



Robert Koch Gallery

As in “Yawnah” (2014-15), Ed Drew used a vintage process to depict present-day Modocs as they choose to be seen.

ART REVIEW

American Indians in jarring images

Staged and racist works of the past — and a new contrast

By Charles Desmarais

The images that shaped public imagination of the American Indian — 19th and early 20th century photographs (and the paintings, popular press engravings, reproductions and, ultimately, movies based on such photographs) — were mostly fiction.

They weren't always vicious lies. Often, they were sentimentalized portrayals of what Edward S. Curtis, the most successful of all who trained their cameras on the subject, called “the vanishing race.” But whether the product of true empathy or merely graphic crocodile tears, even the most romantic pictures glossed over attitudes and policies that today are seen as cruelly neglectful, if not genocidal.

Curtis himself, funded with J.P. Morgan money to produce some 40,000 photographic documents for his magnificent 20-volume “The North American Indian,” is known to have choreographed ceremonies and dances, phonied up costumes, retouched negatives to remove all signs of modernity; he paid reservation residents to play the part of native nobility. Other photographers purported to show the fearsomeness of the American Indian warrior.

Art continues on E2

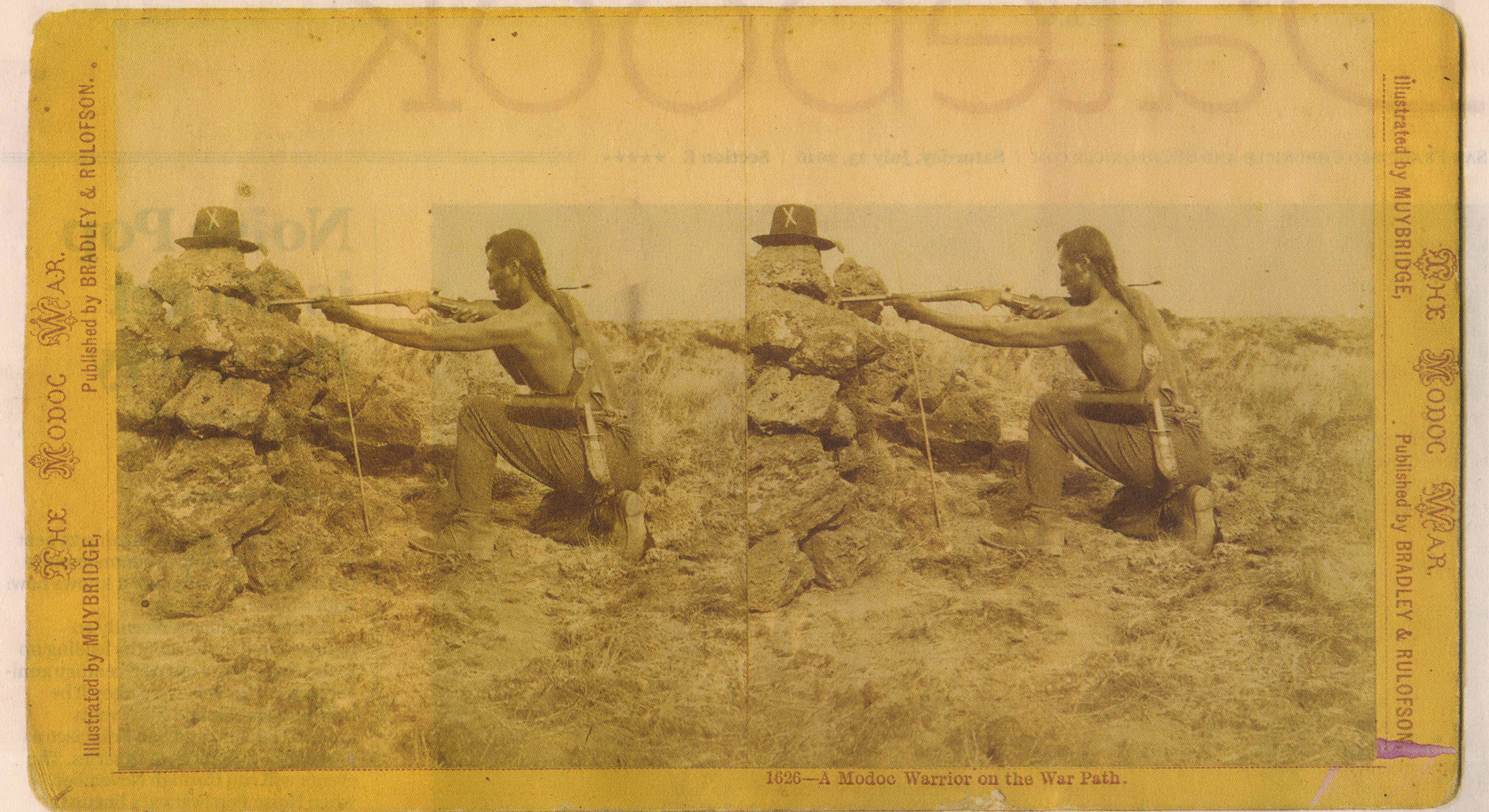


MODOCS SCALPING AND TORTURING PRISONERS

California Historical Society

“Modocs Scalping and Torturing Prisoners” by William Simpson, an 1872 engraving of a completely fabricated scene.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



“A Modoc Warrior on the War Path” (1873), a posed stereograph by Eadweard Muybridge from the series “The Modoc War.”

