



PORTLAND ART MUSEUM

Will Wilson  
Auto Immune Response No. 2  
2005



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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

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Will Wilson is a Diné (Navajo) photographer and multimedia artist who was born in San Francisco in 1969. He grew up on the Navajo reservation, and attended a government-run boarding school in Tuba City, Arizona, through the eighth grade. After attending a private high school in rural northern Massachusetts, he studied photography at Oberlin College in Ohio and later at the University of New Mexico. He is the head of the photography program at Santa Fe Community College in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Wilson's photographs explore issues concerning Native American identity, land rights, health, and the synthesis of art and technology. His ongoing *Auto Immune Response* series, or *AIR*, began in 2004. 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 himself appears as the imagery's protagonist, a Diné man who faces survival in a post-apocalyptic landscape destroyed by colonization, assimilation, and dangerous extraction of natural resources.

Throughout the *Auto Immune Response* series, Wilson photographs himself in the landscape of the Navajo Nation, located in today's Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, assessing the environment and rebuilding from the remnants of the past in anticipation of an unknown future that merges ancestral knowledge with technical advances. The Navajo Nation is an important character in these narrative photographs: Native American lands are regularly stripped of their natural resources by the American government as well as by private companies, often causing severe health problems both during and after extraction. Between 1944 and 1986, nearly four million tons of uranium ore were mined on Navajo lands. The toxic heavy metal was used to produce atomic weapons during the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union vied for global dominance. More than 500 contaminated mines and many buildings were abandoned when extraction ended, and uranium seeped into the soil and water supply both during and after the four decades of extraction. Uranium can cause birth

defects, learning disorders, breathing problems, and multiple types of cancer. Members of the Navajo Nation continue to suffer health effects today.

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.

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.



### 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.
  - How would you characterize this landscape? Does it suggest a particular place or time?
  - What do you notice about the human figures? What is each one wearing? What are they doing? How do they relate to the landscape and to each other?
  - 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 border? How would the feeling or mood of this photograph change if it were in color rather than black and white?
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?
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?
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?
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.
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 are you communicating to others when you wear a mask? What is the artist communicating with the masks the figures wear in this photograph?

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