

Double Exposure: Edward S. Curtis, Marianne Nicolson, Tracy Rector, Will Wilson

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The Seattle Art Museum's special summer exhibition, *Double Exposure: Edward S. Curtis, Marianne Nicolson, Tracy Rector, Will Wilson*, takes a critical look at the photographic legacy of Edward S. Curtis from a 21st-century perspective. The exhibition marks the 150th anniversary of Curtis's birth in his hometown of Seattle, Washington, where he began his career as a landscape and portrait photographer. Curtis is best known for his monumental publication, *The North American Indian* (1907-1930), which is a set of twenty volumes and portfolios that documented what he saw as the vanishing lives of Native North Americans. This major exhibition features 150 works by Curtis in juxtaposition with the work of three contemporary Indigenous artists – Marianne Nicolson (Dzawada'enuxw First Nation), Tracy Rector (Choctaw/Seminole) and Will Wilson (Diné). As the title suggests, the exhibition intends to re-expose Curtis's body of work by incorporating Indigenous art, voices, and perspectives to promote an alternative narrative to that of a vanishing race. Through immersive storytelling, interactive technologies and engaging installations, *Double Exposure* presents a narrative of Indigenous survival, resilience and relevance.

As a special exhibition, *Double Exposure* is immense in both scale and size to accommodate the vast number of Curtis's images and the monumental works of

the contemporary artists. Nicolson's installation consists of a large arched wooden sculpture with etched glass panels on either side through which a blue light casts shadows of its imagery upon the floor and ceiling. It is a symbolic representation of a river system that critiques the ongoing colonial control over natural resources. Rector's films are projected on a grand scale that envelope the viewer. They feature the landscape of the Pacific Northwest and its relationship with the Coast Salish peoples. Lastly, Wilson's large-print photographs portray contemporary Indigenous peoples of the Seattle region. His process is founded on respect and reciprocity as he gifts the original image to the sitter(s) for their participation in the photographic exchange. Throughout the galleries one can also find objects of Indigenous material culture, including Curtis's film *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (1914), hand-coloured lantern slides from his *Picture Musicale* (1911-12), and digitized wax cylinder recordings collected during his fieldwork (fig. 1).

To display this wide array of objects, curator of Native American Art, Barbara Brotherton, has organized the exhibition into seven interconnected thematic rooms: "The Earth is Our First Teacher," "Around Seattle," "The North American Indian Project," "Curtis and Art," "Seeing Through Portraits," "Archiving Culture," and "We Are Still Here." Together the themes shed light on Curtis's practice as a photographer, from his humble beginnings as an outdoorsman capturing the landscape, to the famed photographer living among the Indigenous peoples. However, as an art museum, the exhibition leans towards Curtis's technical and artistic approach to photography. His pictorial aesthetic – which favoured a soft focus, dramatic contrast in light and shadow, rich tonality, and carefully constructed compositions – framed Indigenous peoples within an idealized, romantic and static past. These nostalgic and timeless images

are made even more powerful by his various printing processes. These include photogravures, platinum prints, cyanotypes, and goldtones – each of which were used to market, sell, and fund *The North American Indian* project. It is a rare opportunity to see these together in one place, as they belong to both public and private collections across North America. Seeing that the exhibition is organized into thematic sections, Curtis’s images are not arranged chronologically but rather reflect the theme of each room.



FIGURE 1
Gallery 3, “The North American Indian Project,” *Double Exposure*, 2018.

Source: Image courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum.

The works on display are paired with an extensive labeling system. This includes didactic panels that introduce the theme of each section and provide the socio-historical context for understanding Curtis’s work at the turn of the 20th century, as well as the historical and contemporary realities of Indigenous peoples. Other labels include the artist panels and roughly ninety interpretive panels which accompany Curtis’s photographs. This written element is shared between various individuals to create a multivocal exhibition. These voices – which are that of the curator, Curtis and Indigenous peoples – are most evident in the interpretive

panels. Each bring into focus different aspects for understanding the layered readings and receptions of Curtis's images. Quotes by Curtis are pulled from his personal letters and the text of *The North American Indian* to provide a glimpse into the western mindset toward Indigenous peoples at the turn of the 20th century. One such example is the photograph *Mosa* (1903) to which Curtis writes: "It would be difficult to conceive of a more aboriginal [person] than this Mohave girl. Her eyes are those of the fawn of the forest, questioning the strange things of civilization upon which it gazes for the first time."¹ Curtis's description is rooted within the colonial obsession with primitive cultures at this time and the settler's position of power and observation.²

