

RECLAIMING THE LANDSCAPE THE ART OF LEWIS deSOTO

BY ANYA MONTIEL

»» TAHQUITZ

is a *nukatem*, or supernatural being, who lives in the San Jacinto Mountains east of Riverside, Cal. Most *nukatem* have left earth, but Tahquitz (pronounced tah-KWISH), a being with great *aiva'a*, or power, remains. The Cahuilla of southern California often blame him for lost hikers and automobile accidents.

Tahquitz is also a favorite subject for Lewis deSoto (Cahuilla), the California-based artist who creates dynamic installations linking ancient cosmologies to today's world. Born in San Bernardino, Cal., in 1954 to a Cahuilla father and a Hispanic mother, he has been a professor of art at San Francisco State University since 1988.

In his art practice, deSoto transforms spaces, whether out-of-doors or in a museum gallery, into peculiar and provocative worlds through light, audio and video technologies. His installations are commentaries about human disengagement from the land.

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For the *Tahquitz* installation at the Culver Center of the Arts, deSoto suspended a boulder inside the gallery representing Tahquitz's home in the San Jacinto Mountains. The exhibition was co-curated by Tyler Stallings, artistic director for Culver Center of the Arts and director of the Sweeney Art Gallery, and Jonathan Green, ARTSblock executive director, University of California Riverside, 2012.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LEWIS DESOTO



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CULLVER CENTER OF THE ARTS

Erin Neff, the voice and composer of the maiden's song in the *Tahquitz* installation, performs live, February 4, 2012, with traditional Cahuilla Bird Singers Robert Liera, Gerald Clarke, Jr., William Madrigal, Andrew Madrigal and Jesus Cardenas.



The mountain range where Tahquitz lives includes Tahquitz Peak, a sacred place that is now a popular hiking and rock-climbing locale. It is also called Lily Rock, named after the daughter of one of the founding townspeople of Riverside. The name change, remarks deSoto, shows that “the landscape has become estranged from itself.” Few local non-Native residents know the meaning of the original name, or the disquieting but fascinating stories connected to it.

The artist’s most recent work, an installation at the Culver Center of the Arts at the University of California, Riverside, revived the earlier memory of the being Tahquitz and his landscape. The Cahuilla have fearsome stories about the rapacious behavior of Tahquitz, who kidnaps people and eats their souls, trapping them in his mountain home.

His appetite is insatiable and uncontrollable. This behavior represents desires that go untamed, possibly a metaphor for today’s world of overconsumption and greed. DeSoto says, “everything has power; electrical power or spiritual power are a form of *aiva’a*.” All beings and objects need to be respected and acknowledged for their power and place in the universe.

The site-specific installation and collaborative work, *Lewis deSoto and Erin Neff: Tahquitz*, at the Culver Center, reveals the disconnection between the land and its stories. The artwork took shape once he visited the challenging exhibition space with its 40-foot atrium, double columns and expansive skylight. Like his other works, deSoto used light and sound technology along with his objects.

Like the stories of Tahquitz, the installation at the Culver Center was dramatic, dominated by a large boulder suspended from the ceiling. As viewers walk under this massive rock, that appears almost to float overhead, a woman’s voice is heard singing the story of Tahquitz in Cahuilla in a western operatic style. Looking up in the gallery, a transparent topographic map of the San Jacinto Mountains from the 1880s fills the entire skylight, giving the viewer a somewhat disorienting feeling of looking down on the landscape from the sky. Against one wall, a Cahuilla basket image is projected, its spiral design slowly rotating clockwise. In between the boulder and the basket, an Edison phonograph rests on a table – similar

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PHOTO COURTESY OF LEWIS DESOTO

Detail of Edison cylinder phonograph (c. 1900) with an image of a Cahuilla basket projection slowly rotating behind.



