Will Wilson
Auto Immune Response No. 2
2005
Will Wilson (American and Navajo, born 1969)
Auto Immune Response No. 2, 2005
Archival pigment print
Image: 33 9/16 x 64 1/16 inches
Sheet: 44 1/16 x 73 1/16 inches
Museum Purchase: Funds provided by bequest of Elizabeth Cole Butler by exchange
© Will Wilson
2015.105.1

Discussion and Activities

1. Spend 30 seconds looking closely at this picture. Then, write a list of words describing what you see. Write as many words as you can in one minute. Repeat. Look again, then write again.
   - What do you notice about the human figures? What are they wearing? What are they doing? How do they relate to the right, seated and gazing out over the canyon. The vast expanse of the canyon and sky, combined with the dramatic shadows cast by the rugged terrain, emphasize Wilson’s solitude.

   In subsequent photographs in the series, Wilson discovers a hogan—a traditional, eight-sided Diné dwelling of logs; constructs a hogan out of metal (referring to the mining on Navajo land); and even creates a hogan that serves as a greenhouse, signaling the synthesis of traditional and contemporary technologies as well as survival, nourishment, and hope for the future. Throughout the series, Wilson invites viewers to acknowledge the heritage and tragedies of the past, the turning point of the present moment, and the tenuous but hopeful future of our world.

2. Now that you’ve spent some time observing and describing this image, develop a story about it. What do you think is going on here? What kind of world is this? How did these figures come to be here? What happens next?
   - What do you notice about the image as an image? Where do you see shadows and where do you see light? What is the effect of the strong, horizontal line of the plateau? How is that line repeated or disrupted by other elements in the picture? What is the effect of the image’s uneven borders? How would the feeling or mood of this photograph change if it were in color rather than black and white?

3. The title of this work is Auto Immune Response No. 2. What is an autoimmune response? How do you think the concept of autoimmune response is relevant to the image?
   - The title is a purposeful reminder of the numerous autoimmune diseases such as lupus and rheumatoid arthritis that disproportionately affect Indigenous peoples around the world. In this long-term photographic series, Wilson appears multiple times in each Auto Immune Response image, suggesting movement through space and time, rather than a single moment captured by the camera. The uneven borders of the photograph reinforce the multi-moment concept. Wilson wears a respirator, signaling polluted air and an inhospitable atmosphere. In Auto Immune Response #2, he appears three times on a ridge overlooking a massive, deep, and stunningly beautiful canyon carved over millions of years. At left, he stands and assesses his surroundings in a seemingly scientific but simple manner, without charts or measuring instruments. Wilson appears twice more, at center left and at the right, seated and gazing out over the canyon. The vast expanse of the canyon and sky, combined with the dramatic shadows cast by the rugged terrain, emphasize Wilson’s solitude.

   Wilson discovers a hogan—a traditional, eight-sided Diné dwelling of logs; constructs a hogan out of metal (referring to the mining on Navajo land); and even creates a hogan that serves as a greenhouse, signaling the synthesis of traditional and contemporary technologies as well as survival, nourishment, and hope for the future. Throughout the series, Wilson invites viewers to acknowledge the heritage and tragedies of the past, the turning point of the present moment, and the tenuous but hopeful future of our world.

4. The setting for this photograph is the Navajo Nation, where the artist Will Wilson grew up. During the mid-twentieth century, 30 million tons of uranium ore were extracted from Navajo lands, a process that led to extensive soil and water contamination and radiation hazards that persist today. Wilson has said that, “Making this series, I was thinking about how we’re this sentinel population in some ways, we’re the canaries in the coal mine, but we all share this coal mine. So it’s also about a response, though, claiming agency and trying to figure out how to exist in that space and move forward and survive.” What do you think he means when he refers to the Navajo as a “sentinel population” and “the canaries in the coal mine”? How does this photograph convey a sense of agency?
   - Will Wilson appears multiple times in each Auto Immune Response image, suggesting movement through space and time, rather than a single moment captured by the camera. The uneven borders of the photograph reinforce the multi-moment concept. Wilson wears a respirator, signaling polluted air and an inhospitable atmosphere. In Auto Immune Response #2, he appears three times on a ridge overlooking a massive, deep, and stunningly beautiful canyon carved over millions of years. At left, he stands and assesses his surroundings in a seemingly scientific but simple manner, without charts or measuring instruments. Wilson appears twice more, at center left and at the right, seated and gazing out over the canyon. The vast expanse of the canyon and sky, combined with the dramatic shadows cast by the rugged terrain, emphasize Wilson’s solitude.

5. Think about the landscape where you grew up or where you live today (whichever feels more like home). It may be urban, rural, suburban, wild, or any combination. How would you describe that landscape to someone who had never seen it? What feelings do you associate with your landscape? What changes have you noticed? What drives those changes? How will your landscape look in 10 years, 30 years, 100 years? How did it look 100 years ago or more? Create a picture of your landscape as you see it now and as you imagine it at some point in the past or in the future.
   - Wilson discovers a hogan—a traditional, eight-sided Diné dwelling of logs; constructs a hogan out of metal (referring to the mining on Navajo land); and even creates a hogan that serves as a greenhouse, signaling the synthesis of traditional and contemporary technologies as well as survival, nourishment, and hope for the future. Throughout the series, Wilson invites viewers to acknowledge the heritage and tragedies of the past, the turning point of the present moment, and the tenuous but hopeful future of our world.

6. As we write these questions in the fall of 2020, the world is experiencing a global coronavirus pandemic. Masks have taken on special importance in preventing transmission of the disease. Think about your experiences recently wearing masks. What are you thinking or feeling when wearing a mask? What is the artist communicating with the masks the figures wear in this photograph?

This project was made possible by a grant from PGE Foundation.

Go online for poster PDFs, maps, and additional resources. Find programs for educators and students. Free entry for youth 17 and under.