

Jeffrey Gibson (ed.), *An Indigenous Present*. New York, NY: DelMonico Books, 2023. 448 pages. ISBN: 9781636811024. \$108.50 hardcover.

*An Indigenous Present* is an expansive book that displays images of Indigenous artwork, design, film, and performance by contemporary artists and makers that have impacted the life and work of the publication's editor, Jeffrey Gibson. The book debuts a year before Gibson becomes the first Indigenous artist to be featured for a solo exhibition in the United States' pavilion at the Venice Biennale. It also maintains a heavy emphasis on high-resolution images and therefore resists the customary format and structure of many North American art books and exhibition catalogues. Moreover, there are no central headings to categorise dominant themes or narratives and it is refreshingly unburdened by a deluge of didactic writing. The endemic staleness of art publications today finds a potent contrast in *An Indigenous Present*, whose experimental methodology proposes a new way of approaching the curation of images on paper.

Gibson's selection of high-quality images featuring extraordinary artwork is organised and paired with others that run in a similar conceptual, political, spiritual, or aesthetic vein; take, for example, Wendy Red Star's appropriated book cover *Twin Peaks—or Bust #9* (2014) that appears alongside Cara Romero's stereotyped doll series *Amber Morningstar* (2019). Again, there is not an explanatory text to interpret the images yet, simply through their physical proximity, Gibson (and the artists) raise serious questions about the history of photographic misrepresentation and cultural exoticism of Indigenous nations in North America. Taken together, there are sixty-two artists and art collectives pictured in the book, comprising both emerging, mid-career, and well-established names that include Rebecca Belmore, Wally Dion, Nicholas Galanin, Nani Chacon, Brian Jungen, Dyani White Hawk, Marie Watt, and James Luna, to mention only a few. As a result, *An Indigenous Present* resonates with an electric sense of creativity and, in turn, speculates on the future of Indigenous art practices.

In his introductory statement, Gibson indicates that he does not intend for the book to be a comprehensive survey of current trends and tropes; rather, it convincingly maps "the field of contemporary art and culture by Native and Indigenous makers" (42). Of course, readers might naturally ponder the inclusion or exclusion of some contributors to the project; nevertheless, *An Indigenous Present* represents a profound labour of love that stems from Gibson's personal connections, collaborations, admiration, and respect. This is not to suggest, however, that it was not meticulously researched or rigorous in its construction. From July 21, 2021 to September, 2022, Gibson and managing editor Jenelle Porter conducted a series of online studio visits with each contributor. Nowhere is this remarkable archival record printed, though its intangible remnants are scattered across the pages through Gibson's thoughtful curation of images. Its omission harkens to something Carcross/Tagish curator Candice Hopkins mentions in her reflective interview with Gibson: "There's power in withholding and in keeping certain things to ourselves. And we've always done that" (278). Presumably, the transcriptions from these invaluable conversations might be published in a different book somewhere, someday.

Mulling over the book is a slow experience and there is plenty of time and space throughout its 448 pages to see and absorb its content. In addition to his introductory text, there are eight short essays, poems, interviews, autobiographical accounts, and a performance script. Without doubt, several of these will be cited in the future as serviceable documents in the fields of contemporary art, museology, art history, and curatorial studies. First, Philip Deloria's gripping "Charging Elk and the Refugee: Unanticipated Notes on Modern Indian Art" details the overlooked life of Lakota performer Charging Elk, who vanished during Buffalo Bill's 1905 tour of France only to resettle

in Southern France. It was there that he had an unlikely run-in with Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin, who was attempting to flee the terror of Nazi persecution. The entire story is an utterly convincing fabrication. Still, it looks closely at the ways in which Indigenous artists and makers can “indigenize” forms of colonial modernism that have been applied to or against them in the past; it is, as Deloria attests, “to make the modern one’s own” (p. 166). His words are meant to contextualise a number of works in the book that apply Indigenous knowledge and worldview to sculptural objects and installations; say, Brian Jungen’s striking *Men of my Family* (2010) or Post commodity’s monumental *Let Us Pray for the Water between Us* (2000). His essay makes clear that the capable hands of these artists can, in a clever reversal of circumstance, bend modernity to the “Indigenous will,” thus forging new meanings and trajectories (166) for Indigenous aesthetics.

Deloria’s essay is complemented by the uncompromising writings of Layli Long Soldier. By reliving the offensive language used by a non-Indigenous teacher in the classroom of her teenage son, Long Soldier composes a moving reflection on the bravery of Indigenous youth in speaking up and speaking out. As in her collections of poetry, she balances poeticness with criticality, pushing the limits of words and punctuation to the brink. This is further exacerbated by the text’s commingling of multiple genres, from autobiography and historical narrative to poetry and photo essay. The latter, which concludes her text, outlines the creative collaboration among mother, son, and auntie while underlining the significance of family and community. The caring ethos and affective tone of Long Soldier’s text is echoed elsewhere in the book through poignant works such as Tanya Lukin Linklater’s memorable *An amplification through many minds* (2019) or Anna Tsouhlarakis’s incisive *The Native Guide Project* (2019).

Gibson’s placement of Long Soldier’s text in the centre of the *An Indigenous Present* helps to build to the book’s finale, an earnest interview with the seminal French-Cree, Shoshone, and Salish artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith who enlightens the reader with the story of her early life in the arts. Their conversation soon transitions to the rejection of artists of Indigenous descent by early MFA studio programs, the tangled history of Indigenous women in the American feminist movement, the ongoing study of archival and tribal documents, and the overwhelming lack of scholarship on contemporary Indigenous art practices. By tracing the breadth of accomplishments and challenges faced by Smith in her career, they soon arrive at the present moment, one that necessitates change, self-determination, and expectancy. What follows are several more pages of impactful works by artists such as Anna Hoover, Nicholas Galanin, Sonya Kelliher-Combs, Natalie Ball, and others, which appear to centre the human or animal body as both political subject and artistic material.

*An Indigenous Present* fails to be categorised into traditional genres like exhibition catalogue or photo book, which is precisely what Gibson set out to achieve with this impressive project. Conflating a variety of genres, primarily through its use of Indigenous epistemology, the book offers a new, non-Western vision for the documentation and scholarship of contemporary Indigenous art and writing. Gibson’s project remains almost entirely self-reflective but there is nothing particularly wrong with that individual conceptualisation, especially when the historical documentation and scholarship on contemporary Indigenous art, especially in the United States, is lacking. As such, *An Indigenous Present* is useful both as an introduction for non-specialists to contemporary art made by Indigenous artists as well as a valuable contribution to the growing scholarship on Indigenous art and ideas.

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