

Kali Spitzer

## AN EXPLORATION OF RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE

Curated by  
Glenn Alteen



*An Exploration of Resilience and Resistance* is about identity, culture, strength, vulnerability, and love—these images are about resilience and resistance. In this series, Kali Spitzer uses tintype photography to capture her community of mostly Indigenous and mixed-heritage people, while challenging preconceived notions of race, gender, and sexuality.

Tintype or ferrotype photography was a product of the mid 1800s and most popular during the US Civil War. The medium persisted into the twentieth century at fairs and carnivals as tourist photography, and more recently has been revived as novelty or art photography. Tintype was the first real populist form of photography, making photographs available to working-class people. It's hard to look at tintypes now and not be thrust back into the colonial era, and many of Spitzer's photographs look like they could have been shot at a rodeo or powwow, retaining that populist leaning. But the artist's use of this type of photography that is so tied to the colonialist project to produce images of decolonialism and empowerment is subversive and strategic.

6  
Kali Spitzer, *Kiniaii*, 2016, digital scan of tintype, archival C-print, 30" x 40"  
7  
Kali Spitzer, *Cora-Allen Wickliffe and Son Chaske-waste Twiss*, 2018, digital scan of tintype, archival C-print, 30" x 40"

## NURTURING RESILIENCE: THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF KALI SPITZER

Henri Robideau



I am arrested by Kali Spitzer's photographs. I am stopped in my tracks, staring. Time need not hurry. A love vibe lives here. Good medicine.

The richly toned faces in these tintypes have an edge of historical depth to them, as if they have emerged from the primordial days of photography, but with eyes speaking witness to contemporary lives. These photographs span the generations.

This body of work, titled *An Exploration of Resilience and Resistance* (2015–), addresses the multifaceted concerns of "identity, culture, strength, vulnerability, and love," says Spitzer in her artist statement for her exhibition at grunt gallery. "I photograph my community of primarily Indigenous and mixed-heritage people, challenging preconceived notions of race, gender, and sexuality," Spitzer tells us, adding, "I'm showing who we are today, bringing light to our stories and creating a space for us to be seen and heard, defining ourselves, making it clear how we want to be represented."

While the collective portfolio of the *Resilience and Resistance* photographs relates to community, the individual images focus on personal identity. Spitzer says, "Every photograph, every person, has a story to tell, and I am supporting them to tell these stories through their portrait. I believe that each image I take is a collaboration between the person I am photographing and myself. I wouldn't be able to create the images I do without trust. This is an essential element of my work—giving a safe space for the individual to be seen, heard, and documented the way that they want to be represented."

In the gallery presentation, most of the portraits are accompanied by a recording of the sitter's voice. These spoken words reinforce the tradition of oral history, with variations ranging from poetic expression to ancestral reflections. Spitzer explains, "The viewer is urged to look right at us and listen to our stories. I think that hearing somebody's voice is really important, and a lot of people use their Indigenous language to introduce themselves."

Henri Robideau is a photographer and cultural narrator who lives and works in Vancouver.

The interpersonal, “looking right at us” aspect of these tintypes is unavoidable. In most cases, the sitter’s eyes meet those of the viewer. “That is my preference,” says Spitzer, “and I have mixed feelings on this. But sometimes when people aren’t looking at the lens, the image could then be interpreted as objectifying. Because so much of my work is about being seen and being heard, there is a lot of value in staring straight into that person’s eyes.”

The search for identity in these photographs begins with the photographer. Kali Spitzer is Kaska Dena from Daylu (Lower Post, BC) on her father’s side, and Jewish from Transylvania, Romania, on her mother’s. She spent her early childhood with both parents in Whitehorse and then Yellowknife, and after age six, with her mother in Victoria. She says, “I’m very linked to both of my parents, and feel strongly that people also include that I’m Jewish, because I often find they only want to hear about the fact that I’m Kaska Dena, and I have to go chasing them saying no, you’ve only got half my lineage. I visited the North a few times with my mother when I was younger, but started going back up by myself when I was nineteen. I’d say that’s when I got to spend a lot of time with my family and get to know everyone in that context of my life. That’s when I started documenting my people, which is another huge part of my work that I feel passionately about.”

The people represented in Spitzer’s portraits are drawn from her community of family, friends, fellow students, and artist colleagues. “My community is diverse and includes Indigenous people who grew up immersed in their culture, knowing exactly who they are and where they come from,” she explains. “It also includes Indigenous people who grew up away from their land and their community for many different reasons, including the effects of colonization, residential schools, and lateral violence. Many of our parents were stolen at a young age, ripped away from their land and placed in the horrendous institution of residential schools, which has created a huge gap in passing down our cultures.”

Rebuilding, reconnecting, and nurturing resilience are ideas imbedded in Kali Spitzer’s photography: “Too often, Indigenous women and non-binary communities are not heard or seen in the way we define and experience ourselves in society. I am working to redress this by creating images of contemporary Indigenous people from an Indigenous perspective.”

Spitzer achieves this with great beauty, honesty, and empathy. Citing just one example from the *Resilience*

and *Resistance* series, a head and shoulders portrait of Chemehuevi artist and photographer Cara Romero radiates an organic timeless glow, drawing the viewer into the well of dark eyes, while the audio track’s poetic narrative told by Romero’s soft voice weaves together life’s experiences, a people’s existence, nature’s perpetual cycle, the eternity of the land, and love for lives created. One cannot escape unmoved from this work.

8



The surface of Spitzer’s portraits have a rough-hewn, swirling fluidity, which results from the tintype’s hand-applied wet collodion emulsion, an elaborate process that dominated the early days of photography, from about 1850 to 1880, and has recently seen a revival. One of its key characteristics is the orthochromatic rendering or disproportionate darkening of warmer skin tones. Spitzer’s use of this anachronistic technique imbues her work with an ambiance of history, a wonderful harmonic to the audio narratives of people telling their generational stories.

Because the tintype must be developed immediately after being exposed, there is an element of instant gratification where both collaborators—the photographer and the sitter—see the result at the same time. This can be a shocking revelation: “I have that reaction, too, with tintypes. Also, the harsh lighting they require accentuates wrinkles, and sometimes people are taken aback at first. But then a minute later, they actually really love it, and that’s a beautiful moment. I want people to feel empowered and good about themselves when they look at their image, that’s the part I love the most.”

8

Kali Spitzer, *Cara Romero*, 2016, digital scan of tintype, archival C-print, 30" x 40"

9

Kali Spitzer, *Holland Andrews*, 2018, digital scan of tintype, archival C-print, 30" x 40"



9