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# Artist Matika Wilbur takes on pervasive racism with Project 562

When Pacific Northwest native American artist Matika Wilbur showed her niece Anna Cook some of the portraits on display at the Tacoma Art Museum, she said, “god, I didn’t know there were so many cool Indians out there.”

Chances are, since nothing like this exhibition has been done before, you didn’t either. But you have until October 5 **to visit the museum and experience Project 562.**

**Matika Wilbur**, herself of the Swinomish and Tulalip tribes, has travelled thousands of miles across the US in an attempt to photograph members of each of the 566 (562 when she started) federally recognized tribes in the country. To date, she has reached about one-third of those tribes, driving for miles and sleeping on couches, funded by various grants and through a **Kickstarter**, all together raising over \$213,000.

Wilbur’s now-famous undertaking is a groundbreaking look at Native Americans in America, not as half-naked, feathered, or “uncivilized,” but as the successful and educated professionals they are; a people who have changed the country in a myriad of ways.







Wilbur’s 16 year-old niece is one of fifty Native Americans whose portraits are included in the inaugural show of the project.

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“Star Flower Montoya” (Tribal affiliation: Pueblo of Taos & Barona Band of Mission Indians), 2014. Sepia-toned gelatin silver print with hand coloring. Portrait by Matika Wilbur.

Wilbur gathers her subjects by contacting tribes to let them know that she is coming and asking for names of impactful tribe members. She lets her them choose their location and garb; the portraits feature traditional wear as well as everyday clothes.


But the draw of the exhibit is not just the powerful images, some represented as digital prints, others in sepia-toned gelatin silver prints with hand coloring. It is in the story that each subject brings to the exhibit through the hours of audio that Wilbur collected throughout her travels.


Wilbur asks each subject questions about sovereignty, identity, resilience, and raising people up. As well as the classic question “What do you want me to tell people?”


The answers she obtained built a collection that presents an array of experiences with entrenched racism, stereotypes, and life in a country that has never apologized formally for the genocide committed against its native people.


“The exhibit will unveil some of these truths,” said Wilbur.


Wilbur said her subjects open up to her about their experiences because she spends hours with them “just hanging out;” she brings gifts, or cooks for them, or does their dishes, and just get to know them.


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“Raymond Mattz” (Tribal Affiliation: Yoruk Tribe), 2014. Sepia-toned gelatin silver print with hand coloring. Portrait by Matika Wilbur.

She said one of the most powerful experiences throughout the trip has been the hospitality of her people who are willing to let her, a total stranger, into their lives and homes.

The audio portion of the exhibit offers another side to every portrait, making each work an entire story. The stories unveil the personal experiences of tribal members throughout the country that, unbeknownst to many, still hold their own traditions, languages, and lands.

For example, the audio([which can be found here](#)) shares the experiences of Dr. Mary Evelyn Belgarde from the Pueblo of Isleta and Ohkay Owingeh.

Belgarde has spent her life in education examining the question of how the school system asks Native American children to choose between their traditional belief systems and Western values. Belgarde has started schools where the concepts are integrated, and her dream is to help create systems that properly train teachers to teach in Native American communities.



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“Mary Evelyn Belgarde” (Tribal affiliation: Pueblo of Isleta & Ohkay Owingeh), 2014. Inkjet print. Portrait by Matika Wilbur.

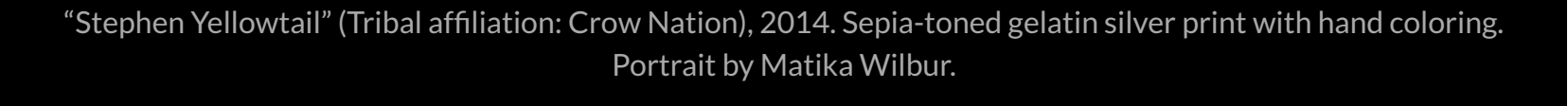
**Gail Small**’s story is also shared; Small, a Cheyenne, takes on both issues of sexual abuse in tribes and of environmental impacts on tribal lands. She teaches in universities to train the next generation of Native American leaders.

Wilbur’s exhibition addresses the struggles that come with balancing Native American culture with that around them and fight pervasive stereotypes that cast Native Americans as a people of the past.

“There is an incredible frankness about racism that our museum has never done before,” said Tacoma Art Museum curator, Rock Hushka.

Wilbur hopes that once this message is absorbed on a large scale, the political and social leverage will help to change the world for future generations of Native Americans.





The exhibition is also groundbreaking in that it is incomplete. Wilbur hopes complete the collection within the next two years, exhibiting the show in major metropolises, and spreading the message of the show that “we [Native Americans] are still here.”

*Featured image: Sky and Talon Duncan (Tribal affiliation: Three affiliated Tribes of Manadan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation, and San Carlos Apache Tribe), 2014. Inkject print. Portrait by Matika Wilbur.*

**Photographic Presence and Contemporary Indians: Matika Wilbur’s Project 562**

Tacoma Art Museum, 1701 Pacific Avenue

Wednesday–Sunday: 10 am–5 pm *(Closed Mondays and Tuesdays.)*

Third Thursday: 10 am–8 pm

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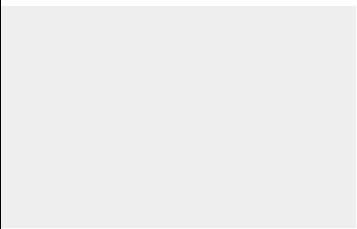
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## About the Author



**Eva Reveal** Eva Reveal is from Puyallup, but spends most of her time in Tacoma where she studies Communications and Computer Science at the University of Washington Tacoma, and works as Editor in Chief of the university’s newspaper, The Ledger.

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