

KARTHIK PANDIAN

WITH

MIKE FORCIA

IN THE RIVER

A PUBLIC PERFORMANCE

THE

CAPITOL

ST. PAUL

Sam Aros Mitchell (Texas
Band of Yaqui Indians), **Leila
Awadallah, Lakota “Hokie”
Clairmont** (Hochunk / Lakota),
**Thomas Draskovic-Chetan
Ohitika** (Standing Rock Lakota),
**Cameron Downey, Douglas
R. Ewart, Mike Forcia** (Bad
River Anishinaabe), **Lela
Pierce, Jonathon Rosemond,
Akičita Šun̄ka-Wakaŋ Ska**
(Standing Rock Lakota), **Darren
Thompson** (Ojibwe / Tohono
O’odham), **Ta Pejuta Wicahpi
Win** (Hunkpati Dakota Oyate)



IN THE RIVER

is a public performance by Karthik Pandian, commissioned by Midway Contemporary Art for its Off-Site program. Produced in collaboration with Indigenous activist Mike Forcia, *IN THE RIVER* braids Native prophecy, Black music, and stories of survival to challenge the colonial monument's claim on space and time.

Since they met in the summer of 2021, Pandian has worked closely with Forcia, who orchestrated the takedown of the Columbus monument in St. Paul on June 10, 2020. Together, they have assembled an ensemble of Twin Cities-based performers, artists, media workers, and activists to revive and redirect the energy of that day into a three-part performance in downtown St. Paul encompassing theater, dance, music, and sculpture.

PROGRAM

Saturday, April 23rd 2022

PART I THE PROMISE OF YOUTH

The Capitol

Monologues converge in the free fall of a monument. Energy is conducted through the sacred circle of dance.

PART II IN THE RIVER

Downtown

A procession through the streets of Downtown St. Paul. Animated by the Anishinaabe Seven Fires Prophecy.

PART III AN ABSENCE OF LIGHT

Lowertown

Rest and quiet give rise to the thunder. The birth pangs of the New People.





April 8, 2022

Dear F.W.,

I wrote to you two years ago. But the letter came back months later: *return to sender*. I must have written the address down wrong. By the time my words came back to me, so much had changed that it was like receiving a letter from an old friend.

The wrongness continues here in Minneapolis, feels necessary, animating. From how I showed up in the first place – getting out the wrong door of the Lyft, approaching the wrong campfire, bringing the wrong drink (beer) – to Mike mistaking me for some kind of Bigfoot in that dim, flickering light, emerging from a rideshare from who-knows-where with who-knows-what-intentions. How my arrival was always a kind of Columbian rehearsal, drawn as I was out to the Cities by the video I'd seen on Twitter a little over a year earlier and watched so many times that the dance done 'round the fallen statue had been etched around my heart, a locked groove of brutality, riot, ceremony, and joy that conducted me back to myself, not as a singular self, but as a people finding a future, a people whose Native roots touch somewhere deep in earth and time; beautiful Black and brown people, connecting

and reconnecting in these early Spring days
when forsythia flames against a dormant world,
turning our heads like a burning police car,
opening our eyes wide to receive its light.

What did Taíno eyes receive when the light of
the sun reflected off the pale-skinned strangers,
inaugurating an historical era we see coming
to a close in the slow motion of a statue's free
fall, the sudden thud of bronze on concrete
echoing back to us from a future we are forging,
echoing forward from a life stamped out of a
prone body on the street? The stranger's journals
record the care extended to him, which he takes
for innocence. Care continues to redeem the
rot, composting the pain for the rebels' garden
bed. We mourn George Floyd as we mourn our
Taíno ancestors whose love was repaid with
abuse, pestilence, slavery, and death. We mourn
Breonna Taylor as we mourn the Dakota 38+2
on whose homelands we are grateful to rehearse
these new forms of togetherness.

When I showed up, out of place, at the
encampment in Seward where Mike was
standing guard, he quickly embraced me as a
brother. After I explained that I had written him
a letter but never heard back and that someone

completely unrelated to him had invited me to a different campfire and that that campfire happened to be across the street from this campfire, which was tended by the one person in the world I most wanted to meet, he said, “Well, the Creator must have brought us together for a reason.” And in that moment, I rehearsed surrender.

