



AMON CARTER MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, FORT WORTH, TEXAS; PHOTO 1965; © WENDY RED STAR

Wendy Red Star (Apsáalooke, b. 1981), *Catalogue Number 1941.30.1*, from the series *Accession*, 2019. Inkjet print.

A Tradition of Innovation

Three decades of contemporary Indigenous photography

Much of the earliest photography in North America that involved Indigenous people was used as a form of erasure or othering. Edward S. Curtis carefully framed his photographs to omit any signs of modernity to support his vision of a “vanishing” world, and landscape photographer William Henry Jackson reinforced colonizing ideas of Manifest Destiny in his sweeping views of the

American West.

Speaking With Light: Contemporary Indigenous Photography, now at the Denver Art Museum through May 21, 2023, considers how, from this complex history, Indigenous photographers have used the medium as a compelling platform for narratives about the past, present, and future. The more than thirty photographers in the exhibition have mostly been working over the past three decades, ranging from

Richard Ray Whitman, whose black-and-white *Street Chiefs* series from the 1970s and '80s sensitively humanized homeless Indigenous people in Oklahoma, to twenty-first-century technological experimentation like Alan Michelson's *Mespat* that projects video of former Lenape land that is now an industrial Brooklyn Superfund site on an installation of turkey feathers.

“We attempted to frame a photographic tradition around lens-based



Left: Alan Michelson (Mohawk member of Six Nations of the Grand River, b. 1953), *Mespata*, 2001. Right: Cara Romero (Chemehuevi, b. 1977), *Water Memory*, 2015.

storytelling that is responsive to contemporary Indigeneity and current cultural politics,” said Will Wilson, a Diné photographer. “One aspect of this tradition is its constant engagement with developments in photographic storytelling technologies. This tradition of innovation also speaks to the title of the exhibition.”

Wilson co-curated the exhibition with John Rohrbach, the senior curator of photographs at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas, where *Speaking with Light* was organized and debuted in 2022. It is billed as one of the largest museum surveys to examine recent work by Indigenous photographers. Rohrbach had been exploring the idea of an exhibition on Indigenous photography and connected with Wilson to collaborate on its curation to center Indigenous perspectives.

“I have an in-depth understanding of photography’s history and its practices, extensive experience interacting with diverse artists, and have assem-

bled many exhibitions and associated publications,” Rohrbach said. “Yet I am an outsider to Indigenous cultures. I can intellectually understand the issues faced by many of the artists in this show, but I do not live them. Will does.”

The accompanying catalogue published by Radius Books and co-edited by Wilson and Rohrbach likewise foregrounds Indigenous voices. “It is a stand-alone work that offers essays by important Indigenous scholars, taking up and expanding on the show themes including sovereignty, survivance, community, and Indigenous ways of seeing and relating to the world,” Rohrbach said.

Along with the publication that extends the traveling show beyond its run, the Amon Carter has acquired a number of the exhibition works, bolstering its representation of Indigenous artists. Previously, most of the photographs in its collections that related to Indigenous people were studio portraits from nineteenth- and

early twentieth-century treaty negotiations—treaties which would overwhelmingly be broken by forced displacement from their ancestral lands. Some of these are included in *Speaking with Light*.

“We wanted to acknowledge the long history of engagement between Indigenous sovereignty and photography by presenting photos from the Carter’s collection of delegation photographs,” Wilson said. “While the nineteenth-century photographers were non-Native, the images do represent people who have come to advocate for themselves and their people in treaty negotiations between sovereign states. In this regard, these leaders are engaging in a representational practice.”

Alongside these pieces is a work by Wilson. He uses a wet plate collodion process to evoke a throughline to these historic photographs, but in a way that gives agency to his contemporary subjects. His *Talking Tintype* of the late Senator Enoch Haney, an Oklahoma

MICHELSON: NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION (64/5791). ALAN MICHELSON ROMERO: AMON CARTER MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, FORT WORTH, TEXAS, 1922/154. © CARA ROMERO. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



Left: Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit/Unangaxx[^], b. 1979), *Get Comfortable*, 2012. Right: Kali Spitzer (Kaska Dena/Jewish, b. 1987), *Audrey Siegl*, 2019.

politician and Indigenous leader, features augmented reality technology so that Haney can speak for himself in a way that the sitters in the nineteenth century could not.

Other artists in *Speaking with Light* are also redefining historic depictions of Indigenous people, such as Kali Spitzer, who employs both film and wet plate photography in portraits that are joined by audio to empower the subjects with self-representation. Wendy Red Star created her 2019 *Accession* series when she was the Native Artist-in-Residence at the Denver Art Museum. She recontextualized hand-painted card catalogues of collected objects like mocasins and elk tooth dresses from the Works Progress Administration era by overlaying contemporary photographs from a gathering of Crow Nation people in Montana, showing similar objects being worn and used as part of a living culture rather than static museum displays. While at the Denver Art Museum, *Speaking with Light* is fur-

ther providing new perspectives and context through its work.

“Our collection and our exhibition program have traditionally been very strong in photography having to do with the landscape and the environment,” said Eric Paddock, curator of photography at the Denver Art Museum. “A lot of the work in *Speaking with Light* has to do with human relationships and, in particular, the relationships of Indigenous people to the land. This is another way of looking at that same bundle of issues and that same aspect of our national history, and how culture and politics have affected those relationships.”

Photographers grappling with ideas around the land include Nicholas Galanin, who visually reclaims it in *Get Comfortable* (2012), in which a roadside sign for Indian River has been tagged over to read “Indian Land.” Cara Romero’s *Water Memory* (2015) contemplates the loss of land through development, with an ethereal scene of two Pueblo corn dancers submerged in

blue water, a reference to the southern California dam projects that flooded tribal land. Others are more abstract like Sky Hopinka’s *Breathings* (2020) series of photographs where text is etched into the borders of prints of the sky. The viewer is invited into these intimate moments of pause to ruminate on what memories of beauty, violence, and care the land holds.

Although there are these themes of land, resilience, heritage, and community that reverberate through *Speaking with Light*, the exhibition never presents the artists as one unified vision. Instead, it celebrates the diversity of artists working across North America, from many backgrounds and cultures, and brings them together as a powerful collective demonstrating the boundless possibilities and potential of photography to tell their own stories. 📍

Allison C. Meier is a Brooklyn-based writer who has contributed stories to *Lapham’s Quarterly*, *National Geographic*, the *New York Times*, *CityLab*, *Wellcome Collection*, and other publications on art, architecture, and history. She is the author of the forthcoming *Grave* (2023) from Bloomsbury.