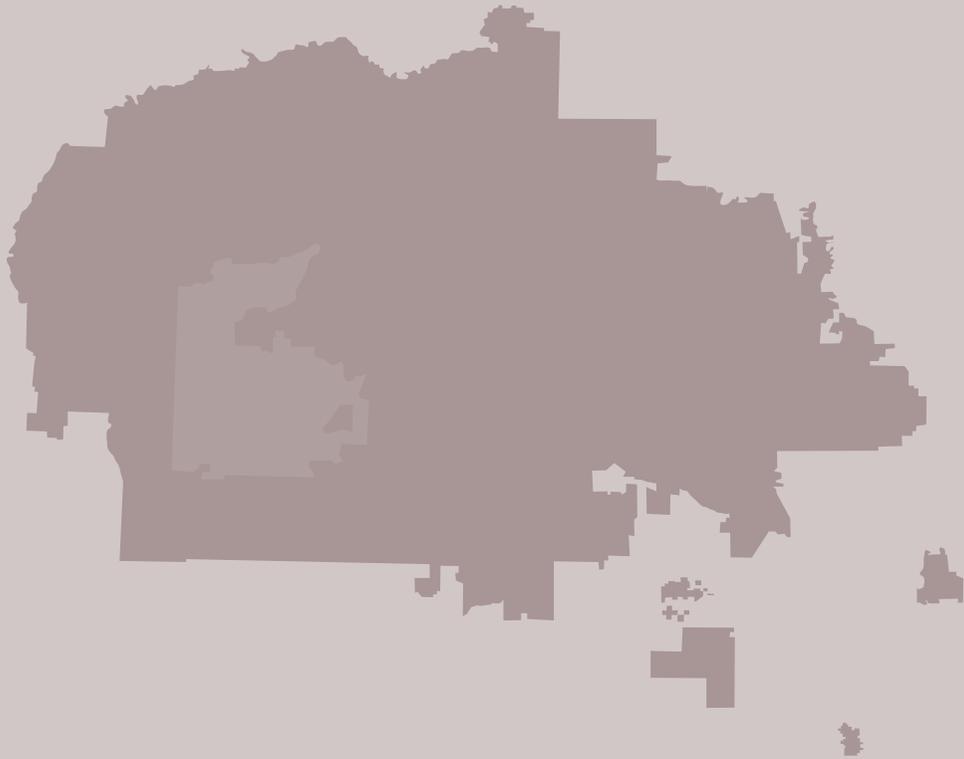




Will Wilson: AIR/Survey



Visual Arts Center
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A LIGHT WIND BLOWS, bringing the smallest respite from the heat of the beating sun. I notice that my shoulders are starting to turn pink—I touch the skin and see a trail of white left by my fingertips for a moment or two, before the blood rushes back. The heat is astounding. Even having grown up in Texas, I am surprised by the dry intensity of this landscape. All around me are red rocks and blue sky. In the middle of it is a vast, gray field of stone that sticks out like a sore thumb from my vantage point on a hill, though from the highway nearby it is all but invisible. I have traveled here with Will Wilson (Diné/ Navajo) to the edge of the Navajo Nation. From the hill we can see where borders meet between the reservation and the United States, though the land looks no different from one side to the next. I am reminded of the popular saying, “We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us.” Political demarcations hold little meaning on Indigenous lands.

And we are all on Indigenous lands.



The wind picks up and I look over to see the shade on Wilson's camera flapping upwards and dangerously close to blowing away. On his left is a barbed wire fence and a steep drop down to the field of stones below: no man's land. The landscape is spread out in a seemingly impossible arrangement of vectors and planes that lend the whole area a sense of careful precision. We both know that underneath those rocks is a different story, the one that brought us here today. We are in Halchita just inside the edges of the Navajo Nation, adjacent to the small town of Mexican Hat, Utah. The scene in front of us is known as the Mexican Hat Disposal Cell and was created in 1995 as part of the Uranium Mill Tailings Remedial Action Program in the U.S. Department of Energy. That year, the U.S. government buried 4.4 million tons of radioactive tailings from the surrounding community (including mining waste, processing facilities, a school building, homes, and other structures infiltrated by radiation) in a pit covering 68 acres in the desert.¹ From the nearby tourist attraction of Monument Valley just twenty-five miles away, you'd never know it was there.