California Historical Society

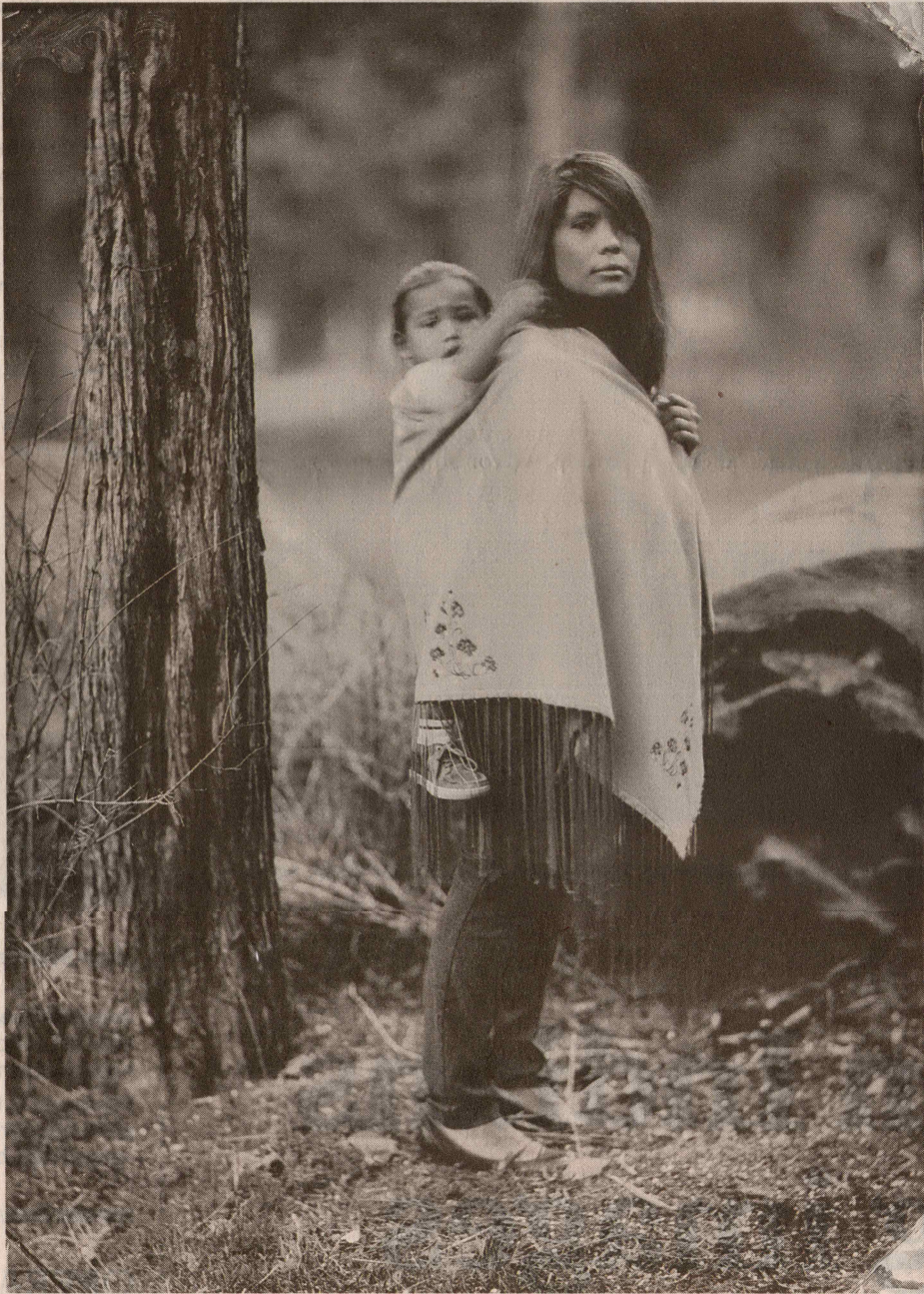
True, false: American Indians in art

Art from page E1

Two carefully honed, intensely engaging exhibitions newly opened at the California Historical Society present images of Northern California and southern Oregon’s Modoc tribe. “Sensationalist Portrayals of the Modoc War, 1872-73” examines reports of a sad chapter of American history, when a band of about 60 Indian fighters held off 600 U.S. Army troops over several months of violent skirmishes. “Native Portraits: Contemporary Tintypes by Ed Drew” features Drew’s revival of a 19th century photographic process to depict present-day Modocs as they choose to be seen. Presented side by side, the two shows add up to a quiet rebuke of photography’s cravenly racist portrayal of the first Americans.

Months of research

“Sensationalist Portrayals” began as research for a series of portraits Drew calls “The People of Klamath Falls.” Having been introduced to native people in the region at an athletic event (the Modoc Ancestral Run), Drew, as an African American of Puerto Rican heritage, became invested in the stories of their individual struggles and their community’s survival. He spent months meeting with tribal members, while also delving into the archives of the historical society. And he made pictures. Even as a student



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at the San Francisco Art Institute, attending on the G.I. Bill, he had received national attention for tintypes he made while on California Air National Guard active duty in Afghanistan — the first products of the antique process to be

