Life

A 14-year photography project paints Native Americans in a new, accurate light



Cover of Matika Wilbur's book, Project 562. Wilbur photographed Native American communities.
PHOTO COURTESY OF @MATIKAWILBUR ON INSTAGRAM

by Elijah Polance
STAFF WRITER
HE/HIM/THEY/THEM
elijah.polance@uconn.edu

Matika Wilbur, a Native American photographer and educator from the Swinomish and Tulalip tribes, visited the University of Connecticut's Dodd Center on Wednesday to speak about her work bringing awareness to Native American culture.

Wilbur came to UConn as the keynote speaker for Women's History Month for UConn's Women's Center, Native American Cultural Programs and the Department of Student Activities. The event was called "Seeds of Culture: Portraits and Stories of Native American Women." Chris Newell, director of the NACP, sang an original Indigenous song to raise energy in the room, and Elise Delacruz, interim director for the Women's Center, introduced Wilbur after.

At the start of the talk, Wilbur shared information about her Swinomish and Tulalip identity, which makes her one of the "Salmon People." She grew up in the state of Washington, but in 2012, she said she sold all her belongings and started living in her recreation vehicle to fulfill something she called "Project 562" — a plan to visit, document and photograph all of the federally recognized Native American tribes by the U.S. Department of the Interior. When the project began in 2012, Wilbur said there were 562 federally recognized Native American tribes, but the number has grown to 574.

"I sold everything in my Seattle apartment to visit, engage and photograph more than 500 tribal nations in what is now known as the United States, all in pursuit of one goal: to change the way we see Native America," Wilbur said.

Wilbur explained her process of photographing and the ethical concerns she keeps in mind while doing so. She said that she tries to give those she visited as much agency as possible, letting them decide where and how they wanted to be photographed. She described the relationship with those she photographs as "co-conspirators in the process."

"I didn't just take pictures," Wilbur said. "I think of it as building relationships, as developing kin. I traveled to communities, I sat with people, I listened to their stories, I asked them to speak to me in their own words."

Wilbur went through a slideshow of various portraits she took along her journey. For each photo, she discussed the person featured, going into their stories and her history of interacting with them. The locations shifted all around the U.S., from Alaska to Hawaii, from Florida to Maine, and everywhere in between. Among the portrait explanations were stories of a 91-year-old woman with 11 children who gave Wilbur parenting advice, a woman whose cancer went away after traditional Indigenous prayer and a humorous encounter with Joey Montoya, CEO of a fashion company that specializes in Indigenous designs.

After featuring what came out of Project 562, Wilbur talked about what inspired her to start it. She said she was invited to teach at a tribal school, where she was surrounded by tribal youth facing unique challenges from longstanding issues in the U.S., like settler colonialism, racism and erasure that made lives harder and undermined self-perception.

With these issues, Wilbur was asked by U.S. Senator Matt McCoy, D-Wash., to create a curriculum that would educate tribal youth. McCoy told her the curriculum would require materials made by Native Americans for Native Americans to teach kids about who they are.

But when Wilbur looked for images of Native Americans to show to youth, she found an abundance of stereotypes instead. Wilbur featured a brief video compilation of various misrepresentations of Native Americans, both in real-life scenarios like clothing appropriation and sports team logos and in media portrayals, like cartoons and animated movies.

"America continues in its historical amnesia, and instead of teaching trustworthy history or acknowledging our real humanity, the majority culture prioritizes American mythology, and rhetoric and visual propaganda to celebrate ideas like pioneering and westward expansion, even manifest destiny," Wilbur said.

Wilbur said she cares most about how these media fixations impact how her family and children get treated by others. She said that reduction of Native American culture and inaccurate representation fuels everyday microaggressions they may face.

"And the truth is, the way that we see ourselves affects the way that we treat ourselves," Wilbur said. "And so if we're hoping for a better outcome for our students, if we are in the business of creating hope for kids, then it has to begin with narrative, in my opinion."

Wilbur collected her photography work for Project 562 into the book "Project 562: Changing the Way We See Native America," which she has worked with others to distribute around the U.S., especially to tribal schools.

Wilbur also addressed the prevalence of violence against Native American women, who she said are 2.5 times more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than any other population group and are murdered at rates 10 times higher than the national average.

"Four out of five Native women will experience violence in their lifetime," Wilbur said. "So for us, it is not really a question of 'if,' but rather the daunting question of 'when.' Violence against Native women is a public health emergency that has gone unanswered for far too long."

