

Erin Younger

Native American Photography: Diversity and Achievement in the Southwest

This paper grew from preliminary research begun in connection with an exhibition of Hopi photography that has subsequently been exhibited at Northlight Gallery, Arizona State University (September 1982). As I began investigating photography by Native Americans in the Southwest, several things became increasingly clear. First and foremost, few people living outside of reservation settings were aware of any tradition of photography by Native Americans. Virtually nothing had been written on the subject, very few exhibitions had been mounted and very little outside encouragement nor Native American photographers apparently existed. In spite of these perceptions, Native American photography was found to be neither an isolated phenomena nor of inconsequential interest. There were in fact, numerous Native American photographers in the Southwest and on the Hopi reservation alone, at least one man had set up his own dark-room and studio by 1940.¹

During the late 1960's, media techniques including photography were added to Native American studies curriculum throughout the country. Photography, film and video were also studied at nationally-recognized art and communications schools. In 1981, Native American media technician Bruce Baird wrote: "The struggle to change attitudes and stereotypes about Native Americans has made it essential for Indians to participate in the media, determining how Indian concerns and realities are presented."² From the 1960's on, many Native American Photographers have pursued this struggle. One of the results of the many individual efforts has been a gradual emergence of an encompassing view of contemporary Indian life: a view that significantly has been recorded and defined by Native Americans themselves.

The emphasis in this paper is on the work of Hopi photographers. The range and variety of their work, however, appears similar to that found on other reservations in the Southwest and also among urban Indian photographers. To highlight these parallels, three primary categories will be reviewed: 1) portrait photogra-

Figure 1. Hopi Man, 1980 by Owen Seumtewa (Hopi)

phy, 2) documentary photography and 3) interpretive or "art" photography. The approach and access to subject matter in these categories appears to have yielded the most distinctive results in the work of Native American photographers. These results are characterized by an "insider's" view of culture. The distinctiveness of this view is less in the realm of technical innovation than in the conceptualization of what is important to record and why.

The use of photography by Native Americans is not new and can be traced to the early decades of the twentieth century. Until relatively recently, however, Native Americans have more often been the subject of photography than its practitioners. As a result, historic photographs of Indians chronicle the changing tides of Indian-White relations as much as they do changes in Indian life.³

The earliest pictures of Indians were taken during the 1840's soon after the invention of the daguerreotype. The westward movement of pioneers was documented to some extent prior to the Civil War, but it was the period between 1860 and 1920 that saw the most extensive documentation of Indian life. Delegations of Indians to Washington were regularly recorded, and field photographers accompanied railroad survey crews and later scientific surveys to carefully record the landscape and Indians they encountered.⁴

As the 1880's drew to a close, most Indians lived on reservations and tourism was on the rise, particularly in the Southwest. Reflecting an ever-widening approach to subject matter, the photographic record of Indians expanded to include the work of amateur as well as professional photographers. Straight-forward documentary images were continued, but a genre of romantic images was added to these — commercially successful staged scenes that piqued the curiosity of potential tourists and helped create a fanciful, stereotyped image of Native Americans that was far removed from any ethnographic reality.

Among the thousands of Southwest-bound tourists in the late 1880's came increasing numbers of photographers, some even arriving in clubs. Dedicated to the sympathetic if romantic cause of recording the "vanishing" Indians, many attempted to fulfill their mission in an honorable, respectful manner. Edward Curtis and A. C. Vroman are among the better-known today. Others, however, were less sensitive. In 1902, photographers and amateur ethnographer George Wharton James described the chaos created by clamoring photographers at Hopi. As a result of their disruptions, photographers were restricted to a single area of Oraibi

during the Snake Dance:

. . . Hitherto, everyman had chosen his own field, and moved to and fro wherever he liked — in front of his neighbor or someone else, kicking down another fellow's tripod and sticking his elbow in the next fellow's lens. Half a dozen or more Indian police led by the acting agent kept us in line, so we had to make the best of it.⁵

Soon thereafter, photography was restricted as other pueblos in New Mexico and many of these restrictions still apply.

Access to subject matter and the limitations or opportunities that access provides is a central element in the photography of and/or by Native Americans. Where the study of historic photographs reveals information about the relationship between the photographer and his or her subject, it also reveals the "impingement" of one culture on another.⁶ If this is understood to have a potential effect on the content of a photograph, it would seem likely that "insiders" (in this case, Native American photographers) would create a view of their subject that would be distinctive from a view of the same subject taken by someone outside the culture.

