

MATIKA WILBUR'S

PROJECT



**CHANGING THE WAY WE
SEE NATIVE AMERICA**

This exhibit exists to shift the collective consciousness and to encourage the viewer to deeply question the false narratives, stereotypes and typical tropes that define their understanding of Indigenaety. Project 562: Changing the Way We See Native America, does just that.

Matika Wilbur, from the Swinomish and Tulalip people says, “there is a collective fire burning inside of the hearts of Indigenous people, and that fire wants the truth.” Truth seeking is what fueled Matika to sell everything, and move into her RV, “The Big Girl”. She would then spend ten years traversing the depths of Turtle Island, with the goal to visit 562 federally recognized Tribes in what is now known as The United States (there are currently 574, but as Matika would realize, 562 was merely a number. She would also go on to visit with state recognized Tribes, urban Natives, and Native folks in Canada, Mexico, and Aotearoa.) During her sojourn she talked story and made kin with hundreds of Tribal Nations, from the Mi’kmaq in Maine, to Yup’ik peoples in the arctic rim, and across the pacific to visit with Kānaka Maoli, in the illegally occupied kingdom of Hawai’i. She has currently visited over 750 Tribal communities, and what you see here is a special selection from that body of work.

Matika’s unique way of being an artist in the contemporary world is presented in Project 562, which was mostly a grassroots effort, funded by two kickstarters and a large community of online supporters.

These portraits reflect Matika’s consummate craftsmanship and her commitment to decolonizing fine art. Photo participants choose what to wear, what questions to answer and where to be photographed. This portraiture conveys a true sense of partnership between artist and sitter.

Students from Santa Monica College worked closely with Matika in crafting this exhibit; challenging the traditional gallery/museum space to be a provocative contemporary learning environment. This space has become a hub and lab for students to question systemic fictions and discover ways to build community and connection through artwork and oral histories. This has created a larger discourse and dialogue that extends well beyond the edges of the art world; pleading with academia to be a part of an equitable shift in the way we all relate to one another. We are reminded through Matika’s lens, that we are all in relation, and the time is now.

Matika says, “Turtle Island and her original inhabitants are worth knowing. Get to know us as we know ourselves. Learn to call us by our names. Say it in our language. May you be so blessed to know these places and people as I have. May you love our people as I do.”



Sheldon Raymore Cheyenne River Sioux

Sheldon Raymore is pictured at the Bay Area American Indian Two Spirit Pow Wow. He runs PrEPahHontozTipi Project, through which he works to increase HIV/AIDS awareness and access to PrEP (HIV prevention medications) in the Two-Spirit community.



Teexeeshe', Tsinte, Ch'vski, Delaina, and Allie Nii~-lii~-chvn-dvn (Tolowa), Yurok, Karuk, Wintun, Chippewa, Tolowa Dee-Ni', Puhlik-lah, Hupa, Wintun

Teexeeshe', Tsinte, Ch'vski, Delaina, and Allie pictured at the Dee-ni' Nii~-li~ (Smith River) at Da'-chvn-dvn (River Mouth) in Tolowa Dee-Ni'.

They're pictured in Ch'a~lh wvn Srdee-yvn (Flower Dance) regalia, a ceremony that has been culturally resurrected after brutal American assimilation tactics failed. I see this photograph and I know that our cultures are alive, our societies are rematriating, and our futures are Indigenous. As Teexeeshe' and Chvski's Mom Marva told me:

"These acts of connection are healing for all of us, so when we reinstate these ceremonies, it's very powerful in self-love, self-respect, and honoring these roles of practice."



L Frank Manriquez
Tongva, Ajachmem

L is an artist, author, and language activist as the cofounder of Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival. L is from the Tongva Nation, whose homelands are in what is now known as Los Angeles. At contact with colonizers, the Tongva were about thirty-five thousand people. Two centuries later, colonizers pronounced them “extinct”, and not until 1994 did California enact Senate Bill 1134, which recognized the Gabrielino-Tongva’s existence; the federal government did not. L is one of seventeen hundred Gabrielino-Tongva Tribal members, and much of her work has been dedicated to reawakening her culture.