In comparison, the incorporation of Indigenous voices provides a new layer of meaning for Curtis's images that functions to fill in the gaps left by incomplete and mythologized histories. As defined in the initial gallery of *Double Exposure*, Curtis's photographs can be viewed as storied landscapes or portraits that hold personal and cultural memory, knowledge, and history. Beyond the surface of his images is the invaluable record of people, places, and cultures. For example, Andy Everson (K'ómoks First Nation) speaks of his grandmother who is portrayed in Curtis's image *Naida, the Proud Princess* (1914). He states that: "I recognize that although she is wearing a costume, she carries a sense of poise and grace that belies her age. I see in her the eyes of a woman who would live to ninety-nine years of age and who, as a true princess amongst our people, would live up to her ancestral name U'magalis, or 'Noblest Over All.'"³ This is a very personal reflection compared to Curtis's naïve comment above, thus providing a non-western lens through which to view the image.

Lastly, the voice of the curator connects the past, present, and future. Brotherton incorporates a range of information from socio-historical and contemporary realities of Indigenous peoples to Curtis's artistic techniques and

problematic approach to recording a time before contact. This third-person authoritative voice of the curator feels removed when compared to the Indigenous voices that speak to personal experiences and cultural memory. The exhibition would have benefited from incorporating more of these Indigenous voices in place of the curator to truly provide an alternative narrative to that of the vanishing race. Nonetheless, together the voices reveal a complex and layered narrative through which to understand and think about Curtis within the 21st century.

In addition to the text panels, a selection of images can be accessed using the Layar app. This technology provides an experience of augmented reality which allows viewers to interact with the work by using their mobile devices. When held up to the image, the device scans and loads a video which brings the image to life on the screen and provides an additional layer of information. These present Indigenous youth, scholars, educators, activists, storytellers, and community leaders.⁴ They share personal stories brought forth by Curtis's images, the repercussions of his pictorial aesthetic on shaping contemporary Indigenous identity, and ask critical questions about the history of representation. This is an exciting and innovative approach to augmenting two-dimensional objects, but it has its challenges. First, one needs to have the Layar app on their smartphone. This limits the potential audience to those who are more tech-savvy who might take the time to download the app. Even when the app is downloaded there are still issues with WiFi connection, loading time, and audio (it works best with headphones to hear over the voices of other visitors). These shortcomings are unfortunate because the app offers a unique experience that emphasizes Indigenous presence within the space and the message that "we are still here." This could be resolved by offering tablets with the app already installed for visitors to use; therefore, eliminating the issues mentioned above.

The large-scale artworks by Marianne Nicolson, Tracy Rector, and Will Wilson have an immense visual impact and powerful presence within the exhibition space. In addition to being artists, they are also scholars, activists, and leading figures in their communities who view their practice as a medium for change. Together, their work speaks to current social, environmental and political issues faced by Indigenous peoples. Brotherton has positioned their work among Curtis's photographs to both disrupt the physical space and stand against Curtis's narrative of a vanishing race. This creates a "double exposure" effect that speaks to the complex and layered relationship that Indigenous peoples have with this extensive archive and their own visual realities. The work of Nicolson, Rector, and Wilson represents new archives of self-representation that are created by, for, and about Indigenous peoples.

Of the seven sections of the exhibition, the initial room – through which you enter and exit – plays an integral role in presenting the framework for *Double Exposure*. It is also the most popular, as is evident by the number of photographs shared across social media platforms using the hashtag #samdoubleexposure. Its theme, "The Earth is Our First Teacher," explores the Indigenous philosophy of home and its inseparable relationship to land, culture, and knowledge. The forest green walls are lined with Curtis's landscape portraits that feature the Indigenous body within the environment as well as important cultural sites and structures. To the western viewer, these images may appear static and timeless in their sepia tones. Yet, when viewed through the Indigenous perspective of place, these images become dynamic and complex storied landscapes. The decision to start the exhibition with an Indigenous perspective rather than an ode to Curtis's achievements, distinguishes *Double Exposure* from previous exhibitions about Curtis. This shift in thinking signals a new approach and equips viewers with the tools to understand Curtis's narrative in a fresh light. With the initial room dedicated

to the importance of place, it simultaneously functions as a form of territorial acknowledgment. This is emphasized by the audio recording that welcomes the viewer in both the traditional Lushootseed language of the Seattle region and English, to acknowledge the land on which the gallery stands. The relationship that Indigenous peoples have with the land, in the past, present, and future, is threaded throughout the exhibition as the seed of Indigenous identity from which their cultures grow.