It’s hard to believe twelve years have passed since you reflected so generously on the record we produced for my previous exhibition in town. Much has changed. I don’t know if I believe in making exhibitions anymore. They imprison the energy I want to conduct through public space. *The monument laughs*. What is public space on stolen land? Especially when the land is *doubly* stolen – *from* Native people who have called it home for countless generations and *by* the concept of ownership itself, which is intimately bound up with chattel slavery, anti-Blackness, and policing on Turtle Island – we do what we can to take it back. We find openings to plot, organize, and speculate together. We retreat into time. And commune there. Where we can rest, study, dance. Ready to feel those rhythms out into the world. To heed the call into destruction as care, yet again.

The crows are cawing this morning in Minneapolis. I feel like I'm in India at my grandmother's house. She would feed the crows at the same time every day, calling out to them in their language – *caw caw caw* – to come and get their dinner. Mike and I talked about the Indian/Indian thing on the drive up to Bad River. What I'd been calling Columbus' founding misrecognition. "You ever met a real Indian before?", he joked again and again when introducing his friends and family to me. They hadn't.

Yours,
K.P.



weight, it can't create a
not applied at any distance away from

Normal

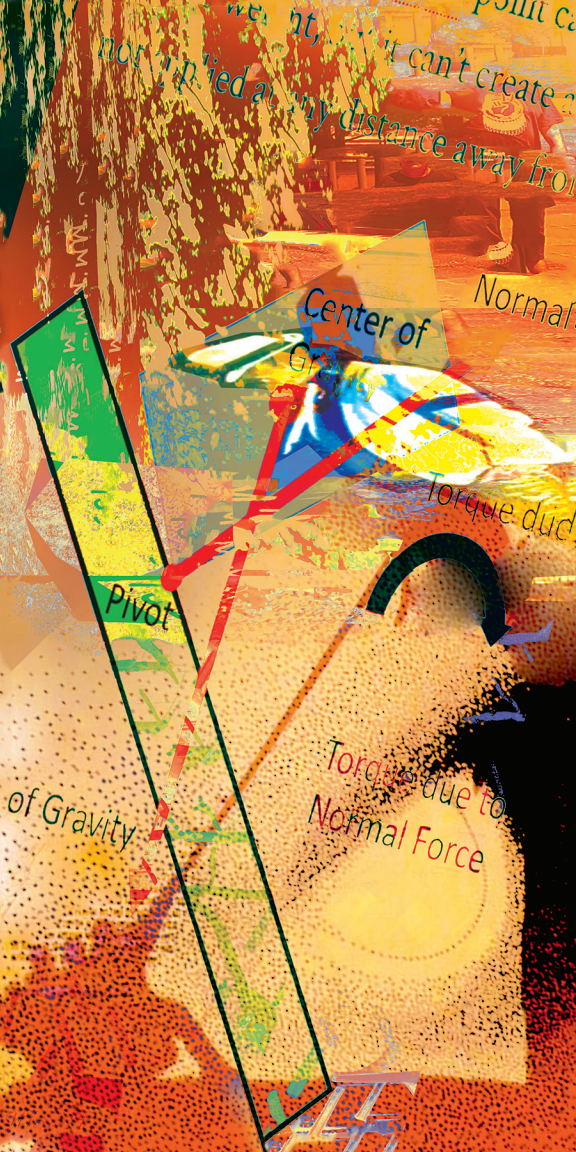
Center of
Gravity

Torque due

Pivot

of Gravity

Torque due to
Normal Force



CONFLUENCE

Yasmina Price & Timmy Châu

On May 28, 2020, in the midst of the Black-led rebellion which erupted following the murder of George Floyd, the Third Precinct of the Minneapolis Police Department was burned to ashes. Two weeks later at the Minnesota State Capitol, Indigenous protesters pulled down the statue of an avatar of settler genocide. These acts, expressions of liberatory devotion, were dazzling singularities in a vast constellation of insurgent actions which proliferated across the globe that year. As participants, students, and caretakers of the necessary riot, we see and recall these insurrectionary flares as images from both the past and the future, “spiral retellings” (word to Édouard Glissant) of what was and what might be.