“The most exciting adventure is being able to offer something back to my own people who have been so rubbed out because we are considered extinct. It all comes back into how do we re-member a people? Not remember, but re-member something that has been dis-membered...In re-membering, it’s resurrection. The linguists call our languages dead languages, except I just call them sleeping. Wanting them back is enough to wake them up. And the harder we work, the more we have. We’re trying to be whole now, because there was a holocaust on our people. And then there was the era of our peoples struggling after the holocaust to maintain lives, now to maintain house and cars and all this other stuff. And you know there’s still a mini holocaust on us. We have enough oxygen now to where we can see our value again, because we had to see our own value. And we see our value and we see the world has a need for us.”



Dr. Henrietta Mann
Cheyenne

“Ne-mehotatse. I love you. The word love itself can be either mehot or mehosane. Each mean love. Ne-tseoneseom-mehotase, containing a second syllable, means I really sincerely or truly love you. It sounds so much more sincere and loving in Cheyenne. I love you is almost sterile-sounding. It’s supposed to convey emotions that are so deep and caring. I can say Ne-mehotatse. In our language it seems to have much more power.”

How has colonization affected the very way we love? Enslaved in systems of assimilation, notably the heartless regime of Indian boarding schools, many Native mothers came home and had children to whom they could not say, I love you. Dr. Henrietta Mann’s parents were part of this insidious scheme. She intimately grasps what happened to love in the time of the boarding schools.

“My father knows what love is. And I believe now that my mother does too, but my mother had a very difficult time experiencing it. You can’t expect those generations who attended boarding school to know what love was, because it was absent, it was not taught there. We know that culturally love was a part of our value systems and was emphasized prior to boarding schools. It still is one of our basic cultural values. My parents did not let me go to boarding school. So we’re about three generations removed from where all that took place in my family. I made up my mind that my children were going to hear from me, that I was going to show them, that they were going to know I love them.”



Teexeeshe' Jones-Scott

Nii~lii~chvndvn (Tolowa), Yurok, Karuk, Wintu, Chippewa

Teexeeshe' is pictured along Dee-ni' Nii~li~ (Smith River) in her Ch'a~lh wvn Srdee-yvn (Flower Dance) regalia. She is wearing eagle feathers generations old, her sister's basket cap, abalone earrings, beaded hair ties, beaver hair wraps, carved clam shell necklaces, a pine nut & olivella shell necklace and a maple bark skirt that she made with other youngsters during language camp. Teexeeshe' also performs Nee-dash Dance (World Renewal Ceremony).

"I like living like my ancestors. I've danced my whole life. Even when i was a baby, my mom would hold me in ceremony while she sang in the ceremony. I love dancing. This ceremony is only practiced by the Tolowa people. To think we are dancing for the whole world and everything in it means we hold strong responsibility to ensure this is done. This is medicine for all of us. I feel so lucky to be apart of this. I want others to know that our ceremonies, our songs, our value is strong today and that it takes each of us to ensure this medicine continues."



Leon Grant Omaha

In his formative years, Leon Grant worked on his father's ranch. At sixteen, he became a champion bronc rider. He once performed thirty consecutive nights at a rodeo at Madison Square Garden. But Leon didn't want to become a rancher as his parents expected of him.

"I came home one day and thought, I can't do this. I just want to get an education. So, one morning in 1947 I left my parents a note: I'm going to Phoenix. I walked 1,826 miles, every bit. No interstates, all crooked roads. Took me forty-one days."

When Leon finally arrived, he found segregation and oppression.

"I found out Phoenix was sick. In 1947, you couldn't go in to eat, get a motel, get a job because you're Indian, Black, Mexican—all considered the 'dark race.' You'd go to jail, they'd kick you out of the city. In Nebraska, farmers, next-door neighbors, we're all mixed up, and got along real good. In Phoenix, you can't use a public bathroom if you're an Indian."

Leon went on to establish the Phoenix Indian Center. He coached the local Indian basketball team, the Phoenix Redsk*ns, who once defeated the Harlem Globetrotters in triple overtime and he worked closely with the Black community and the school board to desegregate Phoenix schools. To this day, the Phoenix Indian Center operates as an esteemed, essential social service institution.



Travis Goldtooth "Buffalo Barbie"
Diné

Travis Goldtooth, whose stage name is Buffalo Barbie, is a Two-spirit powwow dancer. This picture was made in San Francisco at the Bay Area American Indian Two-Spirit Pow Wow.

