

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

# The Griffin Museum shows 'Spirit'

An exhibition offers wide-ranging work from 10 Indigenous photographers

By [Mark Feeney](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 2, 2021, 2 hours ago



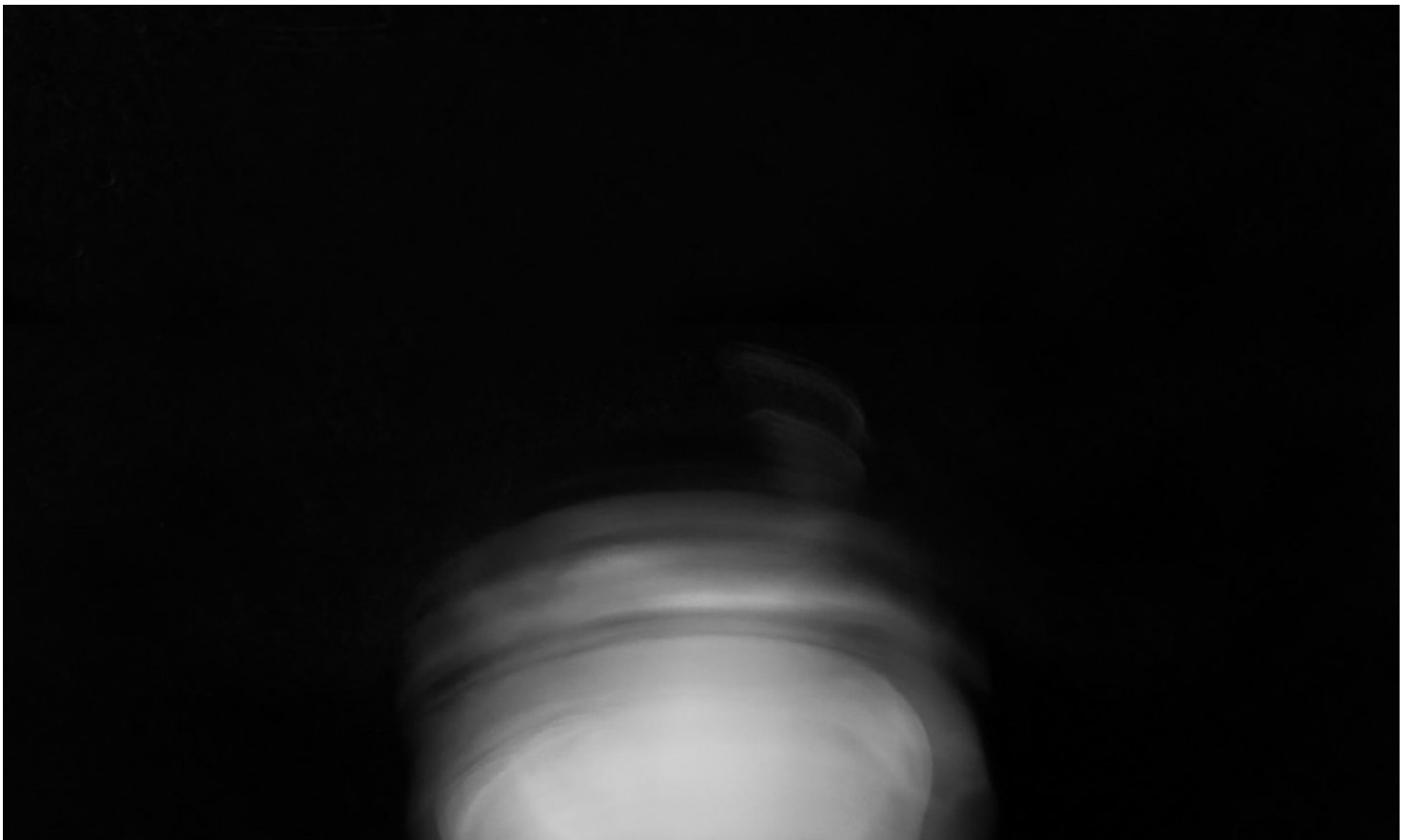
Meryl McMaster, "Edge of a Moment," 2017 MERYL MCMASTER

WINCHESTER — "Spirit," the main show currently at the Griffin Museum of

Photography, has a title that's vague and abstract. Its subtitle, "Focus on Indigenous Art, Artists, and Issues," is more informative. Yet it's also far from precise, which is as it should be.

