Photographer Will Wilson’s portraits startle the eye not just because they are so handsome, but because they strongly—and self-consciously—recall ethnographer Edward S. Curtis’s staged, manipulated, and romanticized images of “the vanishing race” of indigenous Americans. Those images were taken mainly in the first three decades of the 1900s, when his heroic-looking subjects were actually under great duress. As gorgeous and significant and enduring as the pictures may be, Curtis’s work was a whitewash, a dynamic that Wilson aims to redress. Continued on p. 45 »
Cara Romero is an artist and Program Director of the Bioneers’ Indigeneity Program, which focuses on indigenous traditional ecological practices. A member and leader of the Chemehuevi Indian Tribe, Romero has degrees from IAIA, Oklahoma State University, and the University of Houston. Archival pigment print from wet-plate collodion scan, 36” x 25”, Santa Fe Indian Market, 2012.

Nakotah LaRance is a six-time world-champion hoop dancer, actor, performer, and citizen of the Hopi Nation. The image includes props indicative of his interests: a Japanese graphic novel, a portable electronic game console, stereo headphones, and one of his traditional dancing hoops. Since tintypes are direct positives, the image appears reversed, as in a mirror. Archival pigment print from wet-plate collodion scan, 36” x 25”, Santa Fe Art Institute, 2012.
Gerald McMaster, Ph.D., Plains Cree/Siksika First Nation, is a world-renowned curator and artist. Currently he is an adjunct curator at the Art Gallery of Ontario, and last year he was co-artistic director of the 18th Biennale of Sydney, Australia. His wife, Lynn McMaster, is the executive vice president of the Please Touch Museum, in Philadelphia. Archival pigment print from wet-plate collodion scan, 36" x 25", Institute of American Indian Arts, 2012.

Kathleen Ash-Milby, who received her MA from UNM, is a citizen of the Navajo Nation and an associate curator of Contemporary Native Art at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian, in New York City. She was previously the curator and co-director of the American Indian Community House Gallery, in New York City. Archival pigment print from wet-plate collodion scan, 36" x 25", New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe Indian Market, 2012.
Nimkii Osawamick is a singer and dancer, and the founder of the Ontario-based D.N.A. Stage: Dedicated Native Awareness, a Native arts consultancy. Shown handling five of the hoops he uses in his performances, he is a member of the Ojibwe Nation. Archival pigment print from wet-plate collodion scan. During Indian Market, August 17–18, Wilson will be creating more portraits, in the New Mexico Museum of Art’s East Sculpture Garden. Find out more at nmartmuseum.org.

Continued from p. 38. "I want to indigenize the photographic exchange," Wilson (Diné) says, meaning that he wants to take back the role of portrait-maker for Native peoples. He shows his subjects as they want to be seen; the images recognize their modernity and accomplishments along with their heritage. For the last year, the Santa Fe–based photographer has been making old-fashioned collodion tintype portraits in public spaces in Santa Fe, Denver, Los Angeles, and Adelaide, Australia, as part of his ongoing project, the Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange (CIPX).

“I use an 8 x 10-inch view camera with a 140-year-old, hand-ground, brass-barreled lens from the wet-plate era,” says Wilson. The process is demanding: the aluminum plates dripping with flammable, light-sensitive chemicals need to be coated, sensitized, exposed, and developed in a matter of minutes. He wears gloves, a respirator, and goggles while working with the chemicals. The subjects get to keep the plates; Wilson uses digitized versions of the images.

Raised mostly in Tuba City, Arizona, Wilson, 44, first realized that he wanted to become a photographer when he was 15, after seeing an exhibition in San Francisco of work by Joel-Peter Witkin. Witkin, who earned his MFA from the University of New Mexico, is known for his controversial images. “I was stunned, and saw how powerful photography could be,” says Wilson.

Growing up, I tried to articulate the strange liminal space between two cultures, and photography gave me a voice to figure that out. I wasn’t fluent in Navajo, and I was always trying to parse the information and experience the place in translation. To express myself within that space, I used visual language to give me a focus. I was doing a lot of images of family and friends, landscapes. It stuck.”

After attending Oberlin College, Wilson followed in Witkin’s footsteps, to UNM’s graduate program, where he earned his MFA in 2002. “I had a great experience at UNM. There was a strong cohort of contemporary Native artists going through the program at that time.”

In addition to his fine art, Wilson has worked as an Associated Press photojournalist in Costa Rica, taught photography at the Institute of American Indian Arts and the University of Arizona, exhibited at numerous museums (including the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian), and won prestigious grants and awards. And while the CIPX project is still going strong, Wilson would like to expand it in a new direction.

In the 19th century, as the U.S. was establishing treaties with Native nations, indigenous delegations came to Washington to negotiate, and were photographed. These days, the White House Tribal Nations Conference brings representatives from the 566 federally recognized Native tribes together in the nation’s capital. “I would really love to have the opportunity to get portraits of today’s Native leaders from across the nation when they convene,” says Wilson. “I want to update the old treaty-delegate photographs. I’m interested in how art and creativity can be a vehicle for social change—through the way people are represented, and the way underrepresented communities can be given a voice.”

Laura M. André is a writer, editor, and fine-arts consultant.