

Michelle Sound, okāwīsimāk nawac kwayask itōtamwak | Aunties do it better, daphne, Tiohtià:ke

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Michelle Sound

okāwīsimāk nawac kwayask itōtamwak / Aunties do it better

daphne's street-facing windowfront, just south of the refurbished Plaza Saint-Hubert, is prime real estate. Montréal's first Indigenous artist-run centre sits just steps away from the bustling energy of fabric and textile stores, wedding-gown and prom-dress shops, and other long-running special-event clothing businesses. Once inside the small, intimate gallery, visitors are greeted by an assortment of colourful circles dotting its white walls. On a late winter's day, with the warmth of the sun struggling to find its way through the low-lying clouds, the exhibition by the Cree and Métis artist Michelle Sound, *okāwīsimāk nawac kwayask itōtamwak / Aunties do it better*, is a generous invitation to witness rich personalities and storylines embedded in the beautifully detailed structures of handmade drums.

The piece *HBC Trapline* depicts the four iconic colours of the Hudson's Bay Company four-point blanket in plush, fur-like circular drums. Below the blue, yellow, red, and green suspended objects, on the ground like small carpets, lie a series of brown beaver pelts that have been deliberately placed so that they slightly overlap. This installation, which references the legacies of the fur trade and the role of Indigenous women in the preparation of animals, gestures to the ways in which settler-colonial narratives write women out of depictions of the physical and intellectual labour of trapping and hunting. The re-centring, acknowledgement, and celebration of Indigenous women's agency, craft, and significance to the creation and maintenance of community is a cornerstone of Sound's practice.

Sound takes up these notions again in *Chapan Snares Rabbit*, a series of differently sized fur drums dyed pastel pink, blue, and peach, that dot the largest wall at daphne. As the Cree-Métis-Saulteaux writer and scholar Jas M. Morgan describes in an essay for the exhibition, "chapan" is a Cree kinship term with two meanings: it can refer either

to a great-grandparent or, more generally, to descendants. Referencing a long line of "deadly aunties" coming before her, whose dextrous handiwork and manual abilities paved the way for this work, Sound recounts a visual genealogy of embodied knowledge through the textiles, colours, and textures of handmade drums.

In a small back room, *NDN Aunties* adds further complexity to the drums by giving each object its own independent material characteristics and, by extension, identity. Leopard and zebra print, denim, fringe, black and gold leather, and beading make up the variously dimensioned, perfectly shaped circles. This community of sculptural aunties, with their medicine wheel pins or jean-jacket pockets, evokes both individual sovereignty and collective strength of past and present matriarchs. Bypassing figurative traditions of portraiture, Sound's drums are suggestively sonic emblems that echo and reverberate with a particular mix of love, joy, resistance, and reverence. It is in the fine details of these many different voices, in the histories that they each tell, apart and together, that Sound both eulogizes and activates the archetype of the aunty through striking storytelling.

Didier Morelli

daphne, Tiohtià:ke
January 8, 2022—March 5, 2022

Michelle Sound

Trapline, 2019–2020,
HBC Trapline (detail),
2019, installation view,
2022.

Michelle Sound

NDN Aunties (detail),
2021.

Photos : Mike Patten,
courtesy of the artist &
daphne, Tiohtià:ke