¹ "Mexican Hat Uranium Disposal Cell, Utah," Land Use Database, The Center for Land Use Interpretation, accessed November 5, 2020, clui.org/ludb/site/mexican-hat-uranium-disposal-cell.

Wilson brought me here to see and photograph one of the over 500 identified abandoned uranium mines on the Navajo Nation that are in various states of treatment by the U.S. government. These sites—some so large they encompass the towns surrounding them, and others just holes in the ground—are remnants of an era of nuclear weapons development and testing that have left the region with a legacy of toxicity and destruction. Uranium was mined heavily throughout the Navajo Nation beginning in the early 1940s, when the United States Government sought to build and successfully detonate the world's first atomic bomb. As the radioactive material was extracted and processed by mostly Navajo miners, its particles nestled in their skin, clothing, hair, and lungs, where they would bring it back to their families. Homes built from mining refuse—known as "hot homes"—slowly poisoned their inhabitants. Entire households became radioactive. Water sources that sustained whole communities were contaminated with radioactive waste. In the end, there was no end, and the Diné—known widely as the Navajo—continue to experience the effects of radiation poisoning through heightened rates of infertility, cancers, and death.





The Mexican Hat Disposal Cell is a strangely beautiful and horrific thing to behold. It conjures notions of alien interventions on the land, or the weak heroism of the Earthworks movement in 20th century American art. It leaves you with an intense sense that something very wrong has occurred. The site is north of the Diné community of Halchita, UT and on the banks of the San Juan river—a vital resource for this arid region. Water is Life and the absurdity of a toxic waste dump in this place is irrepressible. I am compelled to bear witness to the power of the Mexican Hat Disposal Cell and challenged to represent it in a manner that might convey its significance. So many issues intersect at this place, and I have used a variety of techniques and processes in an effort to develop a kind of new Indigenous cartography to communicate its complexity. By combining the wet-plate collodion photographic process with ground-based and aerial digital photography, I reference a history that visually codified a settler nation's imperialist expansion alongside present-day environmental desecration. The Mexican Hat Disposal Cell has also served as a site to bridge two intersecting projects: the Auto Immune Response series and Survey, or Connecting the Dots, which is a photographic survey of abandoned uranium mines on the Navajo Nation. — WW

Wilson grew up in the 1970s and 1980s in a similar nuclear landscape near the Rare Metals Mine outside of Tuba City, AZ, on the western edge of the Navajo Nation. The mine at that point had become a playground for local children (Wilson included), who used its crumbling mill and evaporation ponds as a backdrop for their childhood adventures. Wilson returned to this site years later to photograph the location for a new series of photographs titled *Survey*, also known as *Connecting the Dots* (2019–ongoing). As the title indicates, in this project Wilson attempts to survey the hundreds of abandoned uranium mines within and along the borders of the Navajo Nation in an attempt to create a visual record of the largely overlooked history of resource extraction there. Some of these places, like Rare Metals and Mexican Hat, have been designated as “Superfund” sites by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, making them among the most toxic places in the country.

Having spent his formative years living in the western portion of the Navajo Nation with his mother’s family, Wilson intimately understands the physical, cultural, and ecological trauma that the Diné have been forced to bear due to histories of resource extraction. Even so, in his *Survey* photographs, Wilson highlights the stark beauty of the Navajo ancestral homelands known as Dinétah. Using vibrant coloring, deep contrasts, and mixed photographic processes ranging from wet plate collodion to digital photography, Wilson captures vivid glimpses of a complex world that is both dazzling and haunted. His aestheticized landscapes speak to a longer history of landscape survey photography that began in the U.S. in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when photographers like William Henry Jackson, Timothy H. O’Sullivan, Carleton E. Watkins, and others poured westward in order to capture images of landscapes for visual and economic consumption. These images often erased the Indigenous inhabitants of these spaces, giving the impression that lands were uninhabited and available for taking. In more recent continuations of this tradition, photographers have turned to devices such as helicopters, planes, and drones to transport cameras high above the land to capture birds-eye perspectives that imbue landscapes with a detached sense of domain. *Survey* cites these various traditions of survey photography while also pointing to the detrimental ecological practices they precipitated.