Against a backdrop of accumulating crises, neverending catastrophes and irreparable damage to the planet, whispers of old/new forms of relation unfurl. Across the false border between two settler nations, the battlecry from Unist'ot'en land defenders rings louder: *reconciliation is dead*. What follows are echoes in this chorus, inherited and passed on.

RUPTURE

NO COPS NO Jails

NO LINEAR FUCKING

STATUES Static and

silent, the statues of Empire

TIME

consolidate its violent erasures—genocidal, historical, cultural, spiritual—of peoples who were once free and will again be free. In his still brightly burning text *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), the militant Martinican thinker Frantz Fanon described the colonial world as: “A world compartmentalized, Manichaeian and petrified, a world of statues [...] crushing with its stoniness the backbones of those scarred by the whip.” Against the forced immobility of the colonizing order, Fanon offered a poem to the ecstatic, transformative mobility of violence channeled towards liberation.

IMPERIALISM Confronting the ongoingness of colonization is always also a struggle against Empire and a ruling global architecture of exploitation. In his book *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad*, Manu Karuka's study of Indigenous decolonization and transnational imperialism points to the collusion between the brutal machineries of war and the cruel mathematics of finance capital. Karuka unmasks how profit-driven imperial logics stabilize the brutality of borders while hoarding the authority to move across them.

MILITARISM A global infrastructure violently polices displaced and dispossessed classes to protect the flow of capital. The inherent instability of this system demands forcible maintenance, leading increasingly militarized states to refine the strategic production and management of crises, and to manufacture and leverage political and economic instability across the world.

RECOGNITION Diagnosing the machineries of colonialism, imperialism and capitalism reckons with the fact that there is nothing to be gained by imploring, compromising or even demanding liberation from these complicit power blocs. Symbolic recognition by the settler state is a trap, further integrating and assimilating its subjects into the imperial nation. Diversity and its representational logics are treacherous tactics of domination which only maintain

the stranglehold of the current order. In *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*, political anthropologist and Indigenous feminist Audra Simpson offers a dissection of recognition vs. refusal, multicultural policies (always folding back into state governance) vs. rejecting the terms of a bureaucratic, juridical, psychic, and institutional scaffolding (always anchored in oppression). *Would you take an antidote from your poisoner?*

DEMOCRACY Empire's grift relies on concealing how it came to be and how it continues to exist. The colonial project uses the language of false liberation—that the people need only be “represented”, that “freedom” is for all, that democracy will “save us”—spreading distraction and amnesia through the alibi and myth of progress. So-called Western Democracies are inseparable from the monstrosities they claim as their opposites. Transatlantic slavery, Indigenous genocide, mass incarceration: this is U.S. democracy. Organized abandonment is the brutal foundation of a rigged system which determines who is allowed to live, and under what conditions.

YOU HAVE
STOLEN MORE
— THAN WE
COULD EVER
LOOT

REBELLION

MEMORIALS

In Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, the Black Studies scholar writes: "[I]f museums and memorials materialize a kind of reparation (repair) and enact their own pedagogies as they position visitors to have a particular experience or set of experiences about an event that is seen to be past, how does one memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still? How do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing?" In the break of the monument's complicity in maintaining the anti-Black police state, the pedagogies, histories, and futures rendered in the process of their destruction emerge.

DIRECT ACTION Colonial statues preserve and project the material force of the dominant order—calling for collective direct action against them. Tearing them down, pushing them into rivers, crumbling them to dust is a loving tribute to the flourishing possibilities of what Fanon would call a program of total disorder. These destructive exercises are the unpredictable, ecstatic, and creative sourcing of remembered and invented worlds. They shed negation, unsettling the rigid organizations of time and space which hold them hostage.

IMAGINATION Dreaming is essential. Where imperial forms of memorialization constitute,

solidify and discipline their ruthless templates, imagination becomes a vital tool to summon impossible horizons and sustain oppositional forms of relation. This is the undisciplined desire to recuperate, nurture, and augment worlds never fully erased by these domineering carceralities, what abolitionist scholar-activist Erica Meiners has named a “jail-break of the imagination.”

