

On collaborating with your ancestors



Visual artist Wendy Red Star discusses how she approaches an archive, her MFA experience, and betting on herself.

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As told to Katherine Cusumano, 2127 words.

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Bishkisché Set 10 (Bad Dog / Farm Woman / Flat Face / Goes Against The Big Wind) , 2023, acrylic, graphite, kitakata paper, coated pastel paper, 20 x 28 inches, 22.25 x 30.25 inches including frame; Courtesy of the artist and Roberts

Projects, Los Angeles; photo Paul Salvesson.

What kinds of art did you grow up with?

Culturally, my tribe—and I think a lot of Native tribes—has a really strong visual language. I just considered [art] normal, an everyday thing. Growing up, my grandmother made me and my cousins our traditional outfits, and she was always making extra things to sell to the community. She basically worked on something every single day. It really bled into what I do now. In the Crow way, no one sits you down and shows you exactly how to do something. It's osmosis. You pick it up. Sewing, my love for saturated color, contrasting patterns and colors and things like that—I think all of that bled into my artistic language. It wasn't until I went to undergrad that I started taking art foundational courses. I had been riding horses all the time.

I should say, on the subject of horses, you have a plastic horse right behind you at this moment.

If all goes right, they'll be shown as benches at the National Portrait Gallery in 2026. The show is about the last chief of my tribe, Chief Plenty Coups. He had a favorite horse. I thought, "Wouldn't it be hilarious if we had horse benches people could sit on and watch a silent film of him?"



Four Seasons Series, *Summer*, 2006, archival pigment print on Sunset Fiber rag, 21 x 24 inches.

That gets at something I was curious about. In a lot of your work, there's an interesting juxtaposition of the natural and the artificial. In your self-portrait series "Four Seasons," for example, you use the form of the historical diorama, albeit with inflatable animals and astroturf, to challenge notions of artifice and authenticity surrounding white Western portrayals of Native life. How did you arrive there?

Again, it's something that I grew up with. My community has always done that. For instance, our traditional elk-tooth dresses are decorated with the eye teeth of an elk. There's only two eye teeth per elk; the more elk teeth you have, the better your hunting or trade abilities or status. As elk were becoming extinct, you started finding imitation elk teeth carved in bone or wood. Even though they're imitation, they still hold that symbolism. I got really used to being able to adapt that way.

The other thing is economic. Starting out being a poor grad student, I had to think of how I could do something big with the budget that I had. I don't have taxidermy animals, but I can buy these blow-up or cardboard ones. That made the work a lot more interesting than if I was just doing a straight diorama because it actually says a lot about societal things. It says a lot about capitalism, mass production, using natural resources to extinction, all of it. So it all feeds into a bigger way that we live in the world.



The Soil You See... series, James Florio/Tippet Rise Art Center.