PHOTO COURTESY OF LEWIS DESOTO

Detail of the skylight above the installation showing a translucent map of Tahquitz's home in the San Jacinto Mountain range, derived from a U.S. Geological Survey map printed in the early 1900s. Below: Scene from live performance of *Tahquitz* installation, Feb. 4, 2012



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CULVER CENTER OF THE ARTS

IN ORDER TO CREATE DISCRETE SOUND EXPERIENCES THROUGHOUT A LARGE, OPEN INSTALLATION, DESOTO INCORPORATED “AUDIO SPOTLIGHT” TECHNOLOGY THAT ISOLATES SOUNDS INTO ZONES THAT ARE HEARD WHEN VIEWERS WALK THROUGH CERTAIN AREAS.

to recording devices anthropologists used in the 1900s to document the language and songs of the Cahuilla.

In order to create discrete sound experiences throughout a large, open installation, deSoto incorporated “audio spotlight” technology that isolates sounds into zones that are heard when viewers walk through certain areas. Near the entrance, the voice of Cahuilla elder Alvin Siva begins, speaking the story of Tahquitz in English and Cahuilla. Under the boulder the melodious voice of mezzo-soprano Erin Neff sings Siva’s story in Cahuilla. As you approach the phonograph, the “voice” of Tahquitz bellows, vocalized by Neff and deSoto. The sound then leads into a 1918 recording of Cahuilla bird singers by anthropologist Lucille Hooper.

In conceptualizing this complex installation, deSoto invited Neff to collaborate on the vocal interpretation and expression of the story. Neff is an accomplished opera singer and linguist from San Jose, Cal., who has performed with the San Francisco Opera and other Bay Area companies as well as the Jewish Music Festival and the Telluride Chamber Music Festival. Neff has sung in multiple languages, including Latin, Tagalog and Cahuilla. With her knowledge of the International Phonetic Alphabet system, she is able to vocalize texts of non-English languages, including Native languages.

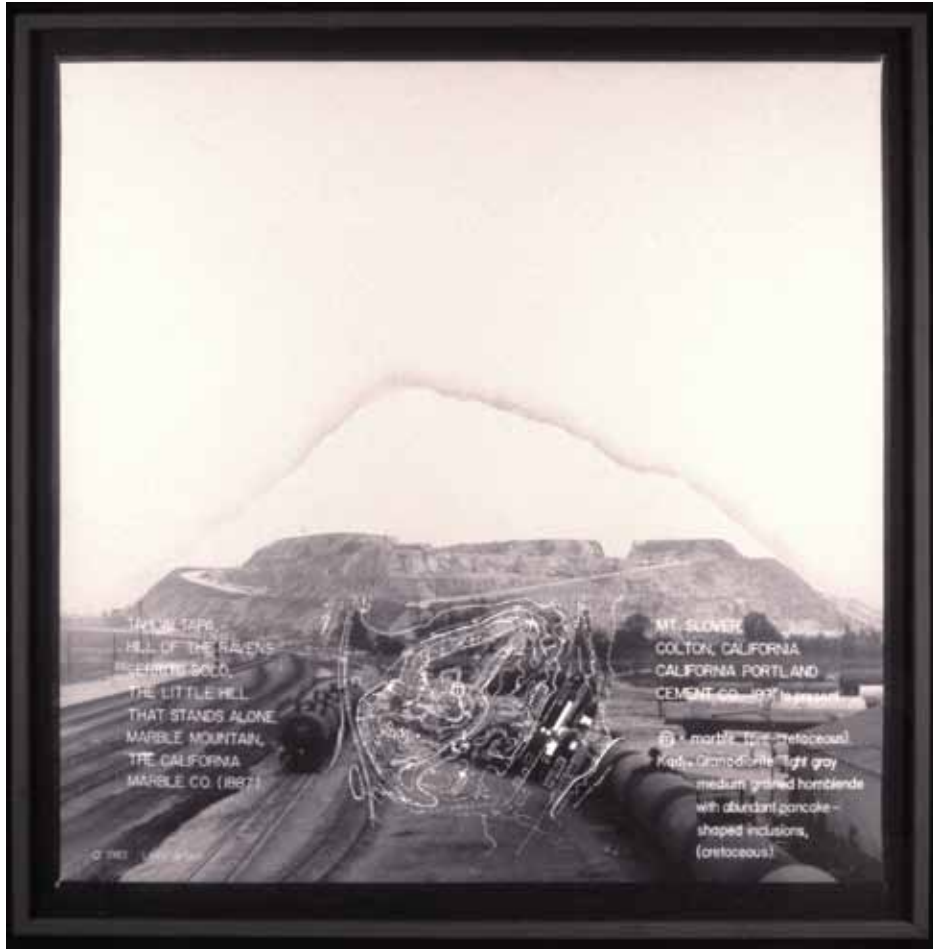
For this project, Neff transcribed audio recordings of Siva from 1992. She also listened to Cahuilla recordings collected by Swiss linguist Hansjakob Seiler. Neff then created songs and melodies to the words. (See page 31 for more about Neff’s process.) In 2009, Neff had sung in German in a liturgical style for deSoto’s sound installation, *Klage/Lament*, based on stanzas from a Hermann Hesse poem.

