

## NATIVE NATIONS: PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATIONS OF NATIVE AMERICANS

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“Native Nations”, subtitled “Journeys in American Photography”, was an ambitious exploration of the photographic representation of Native American Indians. A collaboration between the Barbican and the Smithsonian’s National Anthropological Archives, it was divided into two parts, uneven in size and quality, which reflected the ideological and aesthetic issues besetting this thorny subject. The first part dealt with 19th-century images taken by whites, while the second concentrated on Native American photographers and artists documenting their own communities. The work of 20th-century white photographers such as Laura Gilpin was excluded, an absence which, while understandable in the context of the exhibition’s underlying discourse, still left a gap in the record.

Part one was by far the most powerful; it was also an eloquent demonstration of the way representational photography echoes power relationships between depicter and depicted. This was made clear by such works as Benjamin Franklin Upton’s grim stereographs of captive warriors, George Trager’s brutally casual photo of Chief Big Foot lying dead in the snow at Wounded Knee, and, above all, John Nicholas Choate’s photographs of Native American children at the infamous Carlisle School, particularly the before-and-after pairings contrasting children in native dress with their ‘civilised’ makeover after they had been shorn, cowed and uniformed. The Carlisle experiment, with its dedication to the principle that one must “kill the Indian in order to save the man”, seems particularly chilling today.

Inevitably dominating this section were the dramatic images of Edward Curtis, of whom James C. Faris has written in irritated admiration that “[he] hangs like a stone around the neck of the photography of Native Americans”. There is ample evidence that Curtis staged many of his images, often using wildly inappropriate props, and that his approach was characterised by the sentimental nostalgia appropriate to a defeated and romanticised ‘noble savage’. Nevertheless, Curtis’s vision permeated the exhibition in more ways than one; *The Three Scouts* (1908), a key image by Richard Throssel, the earliest Native American to feature in part two, could easily be mistaken for a particularly fine Curtis, with its Crow warriors on horseback standing among tombstones, rifles raised against a brooding sky.

That only two Native American photographers active at the turn of the century should have been discovered (the other was the remarkable Jenny Ross Cobb) is hardly surprising; as Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie dryly remarks in a catalogue essay, “The focus of my relatives was the reality of survival, keeping one’s family alive. Time to contemplate Western philosophy or the invention of photography was, shall we say, limited.” Tsinnahjinnie’s essay is one of four ‘photographic journeys’ by contemporary Native American photographers seeking to reclaim representation of their people – an issue which begs the question of the extent to which photographs of a society by insiders differ from those taken by outsiders, and which inevitably leads to the more basic argument of whether there is any such thing as inherent traits in the photography of a particular group, people or nation.

In terms of accuracy and sympathy, the answer is obviously that it makes a very considerable difference. The scientific value of traditional

anthropological photography has been successfully challenged by anthropologists such as Elisabeth Edwards and James C. Faris; indeed Faris, in his magisterial study *Navajo and Photography*, has demonstrated the often ludicrous ways in which so-called scientific photography inevitably falsified or misinterpreted data, or distorted it in the light of racial and cultural prejudice. In the area of documentary photography, therefore, the work of Native American photographers such as Throssel, Horace Poolaw and Dugan Aguilar undoubtedly breaks new, if mostly unspectacular, ground.

Whereas the documentary photography of insiders is often superior to that of outsiders in terms of fidelity and perception, it is far from evident that there are significant differences one way or another where aesthetics are concerned. Certainly the final group of works by contemporary Native American fine artists proved a distinct disappointment. Shelley Niro's role-playing self-portraits, Larry McNeil's poetic text and image prints evoking Indian legends and Jolene Rickard's CD-ROM installation all demonstrated considerable sophistication and an evident familiarity with contemporary artistic discourse. Unfortunately, they were also characteristic of that vast body of artistic production generated by and within the American academic establishment: serious, informed and well-mannered, it is also by and large sterile and politely remote. None of these examples really succeeded in rising above their institutional background, making for an unexpectedly subdued ending to an otherwise passionate and intelligent exhibition.

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