In the Southwest, Native American photographers have not only been filling in the documentary record, but they are also presenting a creative self portrait of contemporary Indian life. The distinctiveness of this view emerges in the variety and volumn of photographs taken, the subjects recorded, and the ways in which the subjects are portrayed. In addition, the omissions to the photographic record are of interest because those things not recorded in the 1980's often stand in marked contract to those things previously recorded by non-Indian photographers. Specifically, one finds little, if any, photography of ceremonials or religious activities.

In the realm of portrait photography, the relationship between photographer and subject is most readily apparent. While many non-Indian photographers have cultivated comfortable relationships with their subjects, less congenial examples also exist. In all cases, access to the "inner" world of the subject must be negotiated and is often quite limited to an outsider.⁷ This has certainly been the case for non-Indian photographers at Hopi. In contrast, while Native American photographers must also negotiate to obtain certain pictures, their access to potential subjects is without question much greater. This point is well illustrated by looking at the work of several native photographers working at Hopi.

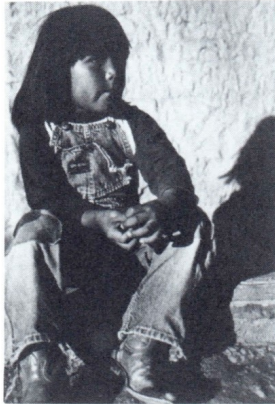


Figure 2. Hopi Child, 1980
by Owen Seumtewa (Hopi)



Figure 3. Drying Peaches,
1980 by Sam Minkler
(Navajo)

Owen Seumtewa is probably the best-known Native American photographer in the Southwest. He studied photography at Northern Arizona University and returned to the Hopi reservation in 1976. As Media Specialist to the Hopi Health Department, he served as photographer and consultant to the tribe in its documentation of villages, people and restoration projects on the reservation. Since then, he has continued taking pictures and has become particularly well-known for his portraits. In discussing his goals as a photographer, Seumtewa has stated that while he occasionally takes landscape and architectural shots, he is most interested in taking pictures that “other people can’t take” (meaning presumably, non-Hopis).

Most of Seumtewa’s portraits are commissioned, although significantly, he takes no money for his work. Most often, the Hopis who approach him want pictures of their parents or grandparents, and occasionally, they have requested pictures of themselves. In other cases, Seumtewa has approached people on his own. In all cases, he poses his subjects in or near their homes where they will feel most at ease. Within these settings, he selectively lights and frames his compositions, creating well-balanced, strong images (Figure 1).

Where the older, more traditional Hopis are often reluctant to be photographed (even by Native Americans), children are much less reticent. As a result, many pictures of Hopi children have been taken. A confidence and rapport emerges from these images that could only come from a close, privileged association (Figure 2). Not only are they engaging for their content, but they are important in their role of establishing a record of contemporary Hopi life.

The advantages of access to subject matter plays itself out in the documentation of traditional and cultural activities, as well as in portrait photography. While the resources are not as extensive for still photography as they are for video and film, they do exist. Some of Navajo photographer Sam Minkler’s pictures are good example. In Figure 3, he has pictured an older woman drying peaches “in the old way.” When asked if she would give permission to have her picture taken, she said, “Yes, as long as no one else sees you take it, and as long as the picture will be used for educational and not commercial purposes.” This was also the stipulation posed by the woman Minkler photographed making *piki* bread (Figure 4). Hopi photographer Freddie Honongva has also recorded documentary sequences, focusing here on the gathering of basketry materials (Figure 5).

Hundreds of video cassettes, films and photographs exist which similarly document traditional and



Figure 4. Making *Piki*, 1980
by Sam Minkler (Navajo)

contemporary cultural activities. These images are creating an invaluable record of contemporary “ways of doing things,” and are also preserving a distinctive view of culture in which the emphasis and view of what is important very often differs from the images recorded by outsiders. In Sol Worth’s and John Adair’s study of Navajo film-makers in 1966, for example, the authors found that not only did the young Navajo film-makers focus on different elements in a scene than they would have, but that the narrative constructions were also different.⁸ In just one example, nearly fifteen minutes of a twenty minute film on weaving were spent showing the weaver walking to and from her loom.⁹ Non-Indian documentaries of weaving, in contrast, have tended to focus on the process of weaving itself.