RITUAL

Be ■ WATER
SPREAD FIRE

STORYTELLING Alongside us and our unrealised imaginaries are the dead. A ghost can be greeted as an anarchic figure for the constant rupturing of a past that is never closed, which refuses the forced stabilization of colonial cages and imperial statues. What remains of those who came before is a crucial narrative re-orientation. The moment a project of violent control comes into being is also the moment the resistance to it emerges. We may not precede the stories we tell about ourselves (all flowers to Sylvia Wynter), but we do precede the projects of enslavement, colonization, dispossession, and control that always try to entrap us in their frames. The stories of

our peoples whose worlds were invaded and wounded did not begin there, and they will not end there. *Sumud*, the Palestinian spirit of steadfastness, shows how protecting the embers is a way to fan the flames, to warm shared histories of resistance.

WATER Caribbean poet Derek Walcott once told us that “The Sea Is History.” Water, like land, holds traces of all that has passed. Water is our teacher. From it we may learn how to adapt, how to be in right relation with one another, how to grow a shared capacity to live with difference—where difference is no longer organized around brutal hierarchies. Indigenous feminist scholar Joanne Barker’s theorization of water offers such a method, a way to attend to our responsibility to all “other-than-human beings.” Water is a fluid map for finding ways to co-exist with relationalities that break, rather than reinforce, the exclusionary designs of humanity.

CEREMONY Ceremony is a technology for holding collectives. *Who holds you?* We must tend to ourselves, to each other, to what is between us. We cannot assume reciprocity or solidarity. But this is no cause for despair. Something more vital is on the line—our capacity to co-create relations of care that honor what we cannot know about each other, our commitment to finding kinship in shared structures of survival. Ceremony is a ritualizing of communal protocols, a remembering and a conjuring,

in which we find each other again and anew. From illicit banner drops to abolitionist zine-making, guerrilla film screenings in the public square to wayward reading groups, from passing around snacks in the middle of a riot to letters shared between those made unfree by the prison and those outside, from a house party in the street to deflated wheels on a cop car, from de-arresting a stranger to collectivized childcare, from sabotaging a surveillance camera to refusing to turn the music down, these are the clandestine kisses of revolutionary love. There are many languages of rebellion: shared, negotiated, improvised. These are the many tributaries that show us our groundwater is connected, that hold us in movement, that meet in the river.



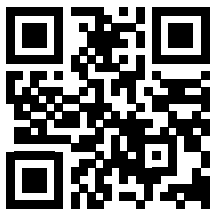




**Abolition is about presence, not absence.
It's about building life-affirming institutions.**

- Ruth Wilson Gilmore

A selection of small organizations doing the work of presencing in the Twin Cities area. Please support them in whatever way you are able. All links accessible using the QR code below:



Documenting MN is a Black youth community-led program teaching young people how to document issues in their communities.
linktr.ee/DocumentingMN

Spring Hill Friends is advocating for environmental and cultural conservation alternatives to development on a 28-acre wooded meadowland in Eden Prairie, MN.
springvalleyfriends.org

In Progress, St. Paul provides opportunities for artists of all ages to develop their skills as digital storytellers and leaders through the use of photography, video, and music.
in-progress.org

IN THE RIVER

Conceived and directed by Karthik Pandian
Choreography by Karthik Pandian with Sam Aros Mitchell, Leila Awadallah & Lela Pierce
Featuring compositions, instruments
& music by Douglas R. Ewart and vocals
& drum by Lakota “Hokie” Clairmont

Part I The Promise of Youth

Written by Mike Forcia, Karthik Pandian
& Ta Pejuta Wicahpi Win
Performed by Thomas Draskovic-Chetan Ohitika,
Mike Forcia, Ta Pejuta Wicahpi Win, Sam Aros Mitchell, Leila Awadallah & Lela Pierce

Part II In the River

Adapted from Edward Benton-Banai’s “The Seven Fires” (permission granted by his son Anishinabe J. Benton) with additional writing by Mike Forcia & Karthik Pandian
Instruments by Karthik Pandian

Part III An Absence of Light

Written by Sam Aros Mitchell, Thomas Draskovic-Chetan Ohitika, Leila Awadallah
& Lela Pierce
Set design by Karthik Pandian
Sculptural backdrop by Cameron Downey
& Jonathon Rosemond
Additional instrumentation by Sam Aros Mitchell & Karthik Pandian

