

# In Our Hands: Native Photography, 1890 to Now

Enter into the vivid worlds of Native photography, as framed by generations of First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Native American photographers themselves. Presenting over 150 photographs of, by, and for Indigenous people, "In Our Hands" welcomes all to see through the lens held by Native photographers.

Total length of all videos: 12 minutes

## Video transcripts, all videos

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### A World of Relations

- Yeah, I got 1890, and then I'm just like, wow, that is a lot of time. And much of it has been controlled by mainstream. When I was growing up, I saw images of turmoil, strife, struggle, poverty, just all of that, and I'm like, "That's not who we are. No, that's not who we are."
- There's something that Indigenous photographers can do that non-Indigenous photographers can't do. When you have an understanding of that person's lived experience, you may not have lived the same life as them, but when you have shared reference points, there is a different result. Whether you're working in your own community or in another community, how you conduct yourself does affect the quality of the final product, of that final image.
- A lot of my work, it thinks about reciprocity or it thinks about a relationship, it thinks about sort of an exchange that's going on. What does it mean in this day and age to kind of sit down with a photographer and make your portrait in the age of the digital selfie, right? The foundation of that goes back to, what does it mean to kind of create an image of Native North America or Indigenous people?
- My work is titled "So", which translates to "Stars" in Navajo. And this work really was kind of looking at the importance of storytelling, especially Diné storytelling, and kind of the stories that I heard from my grandfather. Growing up, I was always surrounded by art, whether that was my grandfather making silver jewelry, my mom, she would always draw, and same with my stepdad. And there was something really beautiful about how their connection to art was always entwined with their identity and there was never something separate.
- I think the values that photography brings for me are family and connected to community. To be connected, whether you're documenting or having that exchange between people.

- Whenever I take photos of people, I give them prints or give back to their community in whatever way I can. I like the feeling of giving back and raising awareness of issues that I'm passionate about.

- This is what my work is all about, just being able to portray our people in the positive light that we see each other in, and recognizing all of our history too, leading up to this point in time. I want it to show how present and very much alive our cultures are.

- I think wellbeing has a lot to do with knowing who you are and where you're coming from, and photography is a really great tool to be able to look back at some of those histories, those family histories.

- Acknowledging where we come from is really important. And sometimes, before the acknowledgement comes finding ourselves or being able to find your voice to express who you are in your community.

- We bring all those values, all those teachings, all those ways of approaching things into the work that impacts what we see in that final image, and a respect for how people want to represent themselves.

- Getting to hear people's stories and experiences, and being able to have a documentation of those stories, I think, is incredibly powerful and extremely needed.

- For me, the way that I look at my work is I'm a documentary photographer. And my work is so beautiful, and it can be considered as art because our people are so beautiful.

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## **Always Leaders**

- For the photographers that are part of my generation, most of us saw our photographs as shaping and defining our identities as Indigenous people. The work was exploratory. It deviated from a more conventional canon. If we think about photography as, you know, having rules, a lot of the photographers that I was, you know, contemporaries with, we were breaking those rules.

- Photography has been used as a weapon against our cultures and there's no stepping into this role as a Native photographer without contending with that reality and indigenizing the medium, so that it is a tool of healing.

- It's always been a medium that's always been very extractive and I think, oftentimes, our history with photography and Indigenous people has always been one of fear.

Indigenous people have really kind of taken back this idea of the camera being an oppressive weapon and seeing the world through our eyes.

- So many of our misconceptions about who and what Native people look like or are were from misconstruction or misrepresentations of Native people. You'd never look like those Indians in the movies and those misrepresentations are powerful, especially when you're younger and coming up. So I thought if it was through photography and film and media that created those inaccurate ideas, then maybe it was through those same means that we could construct new and accurate and identifiable representations of Native people.

- The piece that's gonna be in the exhibition, it's named "Bring Her Home." It's a photograph of my friend Dezbah Evans. She's from these three different tribes that are, like, kind of spread out. I wanted to raise awareness for the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous relatives. So I wanted to pick someone that symbolized that it affects all of us, you know? It's not just one tribe and, like, one people, it's something across the board. I think this is our way of keeping our stories alive and continue our storytelling, because that's who we are. We've always been storytellers. That's how we've always passed down information to each other. So I feel like this is just another avenue of doing that and creating those conversations.

- Native people have always been using different kinds of mediums to represent stories and to tell stories, whether it's, like, in a cave or on a hide or in a ledger book or on a photo. You know, these kinds of different ways of telling our stories has always been what we do and it doesn't really matter the medium all that much, in a lot of ways.

- The ability to self-express is an act of sovereignty. It is an act of asserting your own identity, whether as an individual or as part of a collective. And I think Indigenous photographers support that. They understand that.

- When we have the cameras and when we are the ones that are able to tell our stories and hold the lenses and be the ones, like, in charge, then it's, like, hugely different because we can actually tell the stories that we wanna tell, tell the stories that can be told to other people. We are in so much more control of our narratives and our stories. We have the ability to cut out the middleman entirely. That self-determination and sovereignty expressed through, whether it's art or entrepreneurship or anything is really what makes this an exciting time to be Native.

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## **Always Present**

- So my grandmother, who was my nanny, she is in a lot of my images. In "Holding Her Ground", I was looking at the development of Winnipeg, which was the city that

everyone went to in Manitoba. You see Model Ts and the streetcar and you see this progress, the results of the colonial process. I felt like she is a strong, dynamic woman who's holding her ground, despite what's going on around her.

- Photography is about time travel in some ways. It's about freezing time, and then it's about, like, transitioning through time. And, you know, there is this thing about Indians, about Native Americans, that somehow we have been shot into the past, you know, and that's where we stay.

- When I was younger I'd often look in, you know, books about Native Americans and kind of look at the back of the index and look for Winnebago, and there was very little. And so it's like we weren't represented at all. And just in general, Native people are not, you know, in popular culture.

- When I started out in photography, you know, we really saw so much of photography from the turn of the century and then I grew up with this shoebox of photos, right, that were so magnificent that I didn't see anywhere else, of my grandmother at boarding school, of girls wearing dahlias in their hair of, you know, cowboys, of you know, men wearing the height of fashion at the time that were as Indigenous as they ever were, but they were just like living their modern lives at the time. I was thinking about these box TVs and the generation that I grew up in, and I realized that on the TVs I could photo illustrate multiple images of how we had been depicted in the media. The TVs in the background and the Native people in the regalia in the front became this moment of tension between, normally we see Native people in a landscape, devoid of modern context, but here we have them in front of these kind of new ruins. It's just absurd of how we've been portrayed in the media, and then what we look like in real life.

- Right from the beginning of the history of photography, we have been producing photography, we have been there documenting what's important to us. And so I think that's what's really special about this project, is the opportunity to show just the diversity of interests Indigenous photographers have.

- We will be able to see visually this legacy of photography and we'll get to see how the narrative has changed and how it stayed the same, and just to see like the backgrounds change, the objects around the subjects change, the subjects themselves change. Where people's minds were when they were taking photos, were focusing on people or was the importance on maybe like documenting their sheep? Or was it their grandmother or, you know, was it a self portrait? Like what was important when they were taking that picture that they wanted to communicate? And how has that changed and stayed the same?

- Photography can really work very quickly to give people this incredible amount of context of real lived experience, of real moments, of identity, of culture, of diversity, of continuum, right, through time.