The main feature of the initial room is Marianne Nicolson's glass and light installation, *Kánkagawi (The Seam of Heaven)* (2018), which is positioned in the center of the gallery (fig. 2). Its monumental size and emanating blue glow help create a distinct atmosphere. With the colour scheme of blues, greens and browns, the environment is reminiscent of the Northwest coast, emphasized further by the sound of water coming from Nicolson's installation. This sense of place intentionally locates the exhibition within Seattle's Pacific Northwest environment while also reflecting Nicolson's own home territory of Kingcome Inlet, British Columbia. As a member of the Dzawada'enuxw First Nation of the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nations, Nicolson's work is deeply rooted in her culture. For *Double Exposure*, she begins by asking the viewer "is it possible to divide the Milky Way (a river of stars) in the same way we have divided a river on earth?"⁵ Nicolson's question is in reference to the current political issue surrounding the renegotiation of the Columbia River Treaty between Canada and the US. Growing up along an important river system, Nicolson is empathetic towards the situation and interested in the strategies of control imposed on the land and waters that divide and exploit them as resources. In commenting upon this current issue, Nicolson has created an immersive installation that uses light to create a symbolic representation of a river system. Nicolson counters Curtis's images by bringing Indigenous perspectives to the understanding of water systems. Often

Western governments and corporations view these systems as resources to be divided, controlled, and exploited, whereas Indigenous peoples view them as having a spirit, a life, and an agency. In moving forward, Nicolson stresses the inclusion of Indigenous voices and knowledge about the river's ecology to solve environmental issues today and in the future.



FIGURE 2
Marianne Nicolson, *Kankagawi (The Seam of Heaven)*, 2018.

Source: Image courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum.

The work of Choctaw-Seminole filmmaker Tracy Rector is found within two sections of the exhibition. Her video installation, *Clearwater: People of the Salish Sea* (2018) (fig. 3), is featured in the room “Curtis and Art” while *Ch’aak’ S’aagi (Eagle Bone)* (2016) – one of the first virtual-reality (VR) experiences made by

an Indigenous artist – is featured in the section “We Are Still Here.” Rector’s work revolves around the importance of community for the survival of cultural traditions and knowledge. Both films focus on the Indigenous communities in and around Seattle (urban and reservation), reinforcing the sense of place on the Northwest Coast shaped by Nicolson’s work in the initial room. *Clearwater* is a set of black and white landscape films and short clips of human portraits that are projected on opposite walls that play simultaneously. The voices from the human portraits overlap the images of the land. This is done to imply the interconnectedness of Indigenous identity with the environment. As a multimedia piece, Rector integrates tangible elements of the natural world into the digital space. The two walls are lined with cedar troughs filled with oyster shells and river rocks to create a sacred space for sharing, storytelling, teaching, and learning.⁶ By using new and innovative technologies such as VR for *Eagle Bone*, Rector stresses



FIGURE 3
Tracy Rector, *Clearwater: People of the Salish Sea*, 2018.

Source: Image courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum.

the message that Indigenous peoples are very much a part of the present and are engaging in new ways to express their identities. This stands in opposition to Curtis's portrayal of Indigenous cultures as vanishing or frozen within the past. Rector's films are drastically different from Curtis's film *In the Land of the Head Hunters* (1914) displayed in the room "Archiving Culture." Similar to his photographs, Curtis shaped a narrative that spoke to a time before contact. Rector, on the other hand, presents a people who are in touch with their cultural traditions while also living within the modern world.

Lastly, the work of Diné photographer Will Wilson can be found throughout the seven gallery rooms but is discussed critically in the section "Seeing Through Portraits." The space features eleven large digital prints by Wilson, one of which – *Storme Webber, Artist/Poet, Sugpiaq/Black/Choctaw* – is hung among 23 Curtis portraits in a salon-style display (fig. 4). Wilson's images are called "Talking Tintypes" because of their photographic process, digitization and augmentation through the Layar app – which when activated, fills the space with stories, songs, poems, and Indigenous languages. To counter Curtis's static images, Wilson employs the camera to create a new living archive of Indigenous representation, a project which he initiated in 2012 called the *Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange (CIPX)*. Using the historic wet-plate collodion process, Wilson focuses on the collaborative nature of taking a photograph by engaging with the sitter(s) in a respectful exchange from start to finish. He then gifts the original tintype to the sitter in exchange for a high-resolution scan. Reciprocity is central to Wilson's work as he attempts to decolonize representation and change the relationship that Indigenous peoples have with photography. In keeping with the concept of place, Wilson photographed Indigenous peoples of the Seattle region for the exhibition. Wilson's "Talking Tintypes" are inserted among Curtis's photographs throughout the galleries to serve as a constant reminder that his images are not the only

representations of Indigenous peoples; rather, Indigenous peoples have taken up the camera to fashion their own identities and contribute to a living archive of Indigenous self-representation.



FIGURE 4
Gallery 5, “Seeing Through Portraits,” featuring *Talking Tintype*, *Storme Webber, Artist/Poet, Sugpiaq/Black/Choctaw*, 2018 by Will Wilson.