made in a war zone since the American Civil War. (Full disclosure: I was president there at the time, and became interested in the work then.) Now, he applied the clumsy process — which requires subjects to be still for exposures measured in parts of a minute, not in fractions of a second — to his new project.

The sitters are pictured in their own clothes and jewelry, we are told in a wall text. It is clear that their costume, however, has been selected with an eye to their cultural heritage. Sometimes it is mixed with contemporary trappings: blue jeans, stylish shoes and the like. One man (“Monte,” the title says) holds a bird-wing smudge fan or shamanic wand in one hand, a smartphone in the other.

We don’t know whether a prop or garment that looks tradi-

tional is a treasured heirloom, a historically accurate copy or just something authentic-seeming chosen off the department-store shelf. It is possible that no one knows what the real thing once looked like. But in every case, of this we can be confident: This is how the subjects wish to pres-

Of this we can be confident: This is how the subjects wish to present themselves.

ent themselves. In a deeply important sense, this is who they are.

Tintypes are coated metal (not actually tin) sheets. Each is a unique object — the same plate that was sensitized in the photographer’s darkened tent, then exposed in the camera, is displayed now in the gallery. As a conse-

quence of the process, the works are frustratingly dark and small: You have to get very close to see them well.

The subject, trying not to move or blink, poses rigidly and looks hard at the camera. Hard at you. You stare back, but the subject’s gaze is longer, more profound, infinite. It’s an illusion (isn’t it?), but it is you who are exposed.