Previously, deSoto created a work about Tahquitz, when he was invited to participate in the exhibition *Landscape as Metaphor* in 1991. The installation, entitled *Tahquitz*, travelled to various museums for several years. At the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, his installation occupied two rooms painted in dark blue with an application of pearlescent powder.



Detail of melting ice blocks from the installation of *Tahquitz* (1994–1996), sound, voice, ceramics, galvanized steel, speakers, animated map, wood and pulverized pearl dust. Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LEWIS DESOTO



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LEWIS DESOTO

As early as the 1980s, deSoto looked at another southern California site with his *Tahualtapa Project*, an installation at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Sweden. Tahualtapa, or “Hill of the Ravens” in Cahuilla, is a mountain located in the San Bernardino Valley. When the Spanish arrived in California, they called it Cerrito Solo or “Little Lonely Hill.” In the 1850s, American settlers extracted lime and marble from Tahualtapa and named it Marble Mountain. In 1891, the California Portland Cement Company used the mountain to mine limestone and cement rock. Currently, it is known as Mount Slover after Isaac Slover, a fur trader who died from a bear attack. The cement company still operates and extracts raw materials from the mountain. Before being significantly quarried, Tahualtapa was the tallest peak in the valley.

For the *Tahualtapa* exhibit, deSoto included photographs, maps and objects like blocks of marble and bags of cement in the space. In the center of the room he placed a model of the mountain surrounded by powdered cement – a stark interpretation about the present function of the mountain.

Through looking at one location over time, deSoto uncovered its changing history. As he explains, “the names illustrate how cosmology signified what the earth was used for and how it is regarded by different peoples.” Existing as a nesting place for ravens, Tahualtapa became a commodity to be conquered and consumed. Settlers renamed it for their purposes, and it no longer resembles itself.

Whether talking about Tahquitz or Tahualtapa, deSoto exposes buried cosmologies in the landscape. The Cahuilla have ancient stories about the southern California region, lost under the modern names. His art awakens viewers to look differently at the world. Familiar places in the landscape carry power. The land is a metaphor for what we value and dishonor. ✨

More information about deSoto and his artwork can be found at LewisdeSoto.net.

Anya Montiel (Tohono O’odham/Mexican), a frequent contributor to *American Indian*, is a doctoral student at Yale University.



For the *Tahualtapa* installation, deSoto created a contemporary image of the hill with an aura showing its original height before the effects of mineral mining. He also placed concrete slabs in the installation representing cement ingredients extracted from Tahualtapa. Collection of the Seattle Art Museum.

