

Alanis Obomsawin Wants the Children to Know

At the center of the acclaimed Abenaki filmmaker's practice is her effort to counter White, colonialist versions of history.



Natalie Haddad November 21, 2023



Still from *Sigwan*, dir. Alanis Obomsawin (2005) (all photos Natalie Haddad/*Hyperallergic*)

TORONTO — Surveying the life's work of 91-year-old First Nations filmmaker and activist Alanis Obomsawin, ***The Children Have to Hear Another Story*** is a crash course in Indigenous oppression and resistance.

The chronological exhibition details the acclaimed Abenaki artist's 50-plus-year career through press clippings, writings, music, and videos of her own films and several TV appearances.

As the title indicates, the show begins with children and education. Animal masks greet visitors at the gallery's front window; nearby, two of the artist's handmade stuffed animals sit on a comfy chair near a 1963 news story about Abenaki Christmas traditions. As her practice matured in the ensuing decades, Obomsawin's films and artworks began to move between and weave together youth education and adult calls to action, resulting in a body of work that speaks to multiple ages and generations.

At the center of the artist's practice is her effort to counter White, colonialist versions of history. While rewriting colonialist narratives has been an increasingly familiar topic of discussion in museums, universities, and other

cultural institutions in recent years, Obomsawin's work — particularly presented en masse — underscores the arduous labor of chipping away at structural racism. A handful of fantastical films intertwine mythical characters and a dreamlike tone with allusions to exclusion and abuse: In "Sigwan" (2005), a young girl finds community in forest creatures; and in 2010's autobiographical "When All the Leaves Are Gone" a First Nations girl in an all-White school, bullied by her classmates, takes refuge in her dreams, where horse-like creatures care for her.



Animal masks by Alanis Obomsawin

For the most part, though, the films are documentaries; in 1967, Obomsawin was hired as a consultant by the National Film Board of Canada and has since produced more than 50 long- and short films. Many serve to center Indigenous narratives, subtly marginalizing White settler perspectives.

Interspersed among these are devastating stories of systemic racism that explode into physical brutality, as in *Incident at Restigouche* (1984), addressing Quebec Provincial Police raids and violence against Mi'kmaq fishermen in 1981, and "Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child" (1986) about a Métis teenager in Alberta who committed suicide after being shuffled through 28 foster homes.

Visitors can easily spend a few hours or a whole day taking in all the videos (including recordings of the artist on talk shows and giving speeches) and ephemera. With so much to absorb, significant works can be missed, and as a result, voices that Obomsawin fought to amplify risk being unheard. (Many of the films are available to watch on the National Film Board's [website](#).) Conversely, condensing decades of filmmaking and activism into a few rooms creates an irrefutable archive of state-sanctioned oppression and erasure.

The show bespeaks the advances First Nations communities in Canada have made toward sovereignty, yet Obomsawin makes clear not only the effort it takes to reverse systemic oppression but also the stops and starts, holdouts, and regressions in the process — and the precariousness of social justice within a colonialist framework.



Promotional poster for *Kanhesatake: 270 Years of Resistance*, dir. Alanis Obomsawin (1993)

Kanhesatake: 270 Years of Resistance (1993), perhaps her best-known film, chronicles the 1990 Oka Crisis, a 78-day standoff between the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) community outside of Montreal and police and armed forces, incited by the Quebec government's plans for a golf course on ancestral Kanien'kehá:ka land. Obomsawin remained throughout the siege to record it. The conflict prompted a racist backlash, the effects of which are still felt in the government's ownership of the land and refusal to issue a formal apology.

Throughout the show, the notion of teaching “another story,” as the show's title instructs, moves both forward and backward in time: forward to coming generations who ideally will learn histories from Indigenous perspectives and leaders, and backward to the vilification of Indigenous people via settler stories and their repercussions starting in childhood — from the artist's bullying by students at her predominantly White public school in Trois-Rivières, Quebec, to the horrific abuse and unrecorded deaths at notorious **residential schools**.

The exhibition originated at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin before making its way to Canada, beginning in Vancouver earlier this year. Next year it travels to Montreal, the artist's longtime home, located in Canada's last province to grant voting rights to First Nations people, **in 1969**. Amid empty rhetoric about social justice from institutions across North America, and escalating racial and cultural tensions worldwide, Obomsawin's life work envisions a story wherein sovereignty is a right for all.



Robert Verrall, "Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance" (c. 1993), chalk on paper



Two covers of *Bush Lady* by Alanis Obomsawin



Stuffed animals by Alanis Obomsawin



Alanis Obomsawin, "The Great Visit" (2007), drypoint



Ephemera in *The Children Have to Hear Another Story* at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto



A 1963 press clipping and photograph of the artist with her handmade stuffed animals in *The Children Have to Hear Another Story* at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto



Photograph of Alanis Obomsawin musical performance, 1969

The Children Have to Hear Another Story continues at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto (15 King's College Circle, Toronto, Ontario, Canada) through November 25. The exhibition was curated by Richard Hill and Hila Peleg.
