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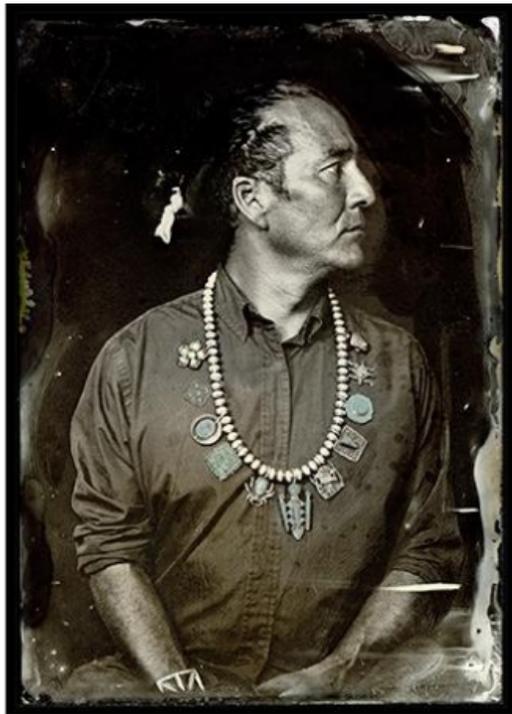
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No Reserve

Interactive photography exhibit aims for perfect shot

By Sophie Engel



An example of Wilson's work. - Will Wilson

Diné photographer Will Wilson invites visitors of the Georgia O'Keeffe Education Annex to interact with his exhibit, currently on display, in a truly unique way: In exchange for permission to use a scan of the photograph in his work, he takes visitors' portraits using an antiquated method and gives them the original tintype at the end of the session.

This distinctive experience is part of *The Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange*—a project that looks at portraits of indigenous people taken by Edward S Curtis— and aims, using Curtis' same photographic method, to continue the conversation about Native culture that his century-old portraits started.

SFR: What is the photographic exchange, exactly?

Wilson: The Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange is about an indigenous photographer putting the ritual and power of relational aesthetics back into the practice of traditional photographic portraiture. It's about acknowledging the power and currency of photographic representation from the vantage point of a practitioner who is aware of the history of photography and how that history's power has been viewed from an indigenous standpoint. When I make these



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one-of-a-kind photographs, I gift the person being photographed the actual photographic object that is created during our exchange. I do this in trade for a high-resolution scan of the image and a non-exclusive right to use the image as part of my growing body of portraiture. I often tell my collaborators half-facetiously that if there has been a soul transfer, that soul resides in the tintype and I don't want to possess that, only a facsimile of it.

You call it a portrait-taking ritual. Could you say more about what you mean?

Since its inception, photography's ability to indexically register a person's visage has been treated as something supernatural. Whether as a tintype of a loved one found on the body of a soldier at Gettysburg, or as a frame from a romance, snapped in a photo booth, the photographic portrait has been revered for its special ability to ground our imaginations to the real. With the CIPX, I'm taking advantage of the magic of a 140-year-old lens and a historic photographic process—wet plate collodion—to reclaim the “relational aesthetics” that have historically characterized the exchange between the photographer and photographed.

You ask for sitters to bring items of significance to “help illustrate our dialogue.”

What do you think people from our century will bring?

So far, my favorite object was something that I had on hand and one of my collaborators took advantage of. Joe Horse Capture—who, at the time, was a curator of American Indian Art at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts—grabbed my iPad and used it to bring up an image of Horse Capture, his great, great, great grandfather who was photographed by Edward Curtis. In the resulting image, Joe holds his present day “weapon” with an image of his ancestor and his weapon—a rifle, signifying his warrior status, shot by Curtis.

You wrote that you were impatient with how American culture romanticizes the Curtis photos. What do you see when you look at his photographs?

I have a fair amount of respect for Curtis' project and the endeavor he undertook. He was a practitioner of his time who witnessed an incredible amount of change in his life and in the lives of Native North Americans. Part and parcel of Curtis' mission was premised on a paradigm of salvage. He sought to capture images of people that he and a majority of American society believed would perish. Curtis entitled his most famous work, “The Vanishing Race,” and I think that many people still see indigenous people through this antiquated lens. On a deeper level, I think that Curtis' images function in the American psyche to illustrate some mythic understanding of what authentic Indians should look like without taking into account that Native Americans today are very much alive, powerful and resurgent.

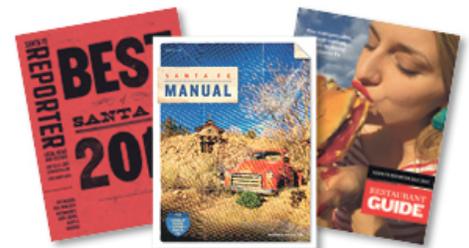
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