The first room was bare except for a wooden table against a wall. Illuminated by a solitary spotlight, a map of the Cahuilla homeland rested on the table. As the light brightened, a transcription of the Tahquitz story appeared behind the map. Viewers entered another world in the second space. Bathed in blue light, two large chunks of ice sat on a long galvanized steel table. As they melted, the ice water dripped into ceramic vessels below the table. On opposite walls, monitors looped videos of the San Jacinto mountain range, one video in real time and the other in a time-lapse from dawn to dusk. Breaking the eerie sound of water dripping, Siva’s voice emerged, telling the Tahquitz story in Cahuilla. Six speakers were mounted throughout the room, allowing his voice to move about and surround the viewer.

Through these two installations, deSoto brilliantly demonstrates that Tahquitz is not just the name of a mountain peak but connects the place to its original namesake. Revealing the Native relationship to land, deSoto recovers stories that are just as relevant today.

Erin Neff and
Lewis deSoto

PERFORMING TAHQUITZ

When we first learned about Lewis deSoto's plans for an experimental sound installation at the Culver Center for the Arts, we were intrigued. It was January 2011, and I had gathered together panelists to review applications for the last year of our Indigenous and Contemporary Arts Program, which had supported exhibitions and critical writing in contemporary Native art since 2008 with funding from the Ford Foundation. Included in the application was deSoto's proposal not only for an experimental sound installation, but plans for a live

performance reflecting the collaborative work of deSoto, Erin Neff and a group of traditional Cahuilla Bird Singers.

Combining operatic vocalization with traditional Cahuilla singing was definitely an innovative approach to telling the story of Tahquitz. When asked about the genesis of this idea, deSoto stated, "I am a big believer in the fact that culture is always hybridizing and building on existing forms, combining others. The idea that a western form of singing could harmonize with an ancient indigenous song is very interesting to me. We often think of these cultures being at odds, but in fact there are

many ways in which these cultures have created new ones."

The development of the performance was complex, involving many layers of research and the collaborative effort of numerous individuals. Neff, deSoto's partner in the creation of the performative work, spent months immersing herself in Cahuilla stories, language and cultural practice, relying heavily on the work of Katherine Siva Saubel, a noted Cahuilla tribal historian and educator. She also collaborated with bird singers Mike Morales and Aaron Siva early in the project.

Eventually Neff began her composition, using a musical sample collected by Swiss linguist Hansjakob Seiler, who, not surprisingly, worked with Saubel in the 1940s. Eric Elliot, another linguist who was also a previous co-author and collaborator with Saubel, provided support with translation. The last part of the process was Neff's work with a group of Bird Singers brought together to collaborate on the performance by Gerald Clarke, Jr. a visual artist himself and traditional vocalist. Clarke and his group included Robert Liera, William Madrigal, Andrew Madrigal and Jesus Cardenas.

Though their rehearsal time was limited, the work came together beautifully both vocally and visually. Neff was surprised at how much the installation space "created a sacred space, like an intimate theater."

John Haworth, who directs the Museum's George Gustav Heye Center in New York, and I had the privilege of attending the performance of *Tahquitz* in February of this year, and witnessing the coalescence of this multifaceted work. As Haworth observed, "Lewis deSoto's enormous site installation at the Culver Center for the Arts incorporated his command of a complex and diverse cultural history with tremendous artistic imagination. His installations have tremendous depth and richness, due to his remarkable ability to incorporate both technical production know-how with the kind of imagination and wit that challenges and informs us as viewers."

The voice of Neff embodying the plaintive cries of the maiden, trapped in the rock but able to hear the ceremonial songs of her people, resonated beautifully throughout the gallery. You didn't need to understand Cahuilla to be deeply moved by the performance. It was an experience we won't soon forget. ✨

To see documentation of the performance and audio elements of the installation, go to:
http://lewisdesoto.net/Installations/Tahquitz_Culver.html

Kathleen Ash-Milby (Navajo) is an associate curator of contemporary Native art at the NMAI in New York.