a young Indigenous woman standing with a line of Protectors, her right arm raised in resistance, by Jesus Barraza and Melanie Cervantes. A second case features dreamcatchers crafted by Water Protectors at the Standing Rock Pueblo Camp who cleverly repurposed the concertina wire used by law enforcement to hem in Protectors as the hoop that holds the dreamcatcher webbing taut.

Perhaps the most arresting portion of the exhibit is its visual documentation of the #NoDAPL Movement. While the perspective of Elizabeth Hoover's now iconic photograph of Protectors silhouetted against clouds of illuminated tear gas during the standoff at the Backwater Bridge barricade places the viewer on the ground (Figure 1), the majority of the exhibit's images use the drone's aerial perspective to tell the story of the actions from above. One striking photograph captures the standoff between Protectors and Morton County police officers at Turtle Island as a complex interplay of surveillance and counter-surveillance: while law enforcement officers clad in



Figure 1. Elizabeth Hoover's photograph of Protectors engulfed in tear gas released by police at the Backwater Bridge barricade on November 20, 2016. (Photo by the author, courtesy Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

black uniforms look down on the Protectors from their vantage atop the sacred island, the drone's elevation allows Protectors to reverse the direction of surveillance and track the movements of law enforcement.

Police interference included surveillance, harassment, and detainment of Protectors, as well as efforts to restrict their mobility on the ground by blocking access to roadways and in the air by establishing no-fly zones. In other photographs, we see Highway 1806 barricaded by burned-out vehicles, and drilling pad sites hidden behind concrete walls loom into view thanks to the reconnaissance efforts of the Drone Warriors. These scenes of environmental devastation also offer a stark visual contrast to the exhibit's earlier images establishing the beauty of the natural landscape. To be sure, such images are central to the movement's aesthetic resistance. Yet, as the curators acknowledge in the contextualizing information that

accompanies the exhibit, the use of drone technology by the Protectors is complex because it also constitutes "an indigenization of neocolonial military and corporate surveillance technology."²

The inclusion of a Phantom quadcopter drone on loan from operator Myron Dewey provides museumgoers with a chance to think through the complexity of this technology at close range (Figure 2). Viewed at eye-level on a transparent platform in a tall plexiglass column (Figure 3), six small bullet holes puncturing the drone's plastic shell are easy to spot. As a nearby panel explains: "[t]he police shot at it multiple times, as evidenced by bullet holes on the drone's underside. Although this drone escaped the police, and survived to fly another day, many other drones fell from the sky behind police lines or into the river." Upon closer inspection, museumgoers can also spy rolled-up swatches of colored cloth tobacco prayers secured with zip ties to the drone's



Figure 2. Drone flown by Myron Dewey in the #NoDAPL actions. (Loaned by Prof. Myron Dewey, Digital Smoke Signals. Photo by the author, courtesy Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

plastic base. If his drone had fallen, Dewey anticipated that law enforcement officers retrieving his drone would necessarily have made contact with the fabric, thus receiving his prayers. Dewey also had the police in mind when he customized his drone's white hull with black marker. On one side of the plastic body—just above the camera—he wrote, “THE WORLD IS WATCHING”; on the other side, “Water is Life.”

Dewey's Phantom quadcopter thus provides a fitting centerpiece for *Drone Warriors: The Art of Surveillance and Resistance at Standing Rock* both as the networked imaging system responsible



Figure 3. Myron Dewey's drone in the exhibition's gallery space surrounded by moving and still images captured at Standing Rock. (Photo by the author, courtesy Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, Brown University.) [This figure appears in color in the online issue.]

for many of the aerial images featured in the exhibit and as a material artifact of the Movement in its own right. Visitors will appreciate the care with which this exhibit frames the #NoDAPL actions as an imbricated set of surveillance, resistance, and aesthetic practices carried out by Water Protectors at Standing Rock.

NOTES

1. Text from the drone video presentation.
2. Text from the exhibition label.