Video and still photography by Akičita Šunja-
Wakanj Ska & Darren Thompson

Additional camera by Danny Carroll

Sound recording by Robby MacBain

A/V by John Ballinger and Tyler Gardin at
Showcore

Thanks to Kristine Sorenson at In Progress,
Chelsea Knight at Unseen Video, Stefan
Grabowski at the Film Study Center at Harvard
University, and Niko Georgiades at Unicorn Riot

Production management by Eben Kowler

Midway Contemporary Art

John Rasmussen, Director/Curator

Megan McCreedy, Deputy Director

Kelsey Olson, Programming Manager

Candice Davis, Development & Outreach

Rio Gordon, Intern

Emmy Smith, Intern



STUDY

As *IN THE RIVER* has found its course over the past two years, I have been blessed to have these writers, poets, activists, and musicians stirring my pot of study:

Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Mariame Kaba, Ravyn Wngz, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, Christina Sharpe, Saidiya Hartman, Tina Campt, Hanif Abdurraqib, Sylvia Wynter, Rinaldo Walcott, Joy James, Lara & Stephen Sheehi, Joshua Myers, Che Gossett, Frank Wilderson, Robin D.G. Kelley, José Esteban Muñoz, Tiffany Lethabo King, Mahtowin Munro, Kisha James, The Red Nation, Nick Estes, Dennis Banks, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Kim Tallbear, Dylan Rodriguez, Harsha Walia, Tobi Haslett, Hannah Black, Astra Taylor, Jason E. Smith, M. NourbeSe Philip, Nathaniel Mackey, Natalie Diaz, Diane di Prima, Danez Smith, Julian Aguon, Ocean Vuong, Patrick Wolfe, Nell Irvin Painter, Andrea Long Chu, Don & Moki Cherry, Douglas R. Ewart, Amina Claudine Myers, Thulani Davis, Ashon Crawley, Frantz Fanon, Cedric Robinson, James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs.

I acknowledge them here in the hopes of widening this circle of study. Toward that end, I have posted links to interviews, videos, and texts that have touched me and my thinking throughout this process:

midwayart.org/event/in-the-river/

Karthik Pandian



BAD RIVER

CASINO & LODGE

caliber

caliber

caliber

caliber

caliber

THANK YOU



Paige K. Johnston, Aaru Pandian, Mankwe Ndosi, Mohamud Mumin, Tiana LaPointe, Adrian Williams, Anthony Romero, Gabby Preston, George Liu, Yolanda Yang, Robby MacBain, Luis Arnías, Nace Zavrl, Pao Houa Her, Taylor from Friends Print Collective, Isa Gagarin, Michael Gordon, Rae Edwardo Gordon, Alice Dodge, Brianna Lamoso, Zakaria Almoutlak, Lalitha and Ganesh Pandian, Andros Zins-Browne, Mariah Garnett, Vishal Jugdeo, David Stone Jr., Jason Forcia, Mike Wiggins Jr., Sheldon Noel, Big Eagle, Brianna Gutierrez, Juleana Enright, Kat Purcell, Rhiana Yazzie, Anocha Suwichakornpong, Palita Chunsangchan, Chitra Vairavan, Vie Boheme, Jay Scheib, Jay Heikes, Erin Gleeson, Jim Heal, Yasmina Price, Timmy Châu, and the Family of Edward Benton-Banai.

IMAGES

Cover: Karthik Pandian, *Minoomin*, 16mm frame enlargement, 2022

Inside front cover: Karthik Pandian, *Island in the Universe*, ink on paper, 2021

Color plates: Digital collages by George Liu using images from Karthik Pandian's camera roll:

p03. Forsythia
p04. Openings
p09. Juggernaut
p10. Tipping Point
p19. Target
p20. Friends
p25. Minoomin
p26. Bad River

p27. Isa Gagarin, *Where the Great River meets the Ocean*, ink on paper, 2022

Inside back cover: Isa Gagarin & Rae Edwardo Gordon, *Tāya pinekkat sin fegge*, ink on paper, 2022



Support for *IN THE RIVER* generously provided by Creative Capital, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Now + There, In Progress, The Film Study Center at Harvard University, and is made possible by the voters of Minnesota through a Minnesota State Arts Board Operating Support grant, thanks to a legislative appropriation from the arts and cultural heritage fund.

©2022

ISBN 978-0-9965241-6-2

MIDWAY CONTEMPORARY ART
www.midwayart.org