Ten photographers chosen as indicative of white or Black or Asian-American contemporary culture would have a comparably imprecise, and challenging, task. The primary aim of each of the photographers is artistic, not argumentative or sociological, though in several cases argumentation comes in a close second.

Inevitably, history informs all the work to at least some degree. Walker Evans said that he wanted to show "what any present time will look like as the past." In one way or another, "Spirit" shows the past as it has evolved into the present. That past can be culturally rich and deeply sustaining. It can also be morally dark and immeasurably injurious.



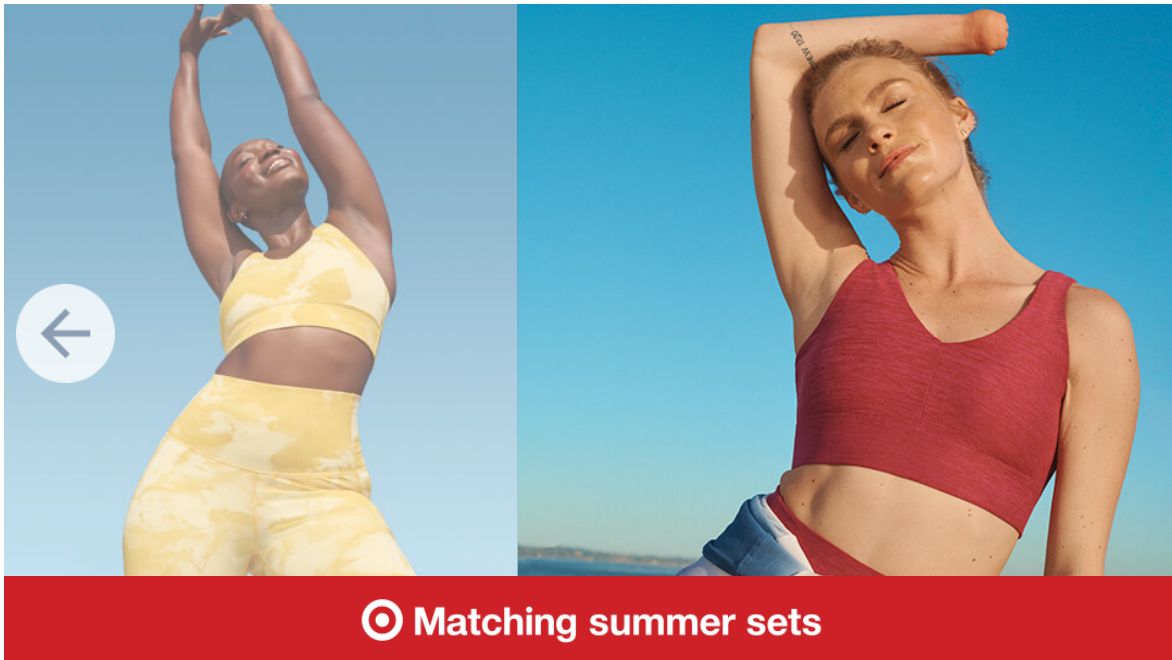


Donna Garcia, "Muscogee," 2018 DONNA MUSCOGEE

Sometimes the connection between past and present is explicit. [Donna Garcia](#), who curated “Spirit,” takes the Indian Removal Act of 1830 as inspiration for her series “Indian Land for Sale.” More often the connection is implicit, as with “Braiding Wounds,” from [Kali Spitzer](#) and Bubzee, who are partners as well as artistic collaborators. The series braids together Indigenous and queer culture. Yes, the traditional hair styling figures in several of the photographs.

For her series “As Immense as the Sky,” [Meryl McMaster](#) photographs herself at various ancestral sites and early settlements in Canada. Her 12 images in “Spirit” aren’t so much self-portraits as a straddling of performance and environmental art.

Wearing symbolic garb and props, McMaster aims to evoke rather than represent. Put another way, the representation is of emotion and memory rather than physical things.





Shelley Niro, "The Shirt #2," from "The Shirt Series." SHELLEY NIRO

[Shelley Niro](#), in “The Shirt Series,” also combines landscape, portraiture, and costume, but to very different effect. An Indigenous woman wears an American-flag bandana and a series of T-shirts with increasingly pointed messages — until we see her shirtless — then a white woman wears one of the shirts — then there are two photos of open space. The message is clear and forceful.