In another example, Native American consultants established the conceptual guidelines for the photography exhibit *The Urban Indian Experience: A Denver Portrait* (displayed at the Denver Museum of Natural History in 1978). The viewpoint presented was positive and stressed the variety and accomplishments of Denver’s urban Indians — a viewpoint quite different from the down-an-out image that is frequently highlighted in the non-Indian media (Figure 6). Omaha Indian Ernest Ricehill was a photographer for the project and the catalog text was written by Sioux consultant Michael Taylor.¹⁰

In a final example, a Papago photographer created a photo-essay on the Yavapai Indians of Fort McDowell, Arizona in 1980. The Fort McDowell Yavapai had been



Figure 5. Gathering Basketry Materials, 1980
by Freddie Honhongva (Hopi)



Figure 6. From *The Urban Indian Experience*, 1978
by Ernest Ricehill (Omaha)

threatened until 1981 with relocation if the Orme Dam site was selected for a Phoenix flood control project. The essay combined photographic images with poetry to present an encompassing view of Yavapai life, illustrating their attachment to the land and by association, their reluctance to leave it. Unlike much of the media coverage in Phoenix, these pictures did not show isolated individuals, but rather showed groups of people at work and play — clearly “at home” and connected to their physical environment. Although not published, the pictures were publicly displayed in churches throughout the state of Arizona.¹¹

In all of these examples, the views of Native American photographers have been distinctive from the views previously presented by non-Indians. Representing a range of technical proficiency, these images have presented a self-determined view of Indian “concerns and realities.”

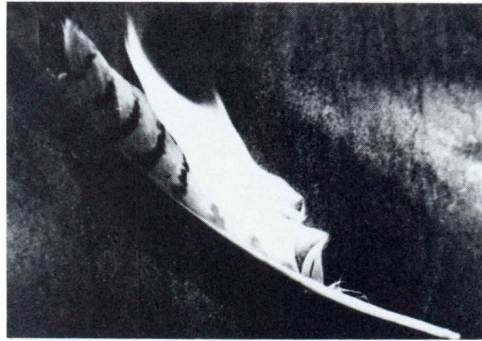
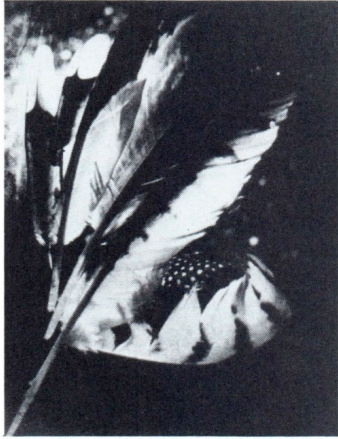
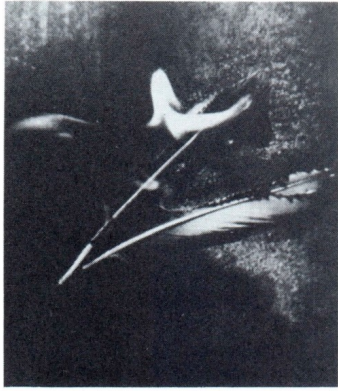
The third arena in which photography by Native Americans can be found to be distinctive is in the realm of “art” or “interpretive” photography. Like painting, sculpture and other art media, interpretive photography is self-expressive and is informed and influenced by an individualistic, private vision. Such work may or may not include direct reference to Native American subject matter. When it does, the results often stand out because of the conceptual blending between “traditional” or ethnic concepts and a modern interpretation. An example of this may be seen in Victor Masayesva’s *Rain Bird* series, subtitled: “An Exercise in Hopi Logic” (Figures 7-11).

In describing the *Rain Bird* series, Masayesva wrote a prose text that was published with the photographs in an issue of *Sun Tracks* (Department of English, The University of Arizona):

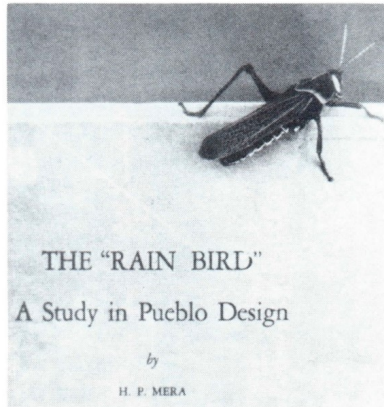
I was asked to explain:

I wanted to photograph a special image I had worked with *before*, so I planned the trip to Hopi: first small chores, then at least half a day for myself, I got a full day. All day I photographed these violent images and left pretty tired and irritated: not the light I like, clumsy footing, wrong speeds. . .