Four miles to the East of Tuba City, AZ, this radioactive waste disposal cell is just up grade from the Moenkopi Wash watershed. A major concern is that contamination will migrate into the Moenkopi Wash, a vital water source that irrigates the cornfields of Curley Valley below Tuba City. Resident Rose Williams—a farmer and activist—cultivates non-GMO corn along the Moenkopi Wash that is the source of the Taada’diin, or sacred corn pollen, used in this exhibition. She currently lives about a mile from the Rare Metals site. My grandfather also kept cornfields in this foodshed, now threatened by toxic desecration. — WW





Auto Immune Response / Survey 1 documents the work of the AIR protagonist as he calibrates his 6 prop, DJI Matrice 600 Pro drone at his campsite in the Valley of the Gods. The drone's larger payload capacity has enabled the protagonist to fly a higher resolution camera for his new Indigenous cartography. This image begins to answer a critical question found at the intersection of two photographic projects: How can a project based in a politics of imagination co-exist and inform a documentary survey focused on real-world environmental violations? This work also shares the blending of digital and historic photographic processes as it tells its anachronistic tale. — WW



The longer-standing *Auto Immune Response (AIR)* series (2004–ongoing), converges with the newer *Survey* project in the same cultural and geographic sphere of Dinétaah. Central to both projects is a strategy of response that allows Wilson to counter established historical narratives of Indigenous peoples as past-tense. *AIR*, like *Survey*, highlights the ugly histories layered onto Indigenous landscapes by drawing viewers in through evocative photographs. *AIR* defies popular tropes of the “vanishing Indian” and instead shows a post-apocalyptic future where a Diné man known only as “the protagonist” is the lone survivor. We follow this figure as they wander through landscapes of detritus and decay. Though the protagonist takes Wilson’s form, they are more aptly a projection of Wilson’s mind into a speculative future—a performance of a future self. Wilson’s speculations also take the form of a series of structures that together form an architecture of apocalypse. *AIR Lab* is a skeletal steel hogan—a reference to the customary Diné dwelling that serves multiple purposes between home, shelter, and ceremony—and is transformed in one iteration into a greenhouse filled with



Indigenous plant life, and another into a sanctuary for the protagonist. A new tower-like structure designed for the Visual Arts Center references the tower that lifted the infamous Gadget bomb during the Trinity nuclear test on July 16, 1945. In this exhibition, however, Wilson transforms the tower into a harbinger of light instead of destruction. Viewers bear witness as the protagonist navigates the toxic landscapes of Dinéyah and seeks to create balance in their unbalanced world. *AIR/Survey* thus presents the meeting point of these two series as they intermix and diverge in the same physical sphere.

The breeze carries with it a myriad of stories of past, present, and future. Stories of the ancestors. Stories of the people. Stories of the monsters. Each gust of wind on that hill in Halchita carried complex stories of entanglement that require tuning into.

The human and non-human (or more-than-human) world are emphatically interwoven in Dinéyah. Imbalance in one leads to imbalance in the other. Resource extraction is one imbalance among many that the Diné navigate in their daily existence. For those living on the Navajo Nation and in Indigenous communities worldwide, Wilson presents a familiar tragedy of destruction. *AIR/Survey* bears witness to these atrocities with uncompromising attention. Yet, as Wilson makes clear, this tragedy is far from settled, and new stories are still being written.

Kaila T. Schedeen
2019–2020 Curatorial Fellow, Visual Arts Center





The Connecting the Dots for a Just Transition project will raise awareness about a critical opportunity for a Just Transition on the Navajo Nation as it addresses remediation following uranium extraction that has poisoned the land and impoverished a people. These images are part of a photographic survey using drone-based, aerial photography to help Diné people re-story our narrative. This project is ambitious and just beginning. I hope to present a portrait of environmental damage and the people affected by it. More importantly, I hope to shape a platform for voices of resilience, wisdom, and vision for a transition to restorative systems of economy and memory making. This survey will lead to a series of exhibitions and an archive of documentation to help advocate for a reformed approach to environmental remediation underway on the Navajo Nation.

