# *Stitched: Merging Photography and Textile Practices*

Dana Claxton Audio Tour
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**Dana Claxton**

The history of photographic portraiture with Indigenous peoples as the subject has a deeply problematic, racist, and colonial nature. Often relegated to the disciplines of ethnography, anthropology, and archeology, these images carry a sense of what has passed. The very apparatus of the camera assumes a violent function highlighting the power differences between who is in front of and behind the camera, the lack of consent of the subject to the elaborate and falsified staging of scenes. The very act of photographing becomes a statement of archiving what is assumed to be or become extinct devoid of all causal context, the cause of which is often instigated by the very culture that photographs. From tattoos to regalia to artistic motifs, the individual is reduced to a collection of signs so the white man could easily identify categories.

Artist and academic Dana Claxton, who is of the Wood Mountain Lakota First Nation, has flipped this historical imbalance on its head. In her work, Indigenous people are both the photographed and the photographer, and such images emphasize lasting presence, rather than impending absence, of Indigenous life. Through text, video, photography, performance, Claxton, as noted by curator Grant Arnold, "[reclaims] history and [asserts] an Indigenous presence within it." Arnold continues that even in Claxton's early works, there was a usage of disrupting familiar imagery.

The two works within the exhibition from the *Headdress* series ask us to directly confront this disruption. We are so familiar with the immediacy of the face and thus the sitter's identity within the genre of portrait photography. Here, in *Headdress – Connie* and *Headdress – Jeneen*, the only immediate identifying features of the individuals is in the name attributions of the works' titles. They are obscured by the beaded fashions proliferating from the face and torso with animal, floral, and geometric patterns. As if masking the individuals, Connie and Jeneen, the viewer must contend with only the beading which traditionally have transmitted individual, family, regional, and national histories and stories. Connie's image exemplifies her own handbeaded pieces and Jeneen's image exhibits beaded designs spanning three generations from Old Crow, Yukon, and Vuntut Gwich'in First Nations.

Claxton pays tribute to the legacies of the Sioux peoples of the Great Plains of North America through transmission rather than through archive. The history of beading in Native American cultures predates European contact and colonization for thousands of years.

Historically beads made of stone, bone, and shells were traded and used as currency, along with being fundamental to textile innovations with the porcupine quill work of the Plains Indians. In the nineteenth century, European traders brought glass beads, also known as "seed beads", produced in South and Central Europe, to exchange with Indigenous peoples in North America leading to its use in a variety of textile objects, for example headbands, saddles, bandoliers. As beadwork was within the domain of women's work, it gave Indigenous women avenues for actively participating in cultural production and transmission via beaded regalia as well as economic opportunities through trading other beaded works beyond their own communities. And through Claxton's *Headdress* series, we can see that beadwork is celebrated beyond the Great Plains, as with Jeneen's heritage from the Yukon, Connie's Okanagan and Tsartlip heritage, and contemporary beadwork resurgence in the eastern seaboard of North America.

These almost lifesize images are projected on what Claxton calls a "firebox", a color transparency photograph mounted and backlit on a lightbox, giving these images a monumental feel. Unlike the archival portrait, these portraits literally bring the subject to the forefront, creating an immediacy for the viewer. Anishinaabe author Gerald Vizenor's idea of "survivance" comes to mind, in which when situated within a continuous program of erasure, Claxton's portraits are an act of assertion of Indigenous existence, active refusal of traditional power structures, and bold challenge to the image of Indigeneity in the minds of the oppressor.