On the way home, the light falling in the evening time, I stopped in the canyon to check the horses’ water tank. Stepping through the gate I found this partially finished, partially eroded, Sparrow-Hawk. I recognized him, or it, right away. I threw it out of the tank earlier that year in Kwiya-muyow, when it was very dry. It was a dry time when the wind blew constantly. During that time he must have come there for water. I picture him then, blown there by a wind and drowned, probably deliberately.



Figures 7-11. Rain Bird Series (1-5), 1978 by Victor Masayesva (Hopi)



In any event, it was that same Sparrow-Hawk that lay there. I manipulated it so I could photograph it: a race between my need to record the feeling and the sun going down. I recorded one roll with about 12 pictures of the Hawk and returned him to the ground. Then went home. Almost. I returned and wrapped up the hawk in tissue paper, thinking I could choose an ideal light situation to record it in.

Home in Tucson, I checked by hawk and found the head had been lost somewhere, but not one wing. That made my roll of film special. And I began developing it all wrong, putting in a perma-wash for a moment, then quickly shifting to developer. Of that roll only one frame included all the information I wanted, even that one had fogging in the corners (which I cropped out). I thought I was finished, but immediately after I began to photograph the remaining fragile, wing with extreme difficulty: the wind blew, light changed, days changed. Out of frustration, I turned to photographing regular feathers in place of the wing: feathers in which happened to come along in my carving box. These became satisfying images and kept be in the lull of whatever was going on.

On my second trip home I took the wing to bury it properly, for, by this time my mind was focusing on the childrens' graves alongside the canyon edges, in the crevices and crags we used to pass by as children, on our way home. After Niman Tikiveh, they bury the pet eagles and hawks and their toys there too, alongside the canyon drop where the currents begin.

Then I lost the wing. And how to bury him now was becoming a real problem. I went through rolls of film experimenting with photographic illusion, opaque lighting and symbolic imagery to bury him. Beyond my budget, with remaining film, I turned to another subject and with a combination of feathers and fire, got what I wanted: a burial, a kind of freedom — his and mine.

Similarly, the grasshopper invited himself to a sitting, wanting to narrate the sequence of pictures by rasping in the palo verde, then falling into my image. And, of course, the book title by Mera found its way home. Thank you Mera.

I understand making rain is as involved.¹²

Much of Masayesva's other work is similar to the extent that he often combines visual images with writing — poetry mixing with strong compositions, either found or created. The success and artistic interest of this work comes among other things from its emphasis on commentary knowledge within the context of personal vision.

To conclude, the question arises as to why Native American photography is so little known outside of reservation communities, particularly given the variety and achievement of much of the work. One reason may be economic. With the exception of tribal newspaper

photographers, few Native Americans living on reservations will sell their photographs. As community members they respect the feelings of their relatives and friends who have for too long been sold to the outside world as curiosities. A dilemma thus exists which has the effect of inhibiting the exposure of many Native American photographers. Non-Indian photographers on the other hand, may work comfortably with their clients and give them copies of their pictures, but they will also sell the images in order to make a living. Under the best of circumstances, it is difficult to make a living as a photographer, and in light of perceived cultural restraints for many Native Americans, it becomes even more problematical.

Alternatives and/or companions to selling are exhibiting and publishing. In Arizona, the opportunities have been limited at best. As of 1981, only one of the five major museums in the state had ever exhibited Native American photography. During the 1970's the "Native American Photography Workshop" was started by the Central United Presbyterian Church in Phoenix and ran for six summers. Conceived as a creative extension to the Youth Corps program, high school students were trained in photography and their work was then exhibited at the Heard Museum and circulated by the Arizona Commission on the Arts.

In 1971, *Sun Tracks*, a Native American literary series, was published in Tucson and along with creative writing, frequently publishes photography. In 1982, *Sun Tracks* began to be co-published by The University of Arizona Press, greatly increasing the circulation of its volumes.

Within the last few years, Native American photography has become more widely recognized although it still remains obscure. In addition to art support organizations, tribal governments and urban Indian centers are showing their interest by supporting and writing grants. Tribal photo archives are also being established. It would seem then, that whether through interpretive or documentary images, Native American photographers are taking to heart the challenge of determining how their "concerns and realities" are presented. They are meeting this challenge by preserving a vision on film that will extend the existing historical record, enlarge upon their artistic repertoire and provide an encompassing view of contemporary Indian life.