Artists are dynamically effective at identifying social and environmental problems and envisioning solutions. Guided by an ethics-based aesthetics, these photographic accounts of the Land and People can inspire awareness, activism, and change. I aim to re-story this map of the Navajo Nation by connecting the dots that mark the locations of 521 abandoned uranium mines (AUMs) with data collection, portraiture, and multi-vocal testimony to create a place-based re-telling of our relationship to the Earth. Using dynamic visualization and multi-vocal storytelling, the project will illustrate problems and empower communities to creatively imagine and define solutions. Re-telling stories of the land by those most impacted by the false logic of extraction will enact what the Climate Justice Alliance has referred to as a “Just Transition,” which is a “vision-led, unifying, and place-based set of principles, processes, and practices that build economic and political power to shift from an extractive economy to a regenerative economy. The transition itself must be just and equitable; redressing past harms and creating new relationships of power for the future through reparations. If the process of transition is not just, the outcome will never be.” — WW







In this behind-the-scenes image from the AIR/Survey projects we find the protagonist testing new equipment and evaluating the workings of a larger drone. I created this image in collaboration with Peter Stacey, one of my students at Santa Fe Community College, who is also a conservation biologist and avid photographer. The AIR protagonist uses a DJI Matrice 600 Pro drone, Ronin-MX 3-Axis Gimbal Stabilizer and the Sony A7r4. These tools are powering the production of both the Auto Immune Response and Connecting the Dots series. — WW

William (Will) Wilson is a Diné (Navajo) photographer who spent his formative years living in the Navajo Nation. Born in San Francisco in 1969, Wilson studied photography at the University of New Mexico (Dissertation Tracked MFA in Photography, 2002) and Oberlin College (BA, Studio Art and Art History, 1993). In 2007, Wilson won the Native American Fine Art Fellowship from the Eiteljorg Museum, and in 2010 was awarded a prestigious grant from the Joan Mitchell Foundation. Wilson has held visiting professorships at the Institute of American Indian Arts (1999–2000), Oberlin College (2000–01), and the University of Arizona (2006–08). From 2009 to 2011, Wilson managed the National Vision Project, a Ford Foundation funded initiative at the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts in Santa Fe, and helped to coordinate the New Mexico Arts Temporary Installations Made for the Environment (TIME) program on the Navajo Nation. Wilson is part of the Science and Arts Research Collaborative (SARC) which brings together artists interested in using science and technology in their practice with collaborators from Los Alamos National Laboratory and Sandia Labs as part of the International Symposium on Electronic Arts, 2012 (ISEA). Since 2014, Wilson has been the Head of the Photography Program at Santa Fe Community College. He has received a number of fellowships and awards in support of his practice in recent years, including the Rollin and Mary Ella King Fellowship at the School of Advanced Research in Santa Fe, NM; a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant in Photography; the New Mexico Governor's Excellence in Art Award; and a Mentor Artist Fellowship with the Native American Arts & Cultures Foundation.

IMAGES

- COVER** Will Wilson, *Shiprock Disposal Cell, Shiprock, New Mexico, Navajo Nation*, 2020. Archival pigment print. Size variable.
- 00** Will Wilson, *Mexican Hat Disposal Cell, Detail 1, Halchita, Utah, Navajo Nation*, 2019. Archival pigment print. Size variable.
- 02** Will Wilson, *Mexican Hat Disposal Cell Redux, Halchita, Utah, Navajo Nation*, 2019. Archival pigment print. Size variable.
- 03** Will Wilson, *Mexican Hat Disposal Cell Monument, Halchita, Utah, Navajo Nation*, 2019. Archival pigment print. Size variable.
- 04/05** Will Wilson, *Auto Immune Response, Mexican Hat Disposal Cell, Halchita, Utah, Navajo Nation*, 2019. Digitype (archival pigment print from original tintypes and digital captures). Size variable.
- 07** Will Wilson, *Rare Metals Disposal Cell, Tuba City, Arizona, Navajo Nation*, 2020. Archival pigment print. Size variable.
- Will Wilson, *White Mesa Uranium Mill, White Mesa, Utah, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe*, 2019. Archival pigment print. Size variable.
- 08/09** Will Wilson, *Cameron Chapter Complex 1, Detail, Cameron, Arizona, Navajo Nation*, 2020. Archival pigment print. Size variable.
- 10** Will Wilson, *AIR Lab (Auto Immune Response Laboratory)*, 2005. Steel, wooden shelves, bailing wire, Indigenous food species.
- 11** Will Wilson, *Auto Immune Response / Survey 1*, 2020. Digitype (archival pigment print from original tintypes and digital captures). Size variable.
- 12/13** Will Wilson, *Auto Immune Response, Valley of the Gods, Dinétah*, 2020. Digitype (archival pigment print from original tintypes and digital captures). Size variable.
- 14/15** Will Wilson, *Rare Metals Disposal Cell, Worker's Housing, Tuba City, Arizona, Navajo Nation*, 2020. Archival pigment print. Size variable.
- 16** Will Wilson, *Church Rock Spill Evaporation Ponds, Church Rock, New Mexico, Dinétah*, 2019. Archival pigment print. Size variable.
- 17** Will Wilson, *Babbit Ranch Upgrader, Adjacent to the Little Colorado River, Arizona, Dinétah*. 2019. Archival pigment print. Size variable.
- 18** Will Wilson, *Cameron Chapter Complex 1, Cameron, Arizona, Navajo Nation*, 2020. Archival pigment print. Size variable.
- 19** Will Wilson, *Cameron Chapter Complex 1 Triptych, Cameron, Arizona, Navajo Nation*, 2020. Archival pigment print. Size variable.
- 20** Will Wilson, *Auto Immune Response, Unit Photograph 1*, 2020. Archival pigment print. Size variable.