Source: Image courtesy of the Seattle Art Museum.

Double Exposure comes at a critical time in curatorial practices as museums and galleries are looking to revise the master narrative of art and history. Curator and writer Maura Reilly terms this new practice “Curatorial Activism,” stressing the need for more inclusive exhibitions that acknowledge the histories of marginalized groups. I believe that is what *Double Exposure* curator Brotherton has accomplished through this collaborative approach. To ensure the accuracy of representation and inclusion of Indigenous voices, Brotherton worked with an Indigenous Advisory Committee that oversaw the exhibition from start to finish.

While effective in its execution, however, *Double Exposure* is not entirely new in its approach to critically examine Curtis. Both the Portland Art Museum (PAM) and the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art (FJMA) at the University of Oklahoma have curated exhibitions that look at Curtis through a 21st-century lens.⁷ The aspects that set *Double Exposure* apart from these previous exhibitions is its use of new technologies and the framing of Curtis through Indigenous perspectives. The latter is predominantly achieved in the initial gallery and represents the possibilities for an alternative approach to Curtis that compliments a decolonizing strategy.⁸ The Layar app and the inclusion of a VR experience provide an interactive and immersive element that has been left unexplored until now. Furthermore, Brotherton selected artists who work in different lens-based practices (film, photography, and light). This highlights the variation in contemporary approaches to Indigenous identity and representation rather than focusing solely on photography which has been done in the past. A shortcoming of the exhibition is the extensive labeling system. With roughly ninety interpretive panels, the heavy reliance on these lengthy texts runs the risk of losing the key message for the viewer who only skims the material.

Double Exposure belongs to a new wave of Curtis exhibitions that are striving to change our reception of Curtis's work and the representation of Indigenous peoples. As Brotherton stated at the opening: "the next exhibition we have is a Curtis show with the contemporary artists, but without the Curtis."⁹ I second that statement as we move forward and create exhibitions that give agency and a voice to groups that have been pushed to the peripheries of history. This exhibition marks a new chapter in the Curtis legacy but also for contemporary Indigenous peoples as they stand against the myth of a vanishing race, proving that they are very much alive and thriving today.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Edward S. Curtis, *Mosa (1903)*, Interpretive Panel, 2018.
- 2 What I am referring to here is the power that comes with observation through the use of the camera, which was a strategic colonial tool. With the emergence and rise of anthropology, the camera was used to record differences between cultures and catalogized “types” based on physical appearances. Curtis engaged in this practice to which he portrayed a number of “types” which have since become dominant stereotypes within American culture which is problematic as it misrepresents and frames Indigenous peoples within a false narrative of a vanished race.
- 3 Andy Everson (K’ómoks First Nation), *Naida, the Proud Princess (1914)*, Interpretive Panel, 2018.
- 4 Solomon Calvert-Adera (Seminole/Choctaw), Roger Fernandes (lower Elwha Band of the S’Klallam), Elizabeth Brown, Miranda Belarde-Lewis (Zuni/Tlingit), John McCoy (Tulalip), Crystal Worl (Tlingit/Athabaskan), Tracy Rector (Choctaw), Marianne Nicolson (Dzawada’enuxw), Timothy White Eagle (White Mountain Apache), Storme Webber (Sugpiaq/Black/Choctaw).
- 5 Marianne Nicolson, Artist Panel, 2018.
- 6 Tracy Rector, Press Preview of *Double Exposure*, June 12, 2018.
- 7 Similar to *Double Exposure*, the PAM’s exhibition, *Contemporary Native Photographers and the Edward Curtis Legacy: Zig Jackson, Wendy Red Star, Will Wilson (2016)* featured three contemporary Indigenous artists in juxtaposition with Curtis. The exhibition was shaped by “critical pauses” in Curtis’s narrative that asked the viewers to think about the portrayal of the Native experience. At the FJMA, *PHOTO/SYNTHESIS (2017)* curator heather ahtone [sic] is a leading figure in Indigenous curatorial practices, advocating for more collaboration and consultation with Indigenous communities when representing their histories. Brotherton employs this methodology to *Double Exposure* with the Advisory Committee and incorporation of Indigenous voices in the text panels. All three exhibitions include Will Wilson because of the adaptability of his work to represent Indigenous peoples of the region in which the galleries are located.
- 8 By collaborating with Indigenous communities and with an Indigenous Advisory Committee, new models of representation are made possible that position Indigenous voices at the center of the narrative that is being portrayed. This is a form of decolonization since the master narrative is being redressed by those that have been erased, ignored and silenced.
- 9 Barbara Brotherton, “Double Exposure: Artists in Conversation” facilitated by Asia Tail, Public Event, 14 June 2018.