



Will Wilson (U.S., Navajo; b. 1969), *Gordon L. Yellowman, citizen of Cheyenne & Arapaho Tribes* (2016), Archival pigment print from wet plate collodion scan, 8 x 10 in.

PHOTO/ SYNTHESIS

A new exhibition at the OU Museum of Art returns the authenticity of Native American images into the hands of the subjects themselves.

BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

AS GORDON YELLOWMAN WATCHED IN AMAZEMENT, his likeness in the chemical bath slowly emerged in ghostly blue and transformed to smoky charcoal gray and black. “It was an image coming from the past into the present,” he says.

The past and present have come together in *PHOTO/SYNTHESIS*, a unique photographic exhibition and collaboration between artist Will Wilson, seven Oklahoma Native American tribes, and the University of Oklahoma’s Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.

The exhibition will be featured through April 2 and is supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. *PHOTO/SYNTHESIS* re-envisioning how images of Native Americans are shaped by pairing the early 20th-century photography of Edward S. Curtis with contemporary images by Wilson, who uses a camera and wet-plate collodion tintype process that dates to the Civil War era.

Curtis became renowned for crisscrossing the nation to photograph the “vanishing race” of Native Americans from 1907 to 1930, including a 1927 visit to seven Oklahoma tribes. His work – which the *New York Herald* called “the most gigantic undertaking since the making of the King James edition of the Bible” – was published in a 20-volume series, *The North American Indian*.

While Curtis’ work is indisputably art, his role as documentarian has come under fire. He has been accused of crafting images to fit preconceived notions about

what “authentic” Native American culture looked like; in some cases, Curtis is even thought to have staged events, used his own props or identified people with the wrong tribes.

“These images still exist in most people’s minds of what Native Americans look like, but those images were an abstraction,” Wilson says. “Curtis was on a mission to create his own vision of what Native America was.”

Wilson partnered on PHOTO/SYNTHESIS with heather ahtone, the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art’s James T. Bialac Associate Curator of Native American and Non-Western Art. For a year, ahtone worked to establish relationships with the Oklahoma tribes that Curtis visited and gave each the power to choose how they would be depicted.

“We asked the tribes to take authority of their own representation,” she says. “They are asking you to see who they are now. The agency that the tribes took in interpreting the photos was incredibly powerful and thoughtful.”

Ahtone says alliances between artists, museums and Native American tribes are rare. “The project was negotiated in a way that the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art became a conduit to creativity and collaboration.”

Though a handful of Wilson’s new photographs include descendants of Curtis’ original subjects, many of those ties were lost or never existed. In one case, ahtone provided Comanche elders with photographs of children whom Curtis had identified as Comanche. After two months of circulating the photos, none of the elders recognized any family resemblances.

“It’s not a mystery, it’s not some kind of code imbedded into a pot or a textile,” ahtone says. “These would be the faces of people in their families. If you don’t recognize faces, it challenges you to think, ‘Who are these children?’ The community suspects that it’s possible Curtis may have gone to a neighboring Indian

boarding school, taken pictures and identified those children as Comanche.”

Wilson, a member of the Navajo Nation who heads the Santa Fe Community College Photography Program, says



Edward S. Curtis (U.S., 1868-1952), *Man on the Cloud-Cheyenne*, 1930, Photogavure, Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art.

such distortions matter because they misappropriate a piece of Native American history and culture. “What would it mean to any group to be misrepresented, to say, ‘You’re Irish, but here’s a photo of your grandmother in lederhosen?’” he quips.

Ahtone believes that Curtis’ perspective was influenced by “salvage ethnography,” a practice encouraging social scientists to record cultures before they die out.

“Curtis comes to Oklahoma 20 years past statehood,” she emphasizes. “Most of the tribes have made the transition from the ‘reservation period’ to living in Oklahoma’s market economy, which is largely agricultural. He photographs seven tribes; there are 38 in Oklahoma at that date. Why didn’t he go to the other tribes? Some answers we find in his text – he describes the Choctaw, Chickasaw and Cherokee as already being so assimilated that they’re past the point of being ‘authentically native.’

“From a contemporary perspective, there is no such thing,” says Ahtone, who is Choctaw and Chickasaw. “But it’s part of the salvage ethnography mindset that there is a measure, there is a point, where you are or you are not Native American.”

PHOTO/SYNTHESIS challenges that notion. “We focused on 33 portraits. We went back to the tribes and said, ‘We’d like to think about who those people were and ask your guidance in how we represent these same seven communities in the 21st century,’” she says. Tribes also were given the freedom to select which photographs would be shown in the exhibition.

Gordon Yellowman chose to represent his Cheyenne community by emulating chiefs who sat for portraits during 18th- and 19th-century peace medal ceremonies in Washington, D.C. He held a red clay pipe, a traditional Cheyenne symbol of leadership.

“My whole goal was to show that we’re still alive, we’re still here, and we’re still powerful nations,” says Yellowman, who is one of 44 chiefs in his tribal council. “I felt this was a project that gives us an opportunity to show who we are today.”

Wilson’s photography helps close the gap of time using the wet-plate collodion tintype process. The antique photography method requires him to mix chemicals by hand and can be dangerous. After pouring collodion onto a glass plate, dropping it into a bath of toxic silver nitrate and slipping the plate holder into his camera, Wilson had 10 minutes to shoot each photograph before rushing to his outdoor darkroom – a black tent sheltering under a tree in Oklahoma’s triple-digit summer heat. There, the images bloomed from palest blue to antique black.

“It was extreme photography, for sure,” Wilson says. “There’s a ritual aspect to the whole experience. It’s not like snapping a picture. I’m having a conversation with folks, set-

ting everything up, and I invite them to come watch the process as well, so they get to see what handmade photography is about. In some ways, the images are almost secondary to the process.”

The process of producing PHOTO/SYNTHESIS included scanning and varnishing the original images, which will be returned to each participating tribe as a gift. Several photo subjects also were interviewed for “Talking Tintypes,” audio stories accessible to exhibit visitors through QR scan codes.

“I felt honored to go into all these communities. Each place was unique and wonderful,” Wilson says. He was feted

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at a Ponca Nation encampment meal, which also paid tribute to the neighboring Wichita Nation. His visit to the Osage Nation grew into an informal family reunion for descendants of John (Wash) Bigheart, and an encounter at the Cheyenne Arapaho Nation became especially poignant.

“A lady named Tashina came directly from their powwow in regalia, carrying a pure white fan,” Wilson recalls. “Before I photographed her, she said, ‘I just saw somebody. Sometimes, I see ancestors.’ I didn’t think anything of it, and then later that night when I was scanning photos, I saw that there was a person’s image on the fan. It was pretty uncanny and moving.”

To Gordon Yellowman, that moment symbolizes what PHOTO/SYNTHESIS has come to mean to the seven Oklahoma Native American tribes it represents: a bridge between images of the past and the realities of the present.

“For me, this exhibition is spiritual,” he says. “It’s a living, breathing project. So are we, as Cheyenne people. We have endured many things. This is no longer about ‘documenting’ a race of people – it’s about proud nations.”

Anne Barajas Harp is assistant editor of Sooner Magazine.