All photos courtesy of the artist.

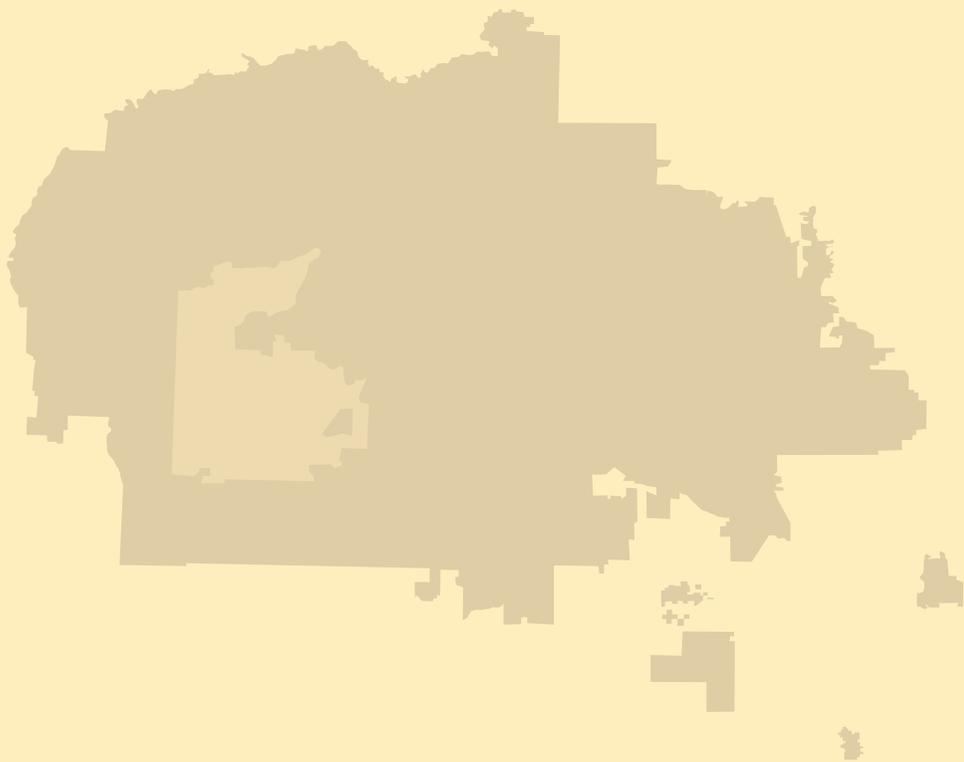
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Will Wilson: AIR/Survey is organized by Kaila T. Schedeen, 2019–2020 curatorial fellow, Visual Arts Center.

Photos: Will Wilson
Design: Hunter Thomas



In AIR / Survey, I explore the quixotic relationship between a post-apocalyptic Diné (Navajo) man and the devastatingly beautiful, but toxic environment he inhabits. This installation explores what a contemporary Indigenous cartography might reveal and how a project based in a politics of imagination can co-exist and inform a documentary survey focused on real-world environmental violations.

— Will Wilson