That’s true, too, of the more traditional portraits that [Tonita Cervantes](#) has in “Spirit,” five in all, taken on North Dakota’s Standing Rock Reservation. Similarly clear, if not quite as forceful — or successful — are the six photographs in [Jeremy Dennis’s](#) “Nothing Happened Here.” Each shows a blank-faced white person in various

everyday settings. The twist is that multiple arrows are sticking out of each individual. If nothing else, the long iconographic tradition of [Saint Sebastian](#) in Western iconography gets a new chapter.





Kiliii Yuyan, "Grief Mask, AB," 2018 KILIII YUYAN

[Kiliii Yuyan](#)'s photographs in "Spirit" come in two groups. Both are arresting. Eight color portraits show residents of Gambell, a town near Nome, Alaska, wearing papier-mâché masks each has fashioned. The masks work on several levels: as self-expression, as incongruity (what's a portrait without a face?), as allusion (to the work of [Ralph Eugene Meatyard](#)). Four photographs in and around Gambell are very different but no less distinctive. They're in color, but the colors are almost exclusively variations on white, gray, and blue (a bit of red in a playground leaps out). Meteorologically, as well as in their purity and almost-meditative beauty, they're distant kin to Catherine Opie's ["Icehouses."](#)



Pat Kane, from "Here Is Where We Shall Stay." PAT KANE

In his series “Here Is Where We Shall Stay,” [Pat Kane](#) looks at a community in Canada’s Northwest Territories. The color images convey a richly textured sense of lives lived amid striking natural beauty. There is also great natural beauty to be found, albeit in the background, in Will Wilson’s very different “Auto Immune Response (AIR).” The four examples from the series — wide-format manipulated color photographs — recall the work of the late Patrick Nagatani, who in 2015 had a memorable career retrospective at the Griffin. What their work has in common is Southwestern settings, a slightly crazed energy, and deadpan sense of the apocalyptic.





Will Wilson, from "AIR (Auto Immune Response)" WILL WILSON

There are three additional shows at the Griffin. Jacqueline Walter's "At the Edge of the Fens" consists of 15 10-by-10-inch photographs taken in and around Cambridge, England, and the Fenlands. Tightly framed and luscious in color, the images are deeply appealing. Vaune Trachtman's "Now Is Always" offers process as vision: the world seen as through a glass softly. Using the gravure method, Trachtman creates works that seem more like emanations than photographs. They're certainly distinctive, if also wanly mannered.



Jacqueline Walters, "At the Edge of the Fens, 31" JACQUELINE WALTERS

One way to think of Trachtman's images is as renderings of the operation of memory — how it can soften and blur (very different, of course, from the place of memory in so many of the works in "Spirit"). [Alayna N. Pernell](#) has hit upon a way to visualize that operation that's impressively simple visually and no less impressively complex

emotionally. At once sorrowful and forthright, her series “Our Mothers’ Gardens” confronts the long and much-fraught tradition of how photography has depicted Black women. Pernell does this by placing past and present within the same frame. She photographs her own hands holding, touching, and partially concealing old photographs (tintypes, snapshots). There’s a wondrous sense of intimacy — like Walters, Pernell frames her subjects very tightly — as we see her reaching out to the past and, quite literally, grasping it.



Vaune Trachtman, "Strand," from "Now Is Always," 2021. ©VAUNE TRACHTMAN

Note: The Griffin will be hosting an online discussion with Walters on June 3; one with Trachtman, on June 15; and an online panel June 24 with several of the photographers with works in “Spirit.”



Alayna N. Pernell, From "Our Mothers' Gardens," 2020 ALAYNA N. PERNELL

## **SPIRIT: Focus on Indigenous Art, Artists and Issues**

### **JACQUELINE WALTERS: At the Edge of the Fens**

## **VAUNE TRACHTMAN: Now Is Always**

## **ALAYNA N. PERNELL: Our Mothers' Gardens**

At Griffin Museum of Photography, 69 Shore Road, Winchester, through July 9. 781-729-1158, [griffinmuseum.org](http://griffinmuseum.org)

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