The image of the boy has a red layer applied while the bars and numbers of the UPC code are starkly black-and-white. The juxtaposition of the UPC image with that of the smiling boy evokes an alienating system that reduces a person to data registered by computer. In *What’s There to Know Sunchild*, the poem Whitman has added to the image causes us to consider the person pictured in the womb. The technology identifies facial features but Whitman provides character; this stands in contrast with the dehumanizing analysis provided by the sonography.

Technology is employed in a very different way in *Observance I* and *Observance II*. Whitman allows the images to reveal their materiality through pixelation, inverting the color in *Observance II*. There is no attempt to create an illusion of reality; rather, these photos take us into another realm. We do not see people but shadows that morph into spiritual personae performing some ritual of communication with a bison skull.

**Decay and Regeneration**

Death is a necessary part of the cycle of life. Whitman’s *Memento* photos force us to acknowledge the fragility of life and our own mortality. The decaying bodies appear as empty shells. We may even allow ourselves to be curious about the process of decay, to take comfort in the knowledge that the bodies go back into the earth. We know that these are temporary vessels. We know that Coyote lives on.

Whitman’s work provides inspiration for a younger generation of artists. He played an early role in the discourse over the control of imaging of self and representation, and now models new modes of representation. Whitman takes a syncretic approach to the many artistic influences that inform his work, combining text and image, and working with words as poet and visionary while honoring the foresight of his “grandmother and Yuchi artisans who were remembering the future.”

2. Email correspondence with the author, October 9, 2003.
“It is the Indian way to be involved in defining who we are in the universe, to be concerned about our identity, and how we go into the future.”

As an artist, Richard Ray Whitman draws from his life experiences. He left art school to take part in the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973 where he developed a deep sensibility for the role of the artist as activist. Raised by his grandparents, he has recently become a grandfather himself. This has deepened his commitment to family and community, reinforcing the obligation to speak out through his work. “I hadn't defined my work as social/political or even tribal, but rather I've tried to act instinctively, and accordingly as an Artist, a multidimensional being, it is with the understanding I am already a Yuchi being. For better or worse it’s what I was shaped through….” As Whitman speaks through images, so the Yuchi language speaks through him. As a speaker of his native tongue, he is able to bring a particular way of observing the world to us through his making of images.

In his work, Whitman provides us with clues to his identity as a Yuchi, an artist, and an individual. In the same way that an artist cannot separate himself or herself from his or her work, one cannot essentialize an aspect of oneself. A Whitman photograph is a fragment of a composite of all of Whitman’s life experiences, in the same sense that a photograph is a fraction of a second captured on film (or digital media) that operates as a symbol of a complete movement or action: a bullet in flight is understood as the act of shooting a gun.

Whitman’s work is as varied as his life experiences. Beginning in the late 1960s, his work has been a journey through painting; then photography, film and video (and a combination of all of these); and now experimentation with digital photography. He considers a camera a tool to be explored and manipulated in a variety of ways to achieve a desired result. Just as there are a number of techniques that can be used with a paintbrush, Whitman uses a camera to make portrait photos, digital images, images with text, and images of text. He alternates between black-and-white and color, remakes earlier works, and experiments with digital processes. These decisions are made based on how they enhance the meaning or content of the work.

Whitman’s image making is informed by the history and attitudes he experienced in Oklahoma, where he was born and raised. Whitman became acutely aware of the situation for Native Americans in the state that calls itself “Native America.” Oklahoma used to be “Indian Territory.” The concept has been twisted into a notion of America being “Native,” with Americans as the indigenous and righteous occupants of the land. A reflection of the ironies and injustices of Oklahoma can be read in much of Whitman’s earlier work.

Whitman does a Fancy Dance through the racism and pain of the past (and present). That is not to say that his treatment flirts over serious issues; rather, Whitman teaches us to look for the shuffles, fast-steps, and whirls that become the paintings, collages, videos, and photographs that make up his oeuvre. Sometimes this dance is preparatory in the sense that it bends existing structures to make way for beauty (as in the Grass Dance). Sometimes this dance is paused—a contemplative moment—and at other times the pace is frenetic and angry.

Whitman’s new work continues this process with black-and-white portrait photographs that recall his well-known Street Chiefs series of the 1970s and ’80s, as well as digital images exploring new areas. There are photos of dead and decaying animals, images that evoke spiritual personae, and some fresh explorations of photography as a digital medium. Whitman is not afraid to experiment.

Pulling Faces
The Street Chiefs are homeless Native American men that Whitman came to know over a period of time and then photographed. The black-and-white portraits displayed in Continuum 12 Artists are an extension of this work. They reference and challenge the work of historical photographers like Edward Curtis. Because it is Whitman behind the camera the men share a bit of themselves with us. This comes through in their gazes—long and steady, they cannot be denied. Whitman’s relationship with these men allows us to see them as they present themselves to him. These photos are powerful because the men are strong. They have stories to tell. They are older men, layers of life making their skin thick—scarred and protective.

Painting with Pixels
Whitman’s interest in “taking the photos further…to…manipulate them as another way of seeing” takes the work in different directions. Personal identity is explored through Sunchild and What’s There to Know Sunchild. Universal Product Code (UPC) bars are appended to a photo of the artist as a boy.
"It is the Indian way to be involved in defining who we are in the universe, to be concerned about our identity, and how we go into the future."  

