



MATIKA WILBUR

Tulalip, Swinomish

1984- • PHOTOGRAPHER AND STORYTELLER

Matika Wilbur is a keeper of stories. As a photographer, writer, and visual storyteller, she has spent more than ten years traveling throughout Indian Country, with the goal of photographing all of the tribes in what is currently known as the United States. Her project, called Project 562 for the 562 tribes that were federally recognized when she began in 2011, has the goal of “changing the way we see Native America.” Born in Anacortes, Washington, and raised on her homelands in Swinomish, Matika grew up close to her community and cultural practices. Trained as a photographer at the Brooks Institute in California, she began her career in fashion and commercial work in Los Angeles. Before focusing on photography as a tool for social justice, Matika returned to her community and taught primary education at the Tulalip tribal school for five years. It was there, working with her Native students, that she realized they had no access to images and stories of the power of Native people, only a curriculum that relied on stereotypes. With the guidance of her elders and others in her community, she sold everything in her Seattle apartment and set out on the road, eventually moving full time into “The Big Girl,” her RV, to continue her journey.

As she travels across Indigenous homelands, Matika creates stunning and powerful portraits of community members in every Native nation she visits. Historically, photographs of Native people were used to document a “vanishing race,” and subjects were often posed and given costumes to wear that reflected what the public thought Natives “should” look like. To subvert this history, Matika asks her participants to wear whatever they like and to choose the location of their portrait. In addition to photographing her subjects, Matika also engages in long sharing sessions with them to hear what stories and causes they would like the public to know about. Through this work, she has learned not only about family and tribal histories and the effects of colonialism on everything from ceremony to food systems but also about the ways that communities have resisted, revitalized, and found joy through cultural practices.

Matika shares these photos and stories in museum and gallery shows, as well as on her website and social media. She also travels extensively to give talks to audiences large and small, Native and non-Native, to share the lessons, voices, and photos from her journeys. She says, “My dream is that our children are given images that are more useful, truthful, and beautiful.”

In addition to her speaking and artwork, she is the co-creator and co-host of *All My Relations*, a podcast that builds on her years of learning from other Indigenous people. The show focuses on the idea that relationships are foundational to Native people—their relationships to the land, to nonhuman relatives, and to one another.