

**Contemporary Native Photographers and the Edward Curtis Legacy, Zig Jackson, Wendy Red Star, and Will Wilson, Portland Art Museum, 4/17/16.**

If historians didn't re-write history, they wouldn't have anything to do. This sounds trite but it isn't trivial. A look back can change our perspective. That is what the current exhibit is all about.

Curtis attempted to document the culture of Native Americans before it disappeared. It is a monumental work, but in hindsight some critics feel it has definite shortcomings. Among the deficiencies listed are;

The subjects had no say in how the images would be used,  
Curtis removed or cropped out all evidence of the European clothing, utensils, and modern shelters,  
He also had subjects reenact ceremonies that were no longer practiced (some may be outlawed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs).

Zig Jackson, Wendy Red Star, and Will Wilson, contemporary Native American artists/photographers attempt to revise the American iconic image of Native Americans that Curtis' work reflects. Their common mission is to dismantle our stereotypes.

Zig Jackson's (Rising Buffalo) photographs of modern Indians (often himself) in current urban locations while dressed in traditional garb (i.e. boarding a bus) highlights the conflict of our stereotype of Indians with living Native Americans. His series "Indian photographing tourist photographing Indians" depicts white Americans pushing their cameras into the faces of Indians dressed for traditional ceremonies without any apparent interaction with their subject, much like photographing a statue or static object. *"Even today, after centuries of coexistence, the real Indian remains an elusive paradox to the majority of non-native society."* (Zig Jackson <http://www.risingbuffaloarts.com>)

Wendy Red Star uses images of modern Native Americans in a variety of photographs that mix the traditional and the modern. Images that were arranged to be photographed or have been significantly post-production edited interlace intense colors with modern Native Americans. *"She works across disciplines including photography, sculpture, video, fiber arts and performance to offer unexpected and new perspectives on Native life, both historical and as it is lived today"*. (<http://www.wendyredstar.com>)

Will Wilson is repeating Curtis' project to produce portraits of Native Americans, but for Wilson it is a collaborative process in which the sitters can adorn themselves as they wish and strike any pose they want. He uses a wet plate type of tin-type process which produces a unique tone range (low-light high contrast) reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century photography. He gives the sitter the original tin-type. His project is made using digital copies. The duality of "oldie" photography and modern artifacts and poses makes us reevaluate the earlier images. *"For many people even today, Native people remain frozen in time in Curtis photos."* (<http://willwilson.photoshelter.com/#!/index>)

If we re-assess Curtis's work, we must remember that he believed that Native Americans were a vanishing race and for many contemporary Americans, that was the aim. Curtis wanted to re-construct the Native American culture as it was before the "decline." Who knows if his reconstructions were authentic? Why would an Indian trust an American photographer to perform actions that American officials such as missionaries, the army calvary, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs discouraged? Yet without his work, would we know as much about the Native American culture before European-American invasion?

While Curtis might be forgiven for attempting to manufacture aspects of culture already lost, should we also give him a pass on perpetuating the popular stereotype? After all, he had the genuine article right in front of him. If one image carries the message of this show, it is the diptych portrait by Zig Jackson in which the subject sits in his rocker with his feet up, surrounded by his Indian and American mementos staring stoically forward, the ever stoic Nobel Savage. The adjacent portrait of the sitter is identical except he has turned to face the camera with a jovial grin on his face, a friendly and happy guy.



(Edward Curtis) Banners three stories high at the Portland Art Museum (Wendy Red Star)



Portrait by Zig Jackson