As an artist, Richard Ray Whitman draws from his life experiences. He left art school to take part in the occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973 where he developed a deep sensibility for the role of the artist as activist. Raised by his grandparents, he has recently become a grandfather himself. This has deepened his commitment to family and community, reinforcing the obligation to speak out through his work. "I hadn't defined my work as social/political or even tribal, but rather I've tried to act instinc-tively, and accordingly as an Artist, a multidimensional being, it is with the understanding I am already a Yuchi being. For better or worse it's what I was shaped through..." As Whitman speaks through images, so the Yuchi language speaks through him. As a speaker of his native tongue, he is able to bring a particular way of observing the world to us through his making of images. 

In his work, Whitman provides us with clues to his identity as a Yuchi, an artist, and an individual. In the same way that an artist cannot separate himself or herself from his or her work, one cannot essentialize an aspect of oneself. A Whitman photograph is a fragment of a composite of all of Whitman's life experiences, in the same sense that a photograph is a fraction of a second captured on film (or digital media) that operates as a symbol of a complete movement or action: a bullet in flight is understood as the act of shooting a gun. 

Whitman's work is as varied as his life experiences. Beginning in the late 1960s, his work has been a journey through painting, then photography, film and video (and a combination of all of these), and now experimentation with digital photography. He considers a camera a tool to be explored and manipulated in a variety of ways to achieve a desired result. Just as there are a number of techniques that can be used with a paintbrush, Whitman uses a camera to make portrait photos, digital images, images with text, and images of text. He alternates between black-and-white and color, remakes earlier works, and experiments with digital processes. These decisions are made based on how they enhance the meaning or content of the work. 

Whitman's image making is informed by the history and attitudes he experienced in Oklahoma, where he was born and raised. Whitman became acutely aware of the situation for Native Americans in the state that calls itself "Native America." Oklahoma used to be "Indian Territory." The concept has been twisted into a notion of America being "Native," with Americans as the indigenous and righteous occupants of the land. A reflection of the ironies and injustices of Oklahoma can be read in much of Whitman's earlier work. 

Whitman does a Fancy Dance through the racism and pain of the past (and present). That is not to say that his treatment flirts over serious issues; rather, Whitman teaches us to look for the shuffles, fast-steps, and whirls that become the paintings, collages, videos, and photographs that make up his oeuvre. Sometimes this dance is preparatory in the sense that it bends existing structures to make way for beauty (as in the Grass Dance). Sometimes this dance is paused—a contemplative moment—and at other times the pace is frenetic and angry. 

Whitman's new work continues this process with black-and-white portrait photographs that recall his well-known Street Chiefs series of the 1970s and '80s, as well as digital images exploring new areas. There are photos of dead and decaying animals, images that evoke spiritual personae, and some fresh explorations of photography as a digital medium. Whitman is not afraid to experiment. 

Pulling Faces

The Street Chiefs are homeless Native American men that Whitman came to know over a period of time and then photographed. The black-and-white portraits displayed in Continuum 12 Artists are an extension of this work. They reference and challenge the work of historical photographers like Edward Curtis. Because it is Whitman behind the camera the men share a bit of themselves with us. This comes through in their gazes—long and steady, they cannot be denied. Whitman's relationship with these men allows us to see them as they present themselves to him. These photos are powerful because the men are strong. They have stories to tell. They are older men, layers of life making their skin thick—scarred and protective. 

Painting with Pixels

Whitman's interest in "taking the photos further...to...manipulate them as another way of seeing" takes the work in different directions. Personal identity is explored through Sunchild and What's There to Know Sunchild. Universal Product Code (UPC) bars are appended to a photo of the artist as a boy...
The image of the boy has a red layer applied while the bars and numbers of the UPC code are starkly black-and-white. The juxtaposition of the UPC image with that of the smiling boy evokes an alienating system that reduces a person to data registered by computer. In What's There to Know Sunchild, the poem Whitman has added to the image causes us to consider the person pictured in the womb. The technology identifies facial features but Whitman provides character; this stands in contrast with the dehumanizing analysis provided by the sonography.

Technology is employed in a very different way in Observance I and Observance II. Whitman allows the images to reveal their materiality through pixelization, inverting the color in Observance II. There is no attempt to create an illusion of reality; rather, these photos take us into another realm. We do not see people but shadows that morph into spiritual personae performing some ritual of communication with a bison skull.

**Decay and Regeneration**

Death is a necessary part of the cycle of life. Whitman's Messenger photos force us to acknowledge the fragility of life and our own mortality. The decaying bodies appear as empty shells. We may even allow ourselves to be curious about the process of decay, to take comfort in the knowledge that the bodies go back into the earth. We know that these are temporary vessels. We know that Coyote lives on.

Whitman’s work provides inspiration for a younger generation of artists. He played an early role in the discourse over the control of imaging of self and representation, and now models new modes of representation. Whitman takes a syncretic approach to the many artistic influences that inform his work, combining text and image, and working with words as poet and visionary while honoring the foresight of his "grandmother and Yuchi artisans who were remembering the future."5

—**GREG A. HILL (KANYEN’KEHAKA)**
Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art
National Gallery of Canada

---

2 Email correspondence with the author, October 9, 2003.
4 Telephone conversation with the author, September 30, 2003.