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## *The Native Artists Showing Us What's Happening in Indigenous America*

We spoke with Wendy Red Star about what it was like to curate, edit and feature a wide range of Native artists for the Fall issue of Aperture.



By **Fahima Haque**

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Wendy Red Star is a visual artist who grew up on the Apsáalooke (Crow) reservation in Montana and now lives in Portland, Ore. She recently was asked to guest edit the Fall issue of Aperture, a quarterly magazine, which focuses on Indigenous lives through photography.

“I’ve always been really enthralled with images,” she said. “I really like to align my practice with research and investigation as the primary source of inspiration. Everything that I put out there visually is the way that my voice speaks the loudest.”

We spoke with her about what it was like to curate, edit and feature a wide range of Native artists in the issue, titled “Native America” and launching Sept. 10.

*This interview is lightly condensed and edited.*

**Q.** How did you get involved with this project? How much freedom did you have in curating these artists?

**A.** I’ve always known about Aperture. Since my background is in sculpture, I’ve never really thought of myself as a photographer.

I was very hesitant to be placed in this position. I don’t have any formal training in photography, so there was that aspect. But another thing is that being an artist who is Native I’m really particular in what I would like to see. So I was a little bit hesitant in wondering where Aperture was coming from. I immediately put that out there to them, like the artists that I’m going to select are going to be similar and that maybe photography isn’t their main language, maybe they work in other mediums, but photography does come up. The other thing, too, is I really liked specificity. I really wanted artists who were coming from their own environments and their perspectives and giving us access to a deeper look into who they are or communities that they’re focused on.

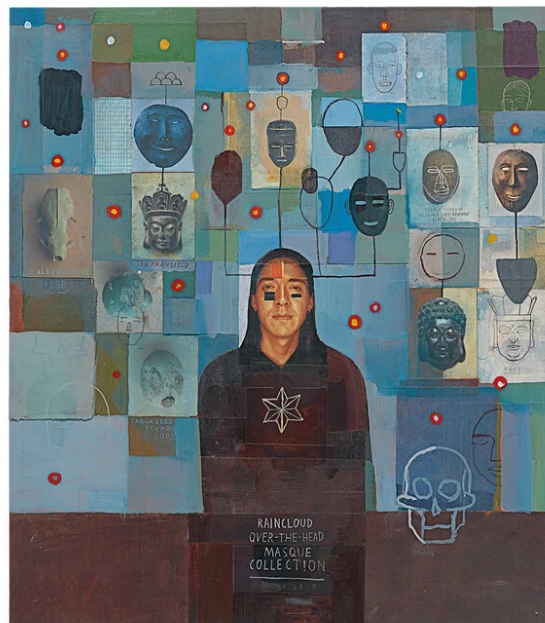
The direction was to really expose artists and ideas that haven’t really gotten as much attention. They’re the deep dive and underbelly of what’s happening in Indigenous America. Each of the artists that are in the

magazine does a brilliant job with that.

**Q.** How did you choose these artists?

**A.** For instance, Jacqueline Cleveland, she's got a background in film and my connection with her is that we actually went to undergrad together at Montana State University in Bozeman, and she's Alaska Native. I used to be obsessed with all her Facebook posts of her home territory and her community. The way that she photographed made me feel like I was right there with her, there were a lot of images of typical things that she and her family would do, like harvesting or hunting. The way that she was able to let me enter into her life and her family life and community life, I thought was really powerful.

Duane Linklater has this very powerful message in that his work is very generous but also he'll show you what he wants to show you but then he'll also keep things that you don't have access to. As a Native artist, it's such a powerful perspective when you think about how Native culture is exploited by Western culture.



Kimowan Metchewais, Raincloud, 2010 Courtesy Kimowan Metchewais McLain Collection/National Museum of the American Indian/Smithsonian Institution

Kimowan McClain, who went by his mother's name, Metchewais. He passed away from cancer and I became aware of his work probably around 2000. He stuck with me and then I did an artist research fellowship through the Smithsonian. I did my research at the National Museum of the American Indian and that's where his papers and his artwork are. When Aperture asked me, he was my number one person that I really wanted because he hasn't really had exposure, but I think his work is so important to the dialogue for both

Native artists and artists in general.

**Q.** How do you edit art?

**A.** Actually, this was really great because it was pretty freeing. Aperture paired writers with the artists. That was really important. We wanted writers of color, Native writers, but we also wanted writers that weren't Native to have to talk about Native artists' work. That was something that I really wanted Aperture to push forward, because it's part of what happens, especially if you want a career in the arts or anywhere. A lot of times people are afraid to write about Native artists' work. That's something I really wanted to have — a marriage between writers and artists and have that opportunity going both ways.

Martine Gutierrez had a project called "Indigenous Woman," which was a magazine that she produced, so she basically sent us that; I already knew about that project. Aperture was always so kind and let me select a wide range of images and then we would go back and forth on the editing process there. With Duane Linklater, he made completely new work. The artists were always allowed to look and give their final say.

**Q.** Did you have to convince these artists to be a part of the issue or assure them they'd be given free rein to express themselves? For many Indigenous, of color or Black artists attempts at inclusion can also be an attempt to commodify or distort.

**A.** It happened with almost every artist and it was a very humbling position for myself as an artist of color and having that sensitivity and trying to get away from the surface level and really dig in. It was a lot of cautionary, easing into these conversations and it really pushed me out of my comfort zone. I had to have a lot of humility in approaching the artists. Part of that humility was because I have such deep admiration and respect and their work inspires me greatly. Some of the people we couldn't get; I'm still reeling from rejection, even if that rejection was just timing.



Queer Rage, Dear Diary, No Signal During VH1's Fiercest Divas, from the series Indigenous Woman, 2018. Courtesy Martine Gutierrez, Ryan Lee Gallery

**Q.** Is there anything that after working with these artists that you've learned, whether technique or perspective, that you are now inspired to try in your next piece?

**A.** I'm really enthralled with Martine's work and the way that she builds a whole world, or if it doesn't exist, she goes and creates it. That, to me, is so empowering. With my work I'm really digging into historical records and bringing light to these histories that have been buried and unearthing them. So to see this amazing freedom that I find within Martine's work is something that I would very much like to allow myself to build a new world or create something in that way.

**Q.** Were you thinking about the audience while putting this issue together? Were you thinking, first and foremost, about other Native artists?

**A.** Well, Aperture said something really interesting in the beginning. They asked, is there a publication out there that's quintessential for Native photographers or, if there isn't, what would you envision? That made me think, or put myself in the frame of mind when I was a young artist in undergrad, and I used to go to the art library and spend hours pulling random books and flipping through them and gaining so much inspiration. I thought, wow, what if there was this publication that I pulled out back then? So I was really thinking about that young artist of color or Native artist that would see something like this and how inspiring that would be to have a publication like this. That really helped me then select a path going forward

of who I thought would be highly important and inspirational for that young artist to see.

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