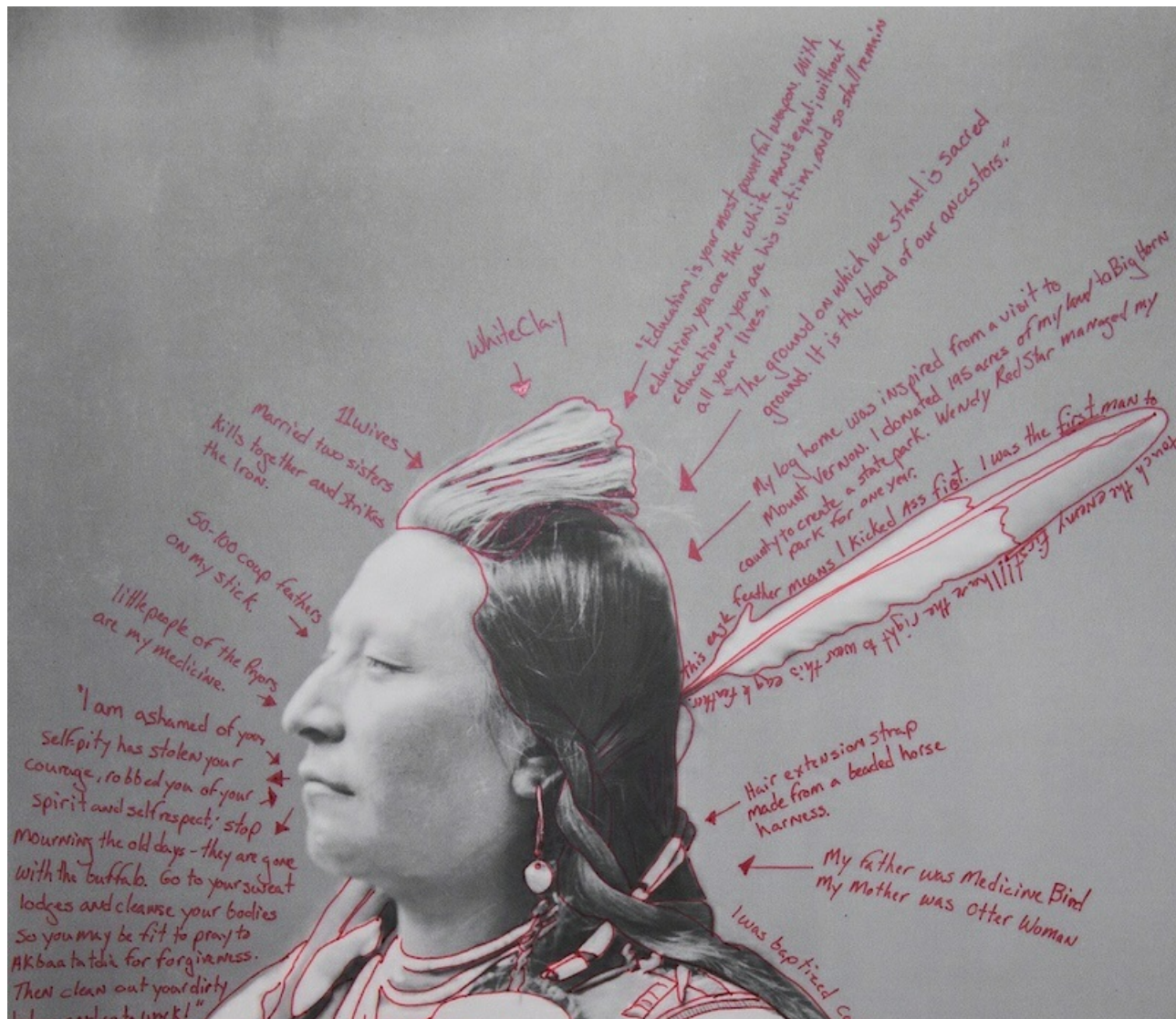
You did your BFA at Montana State University, and then your MFA at UCLA. How did your academic training inform your approach?

I think I got the best of both worlds. I majored in sculpture in both programs, but MSU was really about how to

use the tools [like] the wood shop machines and welding and crafting. UCLA was conceptual; I think that worked to my advantage. As I transitioned into the conceptual, I had the capability to make those ideas. I could craft something that actually worked out and looked good. I remember the sculpture tech at UCLA was like, "Well, if you can't make it, someone in LA can." I hadn't even thought that was an option, but fabrication has become a big part of my practice.

That can be hard to embrace as a solo artist. All art-making is an exchange of ideas, but I do think that there is still this pervasive idea of the individual who is self-sufficient and has the ideas and has the technical skills.

I think that's a very young way of thinking about it, too. Early in your early art education, it is all about you making self-portraits and being able to draw realistically, and having a physical hand in it. But that's not really realizing the full capability of where your creativity can go. In the beginning of my career, when I was learning, I was making more work that had my image and self in it. As I've moved into a more mature practice, the thing that's been really pleasurable is how collaborative it is, in the sense of working with curators and institutions to help realize projects. Fabrication is part of that as well: working with people who are experts in their field. It's fun to see how they translate my idea into a physical form. All of that kind of stuff has been really rewarding, and it wasn't something that was modeled for me in grad school. It's just been so much more fantastic than I could ever imagine. I wish I could convey that to younger artists: your art practice is truly and uniquely yours, and modeled after your own individual creative path.





1880 Crow Peace Delegation series, *Alaxchiiaahush/Many War Achievements / Plenty Coups*, 2014, artist-manipulated digitally reproduced photograph by C.M. (Charles Milton) Bell, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, 24 x 16.45 inches with additional 1 inch border.

I want to talk about research, which seems to show up in your work in a lot of different ways. In your solo show at Roberts Projects last year, you titled a series of paintings after the names of Crow women found in the historical census. Those paintings were also inspired by research you did into *bishkisché*, or *parfleche*, travel cases decorated by women artisans that indicated tribal affiliation but whose makers were very rarely known. How does the research process structure your art making? Were you always so interested in histories and found materials?