"I was pretty much raised by my grandmother and she instilled all this cultural knowledge. In the Navajo culture, it's a matriarchal society. And with the matriarch, which is my grandmother, once she passes, the next holder is a Two Spirit individual; it's usually a male/female, an individual like me. When I moved back home five years ago, I fell into that role, and I guess I never looked back. My brothers and sisters look up to me. I have to do all the family event gathering and when somebody's in the hospital or something like that, I'm the first to be informed. It falls on me to give the news because they say, if it comes from me, it has more of a subtle warmth feeling."



Raven and Free Eagle Borsej Lhaq'temish, We Wai Kai

Twin brothers Raven and Free Eagle Borsej are pictured at the power paddle to Puyallup, preparing to dance during protocol. At the time this photo was made, Free Eagle had been skippering the Lummi Youth Canoe for about three years.

“Ever since I started coming on Canoe Journey, I’ve been dancing and making my own regalia. I’ve been in foster care almost my entire life, so being able to come here on this Canoe Journey and meet a lot of new family who I’ve never met before has been a great opportunity and an amazing experience. That’s what Journey does—it connects us. I feel way more connected here than I have anywhere else, and it feels great to be home.”



Virginia Christman Viejas Tribe

A master of Tribal dance, Virginia is pictured doing Ashaa Takook, a Bird Dance that accompanies a form of storytelling sung at ceremonies, large gatherings, and funerals. Her family has long been part of this ceremonial tradition and lifestyle.

"I can remember from the time I was five, six years old, hearing my uncle Calestra LaChappa, singing every morning, every night, every morning. It is just like prayer. He had learned from his grandfather, the head of the clan. My son is a singer. He's been singing for almost thirty-two years. His sons all sing, they go all over Mojave, Grand Canyon. Around my area there's always a dance going on. I hate to mention sad times, but like a wake or funeral, a wake especially, you'll see the singers get up to sing right away. You'll see the girls right up there, jumping in. And I'll just sit there. And I've had girls come up to me and say, 'Virginia, aren't you gonna go dance?' And I'll say, 'Yeah, yeah, but not yet.' Our Tribe, we sing on the fourth song. You wait until that certain song is sung. Then you get up there and you dance."



Aurelia Stacona
Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs

Ulla (Grandma) Aurelia Stacona, at eighty-five years old, chose to be photographed by the Deschutes River near the Moody Ranch, where she was born. Ulla Aurelia's life story demonstrates inspired Indigenous matriarchy, deep spiritual valence, and enlightened adaptability.

"After I had my family—I had eight children somehow—I found the gospel church. My family used to say, 'That's the way of the white man.' But I'd become very sick. I had tuberculosis. I was devastated because I had young children. The medication they were giving me didn't seem to help. It was just ongoing pain. One day a Black man told me about a gospel tent set up on our Reservation. I went there and everybody was so happy, praising the Lord, raising their hands, singing, clapping, crying, or laughing. I really didn't understand what it was about, but I kept going. One day they were asking for anyone that needed prayer. So I went for prayer, and maybe two or three other times I went.

At the clinic they tested you on your arm, and if you were red there, you still had tuberculosis. I told a young lady at the tent, 'I go to the doctor and it's still red.' I was so discouraged. One day the pastor told me, 'I know you don't understand, but I'm still going to pray for you.' So, he and his wife prayed. I looked again later, and the red was gone. I told the young lady, 'It's all gone!' Like I was healed supernaturally. They took tests and X-rays and couldn't find anything wrong with me.

So, this is why I came to this way, a change in my life. I went against my father with this. He was an elder, with braids, spoke English, and was just a truly wonderful Indian man. Very strong, lot of wisdom. But he saw something that made him change his mind about my choice. He finally thought it was okay. I felt like I was released."



Orlando Begay Diné

Orlando Begay, or OB, is an inspired Diné graphic designer and acclaimed Grass and Chicken Powwow Dancer. He speaks frankly about manhood and his coming of age.

“I grew up without a father figure, so when I got to the point where I transitioned from being a boy into manhood, I had to learn what masculinity was on my own. It’s hard these days—we don’t have the male role models we once did. A lot of us have lost our masculine energy through colonialism, brainwashing, even the food we eat affecting our bodies, so in a way I feel like masculinity is a lost art form.

