

# Photo exhibit explores issue of Native American identity

**BY TRAVIS GULBRANDSON**  
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The history between American Indians and photography is a complicated one, and the difficult issues and questions it raises will be explored at the John A. Day Gallery through Jan. 30, 2013.

“Picturing Native: Photographs from Edward Curtis, Horace Poolaw and Zig Jackson” went on display Dec. 20 in the gallery, which is located in the Warren M. Lee Center for Fine Arts on the USD campus.

Essentially a fine art photography exhibit, it includes the work of three different photographers from three different photographic periods of the 20th century.

“Hopefully, the viewer will come in and see how the depiction of the American Indian has changed over that period of time, and really that there is such an interesting relationship between the photographic medium and the depiction of American Indians,” said Alison Erasmus, director of the University Art Galleries and curator of the exhibit.

“Picturing Native” features a small selection of photographs by Edward Curtis from his study, “The North



The fine art exhibit “Picturing Native: Photographs from Edward Curtis, Horace Poolaw and Zig Jackson” will be on display at the John A. Day Gallery in the Warren M. Lee Center for Fine Arts on the USD campus through Jan. 30, 2013.

American Indian (1907-1930),” which are on loan from the University Libraries Archives and Special Collections at USD.

“Curtis treated his project ... as a way to preserve what he thought was a vanishing race,” Erasmus said. “He felt like his photographs had a social utility.”

Despite its intent, Curtis’ work has come under criticism for maintaining stereotypes,

as well as its lack of input from the subjects themselves.

“Because Curtis’ work was so problematic and political for some viewers, it’s best to contextualize it, and I thought, ‘What better way to contextualize that than showing it with two other examples of photographic works that explore indigenous identity?’” Erasmus said.

The second photographer is Horace Poolaw, a member of the Kiowa tribe of Oklahoma, who died in 1984.

Poolaw’s work depicts his family and friends in their daily lives in Oklahoma during a transitional period of assimilation from the 1930s through the 1950s.

Erasmus worked directly with his family in securing prints for the exhibition.

“The family was very welcoming, and wanted to participate in the show with these pictures that

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have never come to South Dakota to my knowledge,” she said. “It’s a really rich opportunity to see the Poolaw work in person for the first time.”

The third photographer is Zig Jackson of the Manan, Hidatsa and Arikara tribes.

“Zig’s work is really a counter-thesis to Edward Curtis’ work,” Erasmus said. “He understands how Curtis’ photographs in particular have been used to develop and maintain stereotypes of American Indians, and he

deconstructs that with his photography, but also shares a playful mocking element that you see in Horace Poolaw’s photography.”

Erasmus said it’s not uncommon to hear visitors giggling at certain points of the exhibition, particularly around Jackson’s work.

“(Picturing Native) starts off kind of somber and sad, and these photographs by Curtis are very beautiful, but he depicts them as a defeated race,” she said. “You don’t

see a lot of joy, and you don’t really know what the people in the photographs thought about it, because he was treating them as ‘others’ and photographing them through a colonial lens.

“So, you start to see through the exhibit that there is an empowerment that happens when indigenous groups pick up a camera and take their own images and form their own identifies through that,” she said.

In addition to the photographs themselves, “Picturing Native” will feature two lectures from Jackson and Linda Poolaw, daughter of Horace Poolaw, along with a reception at the Day Gallery from 5-7:30 p.m. on Friday, Jan. 25.

Jackson will discuss contemporary photography at 3 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 24, while Poolaw will discuss her father’s work at 3 p.m. Jan. 25.

Erasmus said the lectures should be both informative and entertaining.

“(Jackson) is both an insider and an outsider,” she said. “He is an American Indian, but he also goes to other reservations, he goes to other tribal ceremonies, and so he will kind of oscillate between those two positions. He notes that that’s always really hard. It’s very difficult, because you don’t want to make the mistakes that Edward Curtis made. You don’t want to pretend that you aren’t the subjective observer, and that everything is from your point of view.”

Linda Poolaw is “an amazing storyteller,” Erasmus said.

“She can talk about every single photograph taken, because these are of her family members. She knew these people personally. She has

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*Thank You*  
The family of Richard Bottolfson would like to extend our heartfelt thanks and appreciation for all the support shown to our family during the time of our loss. Thank you for the kind words of sympathy, prayers, food, flowers and memorials. Special thanks to Pastor Trisha for the beautiful service, Kober Funeral Home for their services, and to the Trinity Lutheran and Concordia Lutheran Funeral servers. We are truly blessed to live in a community like Vermillion with all the love and support shown to us.  
Darlene Bottolfson  
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