

NEITHER STOIC NOR IDLE

NADYA KWANDIBENS
SHOWS THE STRENGTH
AND VITALITY OF
CANADA'S FIRST NATIONS

BY LAURENCE BUTET-ROCH

For Indigenous photographer Nadya Kwandibens, making portraits of her peers means giving them the reigns, disrupting stereotypes and supporting a sense of unity.

“Indian,” the misguided and misleading name that was given to the first inhabitants of North America by the European settlers, continues to conjure up equally misguided and misleading images, whether it’s of the “noble savage,” perpetuated through the images of Edward S. Curtis, or of miserable communities awaiting salvation, as often shown in contemporary media. This ongoing misrepresentation has led many Indigenous artists, such as Anishinaabe photographer Nadya Kwandibens, to reclaim the ways they and their peers are depicted. “From the outset, I wanted my work to embody the strength and vibrancy of my people that stem from our overall sense of unity,” she explains.

Before embarking on a journey that would take her across Turtle Island, the name she uses to refer to the American continent, the then-budding shooter defined her objective. Her vision statement reads: “My goal seeks to steer the positive course. If our history is a shadow, let this moment serve as light. We are musicians, lawyers, doctors, mothers and sons. We

If our history is a shadow, let this moment serve as light. We are musicians, lawyers, doctors, mothers and sons. We are activists, scholars, dreamers, fathers and daughters.

are activists, scholars, dreamers, fathers and daughters. Let us claim ourselves now and see that we are and will always be great, thriving, balanced civilizations capable of carrying ourselves into that bright new day.” These words gave her a direction and a purpose. “As a photographer, it became my role to help others see just that. Whenever I feel discouraged by the scale of the task, as one sometimes does, I read the statement and it never fails to reinspire me,” she adds.

Drawing from her experience of living in Toronto and negotiating an identity that is both modern and rooted in her cultural heritage, she sent out a call for Indigenous people living in urban centres. “My father once told me that old folks called those of us who moved to the city ‘concrete Indians.’ That was the perfect name for the series,” recounts Kwandibens, who is from the Northwest Angle #37 First Nation, nearly 500 km past Thunder Bay in Ontario, but grew up in foster care in a mix of Caucasian and Indigenous homes. Because the series is concerned with asking how one’s self is affected by living or working in the city, she lets the willing participants determine the way they want to be represented. “Within fifteen minutes of sending out the email inviting people to imagine and submit their ideas for a portrait, I had received answers. Since, I must have gotten hundreds of emails, and not one is the same,” she notes.

Some don designs inspired by a host of First Nations’ traditions, others dress in their regalia. Many mix clothing of different influences in an effortless, yet



© NADYA KWANDIBENS



© NADYA KWANDIBENS

statement-making way. The photograph of a group of female Indigenous lawyers is a prime example of that diversity of interpretations. “I was approached by one of them who wanted to bring all of her colleagues together. Initially, it was not meant to be part of the *Concrete Indians* series. But when I saw all of them in the old courtroom and felt the strength of their energy and the vigour of their spirit, I asked if they’d be willing to be included in it. They agreed, and we went outside to one of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside alleyways, which is where many of them work,” she recalls. The image, which brings to mind

My father once told me that old folks called those of us who moved to the city ‘concrete Indians.’

that of a band of superheroes, combats the stereotype of the stoic or idle “Indian.”

Through her work, which speaks of a much-needed decolonization of the minds and bodies, Kwandibens has forged links between those who live on the West Coast and those out East, those in cities and those in more remote places, reinforcing the sense of community. “Despite everything that has happened and continues to happen to our nations, what really comes across in all the people that I’ve met is their resilience, their pride and their beauty. This is what forms and informs our collective identity,” she believes.

To pass on that understanding and sense of belonging, the self-taught photographer organizes workshops, mostly with youth. “Growing up, I didn’t know any prominent Indigenous artists because I wasn’t exposed to any of them. Yet I had an innate sense that I could do anything I wanted to be. I want them to know that too,” she says. “For those who are interested in photography, I tell them to get to know light: how it falls, bounces around and changes with the passing of the seasons. I also tell them they can shoot anything. It doesn’t have to be beautiful, but it has to move them. That’s the essence of it.” ■