Modern-day consumerism feeds off our insecurities and people become victims to that and to the superficial. When we mature as men, there are things that happen to our energy, our spirit changes. So I’d say to the youth, ‘Don’t be afraid of growth and aging. Embrace maturity like we used to. Age gracefully like we used to.’ I know I’ve finally gotten to a point in my life where I feel at peace. It’s a gift of growing into maturity, I’ve found happiness from within rather than outside myself.”



Kathy Jefferson
Lone Pine Paiute, Shoshone

The waters of Owens Lake have been emptied by an aqueduct to satisfy the endless thirst of the City of Los Angeles. The LADWP currently owns the water rights and has drained the land dry, creating a toxic dust bowl that has brought disease to the Indigenous folks who occupy the land.

Kathy Jefferson has been part of a group effort that tirelessly monitored, cajoled, and pleaded with mitigation crews and state and federal authorities to stop “building stupid on top of stupid out there.”

“LADWP has a lot of control over the Indians in this valley...It changed the way of life for all the people here. When they started drying it out, it really started affecting our health trying to breathe that dust. If everybody in this valley has breathing problems, COPD, heart problems, doesn't that shit tell you something? DWP dumps all their hazardous waste out there. We're breathing toxic chemicals and heavy metals, and nobody even talks about or monitors that.

They built this aqueduct without Native peoples' uses or anything in mind. They're so water hungry down there and can't get enough. They'll never give up this water. They have swimming pools and waste so much water and don't even care about where it came from. It doesn't take into consideration that there are human beings here too. We have a way of life. Nobody said it's okay for them to destroy our valley.”



562 in Motion

Moving portraits, films, songs and interviews collected by Matika from over a decade on the road for Project 562. This “moving portrait” is a visual glimpse into the richness, diversity and lived experiences of contemporary Native America.



Sky and Talon Duncan
Apache, Arikara, Mandan, Hidatsa

Talon and Sky Duncan are world champion hoop dancers from Yellow Bird Productions, a professional family dance company based in Phoenix, Arizona. Their mother, Doreen Duncan, relayed the joy of watching her children dance:

“When I see my children dancing, it really makes me happy, it makes me feel like I’ve done something in my lifetime. I’m so grateful to see them and my grandchildren dancing, to continue our traditions, because at one time, these dances were not allowed. It was against the law for us to do these dances.”



562 Heard

The fifty eight portraits here are a small sample of Matika Wilbur's work from her ten years on the road with Project 562. Each of the folks pictured shared with Matika their language, their space, their identity through audio interview. Listen closely, listen again, the stories spoken are stories of resilience, reverence, and Indigenous intelligence.



**Darkfeather Ancheta, Eckos Chartraw-Ancheta, and
Bibiana Ancheta
Tulalip**

Darkfeather Ancheta, left, is pictured with her nephew, Eckos Chartraw-Ancheta, and sister, Bibiana Ancheta, on the shore of Tulalip Bay. The family adorns in traditional regalia for our annual Canoe Journey. This celebration has been indispensable to Darkfeather as a person of the Coast Salish Sea.

“It didn’t change me. It shaped me. It’s just who we are, and where we come from. It revitalizes our cultural ways. We take care of the canoe and it takes care of us. When we’re on the water, we all have to pull together. The teachings that the elders gave to us, such as respecting ourselves, respecting each other, respecting other people’s songs, their dances, and their teachings—they teach us how to walk in the world. And the music and songs are so powerful. It’s all so beautiful. It touches you down into your soul. It helps you get through hard times, both in the water and in life.”

Bibiana reflected on “the journey” as part of a crucial Indigenous perspective and cultural and personal practice.

“In man’s law, sovereignty is an illusion of independence under dependence. Under nature’s law, it’s a Creator-gifted right, handed down through our ancestors. Passing down our knowledge, cultures, traditions, and language is vital to our survival, helps root us in our ways so we always know who we are. Without this, we become just another human being with no identity; you risk being spiritually lost. Identity comes from our culture, our culture comes from our language, and our language comes from our environment. So, to protect our environment is to protect us.”

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