I've always been very curious, and I think of things and digest them in a complicated way. I think I make things way too hard. I have dyslexia, so I have a harder time with conventional modes of learning. When I'm researching, I am able to articulate it by making some sort of artwork. I couldn't write a paper about it. I mean, I could, but it would take me a really long time and it still would not satisfy the way in which I think the message should be articulated.

You have been spending a lot of time in the Library of Congress for your upcoming show at the National Portrait Gallery. How do you approach a body of historical records?

I've been working with Charlotte Ickes, a curator at the National Portrait Gallery, for about three years now. When they invited me, I was like, "Well, I want to go check out these archives"—the National Anthropological Archive, Natural History Museum, and National Museum of American Indian. Let's just go in there and see what we find. Chief Plenty Coups, the last chief of my tribe, kept popping up. The show will open in 2026, the 250th anniversary of when the Declaration of Independence was signed. So I was like, "Wait, maybe let's dig into this a little bit." Chief Plenty Coups came to Washington, D.C. at least 10 times between 1880 and 1921. We just kept finding all these connections.



Apsáalooke Feminist #4, 2016, archival pigment print, 35 x 42 inches.

Coming to an archive, I'm interested in what Crow material they have. Once I start looking at it, something might jump out to me, and then I dial into that and other things start to unfold. Chief Plenty Coups turned his estate into a state park set-up to mimic Washington's Mount Vernon because he took a trip to Mount Vernon when he was in D.C. It's just so weird and wild and interesting, this sort of exchange that's happening.

As you were talking, it occurred to me that, like fabrication, just entering the archive is a kind of collaboration with voices of previous generations. You're bringing things that already exist into a new context, and that is itself a collaborative mode.

Absolutely. I feel like I do a lot of ancestral collaboration. That's a big part of the work that I do.

Could you take me through what a typical day of your practice looks like right now?

I always feel like when you come to my studio, you'll be disappointed. Some of my other artist friends who have a more material-based practice always have something out that they're working on. That's what a lot of people think when they're going to an artist's studio. I open up my laptop and I show you different ideas, the concepts that are going to come together. When I'm actually making a work, there's a lot of time thinking about it, and then the production can happen very intensely and fast.



Her Dreams Are True (Julia Bad Boy), 2021, color lithograph with archival pigment printed chine collé on mulberry paper, 20 1/4 x 20 inches.

I remember going to grad school and that's when I first had a studio. The model of success there was somebody who was constantly producing and had lots of work to show. I didn't. I hardly made any work in grad school, and no one really validated for me that the work [doesn't have to be] done in the studio... I'd go to antique stores or vintage stores and I'd look at objects there; I learned that I can rent objects from some of the vintage stores in Hollywood. That opened up a whole new world. I was working the whole time, it just wasn't in a materials-based way that I can do directly in the studio. I think I still have a little bit of a hangup about that.

In an interview, you mentioned working at a nonprofit in Vancouver, Washington, and making art in the extra time that you had. It sounds like you're now able to do art full-time, but I'm curious if having to carve out time for your own art revealed anything about your practice.

I was really busy. I was a single mom, working this 9-to-5, and I would come home and start making art around 7 P.M. Sometimes, I'd go until 1 or 2 A.M. Because I was so busy and there wasn't any time, I was really productive. I was like that when I was in college. The more classes I had, the better I seemed to do, because there's no other way around it. But in 2016, I ended up getting laid off from the nonprofit. It was very scary to be laid off, but then I was like, "Here's this window. Why don't we be really crazy and just try to see if we can sustain ourselves?" It was based a lot off of fear. I was just a maniac, saying yes to everything and feeling like I was going to be doomed at any point. I made six figures that first year. You should always bet on yourself. It always turns out well, making that investment.

Wendy Red Star recommends five stops to make on a road trip to the Crow Reservation:

The Good Food Store in Missoula, for their chocolate cream pie.

The Yellowstone Pawn & Trade in Billings. I like to talk with Blaine about historical objects – he has a great selection of Native American items.

Chief Plenty Coups State Park, located in my hometown. I like to stop by the sacred spring on the property.

Lammers Trading Post in Hardin. I went to high school with the daughter of the late owner, George Lammers. This is a great place to find last minute items for Crow Fair.

River Crow Trading Post in Crow Agency. This is where I pick up any kind of materials for making artwork, such as beads. I like supporting it because it's a Crow woman-owned business on the reservation.

Name

Wendy Red Star

Vocation

artist

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