



PORTLAND ART MUSEUM

Wendy Red Star
Indian Summer,
From the series *Four Seasons*
2006



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Wendy Red Star (American and Apsá'looke, born 1981)

Indian Summer, from the series *Four Seasons*, 2006

Archival pigment print on Sunset Fiber rag

21 in x 24 in; sheet: 23 in x 26 in

Gift of Loren G. Lipson, M.D.

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Artist Wendy Red Star works across disciplines to explore the intersections of Native American ideologies and colonialist structures, both historically and in contemporary society. Raised on the Apsá'looke (Crow) reservation in Montana, Red Star creates work informed both by her cultural heritage and her engagement with many forms of creative expression, including photography, sculpture, video, fiber arts, and performance. An avid researcher of archives and historical narratives, Red Star seeks to incorporate and recast her research, offering new and unexpected perspectives in work that is at once inquisitive, witty, and unsettling. Intergenerational collaborative work is integral to her practice—her daughter Beatrice Red Star Fletcher (now 10 years old) often collaborates with her. Red Star is committed to creating a forum for the expression of Native women's voices in contemporary art.

The *Four Seasons* series of photographs depicts Red Star, wearing a traditional elk-tooth dress, surrounded by dioramas made of cheap plastic backdrops, blow-up animals, plastic flowers, and AstroTurf. This mixing of high and low craftsmanship encourages humor and irony. The scene evokes and mocks the dioramas sometimes seen in natural history museums, where Native American figures appear frozen in the distant past alongside taxidermic animals. Red Star uses the mass-produced materials to challenge

dominant perceptions of Indigenous cultures and art: “There’s a whole notion of being ‘authentic,’” Red Star says. “Your art is supposed to look like the nineteenth century, like we’re a dead culture that never evolved.”

For Red Star, humor is one of the most effective tools to challenge stereotypes of Native Americans as “primitive” or “closer to nature” than the supposedly more civilized white population. Red Star explains, “I’m dealing with really heavy topics pertaining to Crow and Native culture and the colonization of people. You can be very heavy-handed about it, but people don’t want to be around that. You can find an in by using humor. Humor or wit can be very healing; by getting viewers to crack a smile or laugh I can get them in, that way they can investigate my work further.”

Red Star often includes herself as a subject in her photographs, in part to counteract the history of white photographers representing Native people and to assert control over her own image. She says, “People are always telling us what we should be or how we should look or how authentic we should be. It’s empowering for me to put my own imagery out there [and show] my perspective for a change.”

Wendy Red Star lives and works in Portland, Oregon.



Discussion and Activities

1. The title of this work in the *Four Seasons* series is *Indian Summer*. What does the phrase “Indian summer” mean? Why do you think Red Star chose it as the title? How does the title contribute to her project of using humor and irony to challenge stereotypes?
2. Look closely at the image. List all of the objects and materials that you can identify. What details did you first notice that told you the props and the scene were artificial?
3. Although the setting and props are made from artificial, mass-produced materials, Red Star’s clothes and beadwork were created for her by friends and family. Traditional Apsá'looke elk-tooth dresses, for example, symbolize wealth and honor and are worn on special occasions. Lance Hogan made this dress for Red Star in 1997 when she was a princess at the annual Crow Fair. Why do you think Red Star chose to include these personal items in *Indian Summer*? How do these elements contribute to the piece as a meditation on identity?
4. Compare Wendy Red Star’s *Indian Summer* (2006) to Charles Heaney’s painting *Mountains* (1938), also included in the Poster Project. These artists have each chosen to depict western United States mountain scenes—yet with very different materials and intentions—75 years apart. If these artworks could have a conversation, what do you think they would say to each other?

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