

Colonizing the Colonizer:

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew Takes on Edward S. Curtis

by NANCY BROKAW

"The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."

L. P. Hartley

An *Indian from India*, the recent body of work by Annu Palakunnathu Matthew that was exhibited at Sepia International this past winter, touches on questions of history and travel: of how the present speaks to the past, the familiar to the foreign, the near to the far. She writes, "In this portfolio I play on my own 'otherness.'...I challenge the viewers' assumptions of then and now, us and them, exotic and local. This work starts to question what is given credibility, what is patently contrived and how the two are not as far apart as we would like to believe."

The images — all diptychs — pair vintage ethnographic photographs of Native Americans, taken by Edward S. Curtis, R. A. Rinehart, J. N. Choate, or the like, with Matthew's "re-photographs," staged with an Indian cast.

Adopting the strategy that Cindy Sherman pioneered in her *Film Stills* series — and displaying a similar sly wit — Matthew puts her body on the line in *An Indian from India*, dressing herself up and then photographing the result. Unlike Sherman, though, Matthew is a child of the digital age — she once worked in the computer industry — and draws on that experience to create seamless images. Demonstrating a deft hand with Photoshop, she painstakingly recreates herself¹ as one of the real-life subjects portrayed in the original and then cuts and pastes herself into that historical context.

Her face-off with these vintage photographs serves as a visual confrontation between the present and the past, but her interests here extend well beyond the historical. Taking off on Sherman's critique of representation and gender stereotype, Matthew is looking to undermine the authority of the ethnographic image and the racial stereotypes it reinforced. By carefully recreating each element of the original, she asks us to consider how all those elements came together in the first place, freeing us up to see how the photographer *created* his subject. Self-portraits though Matthew's images may be, they couldn't be less interested in self-revelation: they are performance through and through. Like Sherman, she is playing a role to unmask it.

That Matthew's intentions are essentially contemporary — and overtly political — is made apparent in her artist's statement, where she alludes to the feelings of dislocation experienced by immigrants. For her, one regular reminder of her alien status arises from the necessity to distinguish be-



WOMAN'S PRIMITIVE DRESS

Photograph by E. S. Curtis



INDIAN WOMAN'S PRIMITIVE DRESS

Photograph by A.P. Matthew

Edward S. Curtis/Annu Palakunnathu Matthew: *Woman's Primitive Dress/Indian Woman's Primitive Dress*

tween Indians from America and Indians from India — all because of Columbus’s confusion of America with the subcontinent. She writes, “As an immigrant, I am often questioned about where I am ‘really from.’ When I say that I am an Indian, I often have to clarify that I am an Indian from India.”

The child of immigrants who, as an adult, herself became an immigrant, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew knows the expatriate experience inside out. Her parents left the Indian state of Kerala for the UK before Matthew was born. Her family returned to India when she was 11, but 17 years later, she was on the move again, this time coming to the United States to study photography. Her unsettled history echoes through her work: it is as though she is engaged in a quest, both personal and public, to connect with a place — to be, finally, at home. Her dilemma is perhaps best captured in her own description of herself: “born in England, grew up in India, becoming American.”

In her series *Memories of India*, she returned to her homeland to recreate the memories of an Indian childhood she never had, and in *Fabrications of the Truth*, she used Photoshop to create snapshots of a family life that never was. Of her work heretofore, the most unambiguously rooted in her familial culture is also the most blatantly political: in *Bollywood Satirized*, a series of Indian movie posters transformed by digital legerdemain, Matthew cast a satirical eye on Indian sexual and racial politics.

In *An Indian from India*, she begins to explore her relationship with her new home — the United States — and takes on American history in a tour de force parody of the ethnographic photographs of American Indians from the turn of the 19th century. In this foray into the history and politics of her adopted country, she takes the same jaundiced view of cultural myth that she did in her dissection of Indian mores in her Bollywood pictures. But in *An Indian from India*, both her questioning and her politics pick up so much speed that they positively ricochet around the imagery.