Wilbur said she started her podcast, called "All My Relations," to feature Native American women's voices and address these systemic gendered issues.

Wilbur closed her talk by discussing the process of her ancestors regaining the right to safely use canoes near Seattle and by singing a song with her daughter that connected to the story.

Emma Cleary, an eight-semester student majoring in speech, language and hearing sciences, and a staff member at the Women's Center, said she was most interested in Wilbur's dive into the violence Native women face.

"She put a quote on the screen that said how we treat our land is how we treat our women, and I think that was really moving because I think it's true," Cleary said. "So I liked that kind of metaphor because it shows that as they destroying the culture, you know, they're destroying the culture, but it also perpetuated that violence against women."

Amber Hwang, a sixth-semester English and environmental sciences student, made use of the Alternative Break program through UConn during spring break, during which she visited Oklahoma and learned more about Cherokee culture. The experience made her want to learn more about Native American culture, and she said this made the event seem interesting to her.

"I really liked the photography, and being able to share narratives through their own native journeys throughout the country and share their stories," Hwang said.

A selection of Wilbur's photos from Project 562 are currently on display at the Dodd Center.

Take a Listen: Newly released music

by Crystal Thacker
CONTRIBUTOR
SHE/HER/HERS
ngk24001@uconn.edu

We all have signature artists for our different playlists, and whenever they release new music, we're over the moon, counting the days until it's released after pre-saving the album. Throughout this article, I'll be sharing with you some recently released albums in hopes of expanding your already vast playlists.

First, we have "Werewolf" by The Brook & The Bluff. This relatively small band is often described as an indie-folk, soul and rock band. Released March 6, "Werewolf" has 10 tracks, coming to about 33 minutes of playtime. Many of these songs fit into that indie rock category but may also remind some of mild country.

Next, we have an album by Mitski, an alternative and indie artist who originally gained traction on TikTok in 2020 and 2021 with her hit song "Washing Machine Heart." Her newest album "Nothing's About to Happen to Me," was released Feb. 27 and contains 11 tracks, totaling at 34 minutes of playtime. The songs certainly fit into her genre and some remind me of other alternative songs like "Let Down" by Radiohead.

Next is "Mt Tam," released on Jan. 30, by Jordy Searcy, an indie-pop artist who kickstarted his career thanks to his audition for "The Voice." Even though he is labeled as an indie-pop artist, you can also find religious pieces throughout his discography. "Mt Tam" has 10 songs and runs for 30 minutes.

For a different pair of genres — hip-hop and pop-rap — is Jack Harlow with his album "Monica." Jack Harlow gained popularity after being featured on Lil Nas X's song, "Industry Baby." After a few years of releasing singles and some collaboration with other artists , Harlow comes back with this nine-track album, totaling about 28 minutes.

To follow the same tone, we have Don Toliver. Toliver was recently featured in "F1: The Movie" on a song with Doja Cat, but he also released the album "OCTANE" on Jan. 30. Blending hip-hop and R&B, this album contains 18 songs, coming to about 49 minutes of playtime. It also features many artists, including popular rapper Travis Scott, who originally featured Tolliver on "CAN'T SAY" from his album "ASTROWORLD."

Next, released March 20, making it the most recent, is "ARIRANG" by BTS. After four long years, this beloved K-Pop group reunites, blending hip-hop, pop, and EDM in this 14-track album, coming to 41 minutes of playtime. One song of note on this album is "No. 29." Upon first listen it may not sound like much, but it is actually the ringing of The Great Bell of Seongdeok, South Korea's twenty-ninth national treasure.

And finally, to finish it off, released by Danny L Harle on Feb. 13 is the album "Cerulean." Harle has been put into the dance and electronic genre, which is supported by this album's contents. For this album, Harle acts more as a producer, creating music while other musicians provide the vocals. Large and small artists alike are featured on this album to fill this role, just a few being PinkPantheress, Dua Lipa, Clairo and Oklou.

While these are the only albums mentioned, I'm sure many more have been released that I'm not aware of. In addition, there are a few albums expected to come out soon, speculated or confirmed, like Olivia Rodrigo's third album or Conan Gray's "Wishbone Deluxe."

CLIPART COURTESY OF CREATIVE COMMONS



Mitski performing on stage. She was scheduled to perform six nights in New York City.

PHOTO COURTESY OF @MITSKILEAKS ON INSTAGRAM