Native American Photography Exhibition Opens Jan. 26 at OU

NORMAN, Okla. – Noted early 20th-century photographer Edward Curtis (1868-1952) once referred to Native Americans as a “vanishing race.” A new exhibition at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art proves that Native American communities are not vanishing at all – they’re thriving.

PHOTO/SYNTHESIS, an exhibition of contemporary photography by Navajo artist Will Wilson (b. 1969), offers a glimpse of living Oklahomans representing seven Native tribal communities, while also showing some of Curtis’s historic works.

The exhibition opens with a complimentary public lecture by Wilson at 7 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 26, at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art on the University of Oklahoma Norman campus. A reception follows the lecture at 8 p.m.

Whereas Curtis is remembered for shaping modern views of historic Native Americans by depicting his subjects in specific poses, backgrounds and clothing, often of his choosing, Wilson invited his subjects to choose how they wanted to be photographed. Wilson and heather ahtone, the museum’s James T. Bialac Associate Curator of Native American and Non-Western Art, spent the summer
of 2016 working with tribal leaders in Oklahoma to photograph selected community members, some of whom were distant relatives of those originally included in Curtis’s 1930 Indians of Oklahoma portfolio from his famous publication, The North American Indian.

This difference in approach is significant because it empowers the sitters to determine their own portrayal, ahtone said.

“Wilson and I are both interested in the relationship between identity and representation, especially as it is visually materialized for Native people through art,” ahtone said. “Recognizing that photography is an important tool for representation and expressing agency, we committed to a methodology for PHOTO/SYNTHESIS that positioned the tribes as agents in the creation of the images. We hoped that this unique collaboration might cause a rift, breaking away from the historicizing effect of Curtis’s images.

“Through co-authorship in the production of the photography by the tribal communities and Wilson, tribes were asked to consider how they wanted their communities to be represented through the image. In sharing authorship, an act of incredible generosity on the part of the artist, Wilson fostered reciprocity and respect, affirming that collaboration serves a powerful role in working with Native peoples.”

PHOTO/SYNTHESIS serves as an extension of a greater body of work, the Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange, which Wilson began in 2012. Wilson’s CIPX program reimagines photography for Indigenous people by posing a single question: what if Indigenous people had invented photography?

By using a Civil War-era lens and a wet plate collodion process, Wilson produces photographs similar in appearance to those of Curtis. Wilson travels with a portable dark room, so he is able to take and develop the photograph within about 15 minutes. In addition to talking with sitters about how they wish to be portrayed before photographing them, he often invites subjects to watch the development process in the dark room.

“Wilson’s resulting series is composed of stunning portraits, full of aesthetic value and individual personality, that also include the voice of the subject as part of the image,” said ahtone. “As a curator, I found the photographs intriguing and the project an incredibly astute challenge to the issues of representation that persist for Indigenous communities. As a Native curator, though, CIPX begged another question: what if Indigenous people had invented museum curating? From this shared point of professional and cultural inquiry, and a visit over coffee with Wilson in 2013, PHOTO/SYNTHESIS was born.”
The result is a suite of 53 new photographs by Wilson, plus 33 works by Curtis from the museum’s permanent collection. Additionally, Wilson made video recordings of some of the leaders speaking to the contemporary issues they face. These first-person accounts are provided within the gallery through the augmented reality software Layar. Wilson’s “Talking Tintypes” will be the first use of this software in a museum and with his photography.

Participating tribal communities include the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes, Comanche Nation, Osage Nation, Otoe-Missouria Tribe, Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma, Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma and Wichita and Affiliated Tribes.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalog authored by exhibition curator ahtone and Janet Berlo, professor of art history and visual and cultural studies at the University of Rochester.

The exhibition remains on display through April 2 in the Nancy Johnston Records Gallery and is made possible, in part, by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

An educational space within the exhibition provides hands-on art activities and a photo booth encouraging visitors to consider portrayal in their own photographs. A gallery talk at 1 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 7, will give visitors an opportunity to follow ahtone on an informal tour of the exhibition.

Additionally, the museum will open a small exhibition of works by Native Oklahoma artist Poteet Victory in the adjoining Ellen and Richard L. Sandor Gallery on the evening of Jan. 26. Victory’s *Abbreviated Portrait Series* distills portraits of celebrities and other iconic figures to the most minimal forms and associated colors. A public guest lecture by Victory, followed by a reception, is scheduled for 1 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 28.

These events are complimentary and open to the public.

More information about *PHOTO/SYNTHESIS* and the *Abbreviated Portrait Series*, as well as related programs, is available on the museum’s website at [www.ou.edu/fjjma](http://www.ou.edu/fjjma).

The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art is located in the OU Arts District on the corner of Elm Avenue and Boyd Street, at 555 Elm Ave., on the OU Norman campus. Admission to the museum is complimentary to all visitors, thanks to the generosity of the OU Office of the President and the OU Athletics Department. The museum is closed on Mondays. Information and accommodations on the basis of disability are available by calling (405) 325-4938 or visiting [www.ou.edu/fjjma](http://www.ou.edu/fjjma).
A new exhibition of photography by contemporary Navajo photographer Will Wilson opens at 8 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 26, at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. Wilson’s photographs, such as this one of Ponca Tribe citizen Casey Camp-Horinek, hang alongside works by early 20th-century photographer Edward Curtis and examine the idea of portrayal among Native American subjects.

Will Wilson (U.S., Navajo; b. 1969)
Archival pigment print from wet plate collodion scan, 8 x 10 in.
Image courtesy of the artist