Photograph by T. S. Sully, *American Indian*, 1882.
TOM TORLINO, NAVAJO
ON ENTRY TO CARLISLE SCHOOL, CARLISLE, PENNSYLVANIA



Photograph by T. P. Matthew, *American Indian*, 1897.
ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW, INDIAN
ON ENTRY TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

E. N. Choate/Annu Palakunnathu Matthew: Tom Torlino, Navajo, on Entry to Carlisle School, Carlisle, Pennsylvania/Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, Indian, on Entry to the United States of America



Photograph by J. A. Crow, *American Indian*, after 1886.
TOM TORLINO, NAVAJO
THREE YEARS LATER, CARLISLE



Photograph by T. P. Matthew, *American Indian*, Rhode Island, after 1898.
ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW, INDIAN
NINE YEARS LATER, PROVIDENCE

E. N. Choate/Annu Palakunnathu Matthew: Tom Torlino, Navajo, Three Years Later, Carlisle/Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, Indian, Nine Years Later, Providence

A hundred years ago, the British justified their empire-building — in India and elsewhere — by invoking the White Man’s Burden, while the American drive west rallied around the notion of Manifest Destiny. Whatever the rationale, the result was, sadly, of a piece. The British, starting in the 17th century, consolidated their hold on India largely through intrigue and a series of trumped-up wars. They administered it long into the 20th century with military might and mission-

ary zeal — not to mention, crushing taxes and trade policies that consigned large swathes of the native population to starvation. During more or less the same time period, the European land grab of North America was effecting the near extermination of that continent’s native tribes — either inadvertently, through the introduction of disease, or intentionally, by forced assimilation or the military conquest that culminated with the brutal Indian Wars of the latter half of the 19th century.



AMERICAN INDIAN WITH WAR PAINT

Photograph by F. A. Rinehart



INDIAN WITH WAR PAINT

Photograph by A. P. Matthew

F. A. Rinehart/Annu Palakunnathu Matthew: American Indian with War Paint/Indian with War Paint

It is that pair of histories, linked by common motives of greed and racism, that Matthew invokes in this series. Giving expression to her sense of outrage, her artist's statement describes the parallels between the North American views of "what they called the primitive natives" and the British "colonial gaze," directed to the native population of India. She concludes, ruefully, "In every culture, there is the 'other.'"

In *An Indian from India*, Matthew draws on the work of at least a half dozen ethnographic photographers,² all of whom were bent on documenting the disappearing way of life of a "vanishing race." She targets Curtis in particular — and, in particular, his sometime habit of costuming his subjects in inappropriate dress. His sittings resembled, on occasion, a kind of dress-up party. European-style clothing was largely forbidden — calicos and jeans are rarely in sight — and his subjects were persuaded to don

garments they had long since stopped wearing, slipping into their formal wear to grind corn, or even, at Curtis's behest, putting on "traditional" dress that he himself had concocted. Nor did Curtis's interventions end there. Like many of his contemporaries, he set out to document customs that no longer existed, openly stage-managing rituals long interdicted by the Indian Bureau, and in the dark-room, he engaged in the occasional retouching of the negative or the print to remove modern elements from view. Critics have been focusing on these factual inaccuracies ever since Christopher Lyman's 1982 *Vanishing Race*.³ In this revisionist reading, Curtis emerges as an ethnographic fraud and his entire enterprise an exercise in cultural hegemony. But there's a shrill quality here that seems to demand latter-day sensitivities of the century past. Most disconcerting, though, is how blind this interpretation is to the extraordinary power of the pictures

themselves. Littered with misrepresentations though they may be, Curtis's are arguably the most stunning sustained series of portraiture in the history of the medium.

Matthew's debunking is, on the whole, more measured than Lyman's rant. If it's payback she's after, on the evidence of the images at least, the revenge she exacts is a decidedly gentle one — more tongue in cheek than clenched fist in air. Her tone, as in *Woman's Primitive Dress/Indian Woman's Primitive Dress*, is subtle, mimicking. In that image, she makes a dig at Curtis's tricked-up costumes by cooking up her own dress from a jumble of fabrics from different parts of India — a motley ensemble that you'd never encounter in the real world.

That is not to say that she pulls her punches. Rather, in her most affecting images, she asks viewers to contemplate the "other," to confront the actual experience of the individuals be-

ing portrayed. Consider J. N. Choate's portraits of Tom Torlino. A before-and-after shot of Torlino on entry to the notorious Carlisle School⁴ and after a three-year stint, this pair of images simply breaks your heart: at first Navajo through and through, the assimilated Torlino looks like a particularly unhappy bookkeeper, stuff-shirted and straight-laced. In Matthew's treatment, she appears side by side with both of Torlino's incarnations, like a medium communicating with a long-gone spirit and extending a hand across the decades in sympathy.

Still, unlike much political art, this work has a great sense of humor. In imitating the poses struck by the originals and donning comparably exotic dress, Matthew has a bit of fun with her anger. There's a punning quality here that delights rather than affronts: one moves back and forth between the paired images to see how Matthew has handled each detail. In *Contemporary Indian American Mother & Step-Child*, for instance, she has unearthed a chair the lines of which echo those of the sofa that appears in its progenitor, *Traditional American Indian Mother and Child*. And *American Indian with War Paint/Indian with War Paint* is laugh-out-loud funny, with its pairing of two warriors striking over-the-top martial poses and brandishing a tomahawk, on the one side, and a kitchen cleaver, on the other. For my blood, Matthew takes the tinkering too far when she switches the original titles with inflammatory replacements, transforming the even-handed *Two Moons* — *Cheyenne*, for instance, into the impolitic *Noble Savage*. But I was charmed by her digital reconstruction of the photographs' visual details: the careful cloning of vintage backdrops, the scrupulous imitation of old-time fonts and of the handwriting inscribed into the negatives, the re-creation even of the tears and scratches the images have acquired over the years.

Also unlike your run-of-the-mill political work, Matthew's photographs have a surface beauty — a lushness — that makes them a pleasure to contemplate. That attention to craft and aesthetics is borne up especially in the original incarnation of the *Indian from*

India series. My first viewing of the work was in a presentation portfolio: the images themselves were printed on Concorde Rag paper that's the same color Curtis used in his photogravures and the portfolio case was an olive green that likewise mimicked the look of Curtis's.

At Sepia, many of the images on display were significantly larger — 24 by 30 inches — and the work suffered for the choice. Enlarged to fill a New York gallery, the images seemed to lose something of their poignancy. But not all had succumbed to the tyranny of size: also on display was a number from the portfolio. And at that more intimate scale, the images really did seem like visitors from another century. In these, Matthew's recreation of the look and feel of the original ethnographic images is so painstaking and the resulting product so sumptuous that one can't help being drawn in by them.

Of course, the mimicry runs far deeper than paper quality and portfolio covers. In a way, the entire enterprise is an exercise in appropriation: the colonized colonizing the colonizer, if you will. Just as Curtis et al. laid claim to the representational rights of the native population, so Matthew has commandeered their photographs for her own purposes. She is aiming squarely at the Western world's assumption of cultural supremacy — toward anyone from the “wrong” continent, from American Indians to Indian Indians. “It irks me,” she writes, “that I can be called primitive and exotic just because I am different.”

The irony is that both photographers recast their subject matter in service of a contemporary ideology. Curtis's relentless romanticization of the Indians reflected the received opinion of his day that the native population was doomed to extinction, and that notion imparts an elegiac tone to much of the work. Believing that this was the last chance to capture even the faintest echo of the Indian way of life, he set out to document customs that no longer existed, fabricated costumes, and persuaded his sitters to wear ceremonial dress (i.e., “formal wear”) for the mundane tasks

of life. What he was after — explicitly — was a *recreation* of the past.

Matthew performs a similar sleight of hand with the past. To address the injustices inflicted by European colonizers on the native peoples of the Americas and South Asia, she too manipulates the evidence. Of course, historical impartiality isn't on Matthew's agenda any more than ethnographic objectivity was on Curtis's. Looking to expose the racist subtext of these photographs, she selects the most egregious examples she can find, snips and cuts, and even makes mischief with the original titles. What she is after — also explicitly — is a *rectification* of the past.

Discussed in this article

An Indian from India was exhibited at Sepia International in New York from January 31 to March 20, 2004.

Photographs from the series can be viewed at <http://annumatthew.com/Portfolios/Indian/Indian.html>.

Endnotes

1. In two instances, Matthew has enlisted family members in her tableaux: with her mother appearing as *A Malayalee Indian Widow* and her stepdaughter in *Contemporary Indian American Mother & Step-Child*.

2. Along with Edward Curtis, La Roche, J. N. Choate, R. A. Rinehart, B. A. Gifford, and Case & Draper make an appearance. Matthew also credits the Stephens Collection (University of Pennsylvania).

3. *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions: Photographs of Indians by Edward Curtis*, by Christopher M. Lyman (New York: Pantheon Books, in association with The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982).

4. The Carlisle School of Pennsylvania was founded in 1879 to effect the assimilation of the native population. Removed from their families, Indian children were essentially stripped of their tribal culture and taught mainstream, white mores. ■