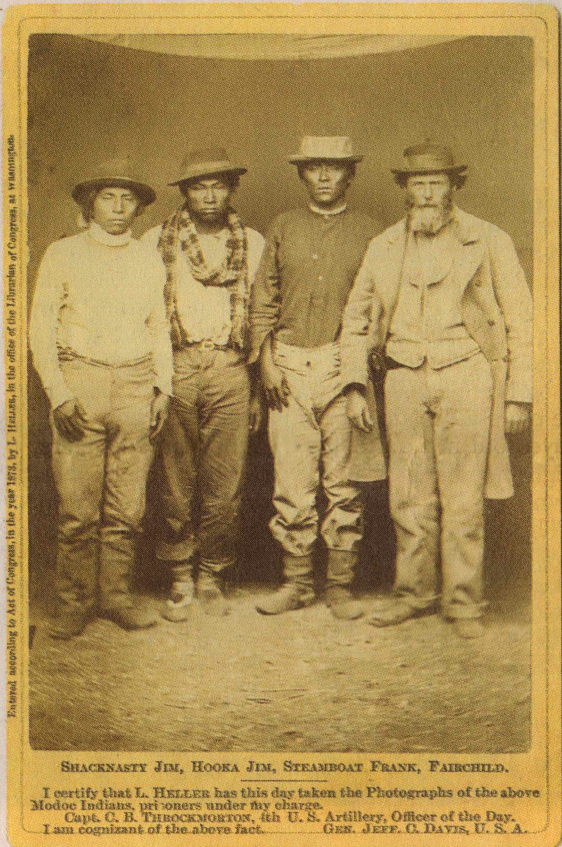
In the Modoc War show, the historical society contrasts Drew’s touching, discomforting, thoroughly contemporary images with photographs and other documents from another time. The effect, as intended, is intensely troubling. The exhibition tells the story of the doomed Modocs through the distorted lens of 19th century popular media. Lurid “news” stories, illustrat-

ed with completely fabricated scenes, fed the era’s appetite for the histrionic and its worst nightmare: scalping.

Staged and falsified

A muscled young Indian, crouched behind a rock, ostensibly firing a rifle, is pictured in a stereograph by one of the most famous photographers of the age, Eadweard Muybridge. It is titled “A Modoc Warrior on the War Path.” Of course, Muybridge was not on the battlefield with the necessary tripod, camera and portable darkroom. The man in the staged picture, we learn, is actually a Warm Springs Indian scout for the U.S. Army. In the language of our malformed history, he is one of the good guys.

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California Historical Society

Above: “Shacknasty Jim, Hooka Jim, Steamboat Frank, Fairchild” (1873), by Louis Herman Heller. Left: “Spainne” (2014-15), tintype by Ed Drew.

Native Portraits: Contemporary Tintypes by Ed Drew. Sensationalist Portrayals of the Modoc War, 1872-73: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. \$5; children free. California Historical Society, 678 Mission St., S.F. (415) 357-1848. www.californiahistorical society.org

PUZZLE ANSWERS

Crossword Puzzle

APPLECART	ABBOT
LUSITANIA	SURGE
PRECIPICE	SLIDE
ORC	CROAK
AKIN	WORSENS
DORIES	MONTEZ
INERT	MINUSSIGN
TALC	RANDS
SLOE	STOOPEDTO
PILOT	CRONES
GROANS	SPARROW
COEN	HITIT
ATALL	ABE
ASIDE	VINDIESSEL
MANOR	ESTIMATES
ENGRS	SHOESTORE

Sudoku Puzzle

9	3	7	4	8	1	6	2	5
8	4	6	9	5	2	3	1	7
2	5	1	6	3	7	9	4	8
5	7	2	1	9	8	4	3	6
1	9	3	5	4	6	7	8	2
4	6	8	2	7	3	5	9	1
3	1	9	8	6	5	2	7	4
7	8	5	3	2	4	1	6	9
6	2	4	7	1	9	8	5	3

New York Times Crossword

ATOMIC	MEATCASE	AFAR
MARINO	PIPEORGAN	NINE
FROZEN	WATERWORLD	KRIS
ASYE	CARRE	AESTHETE
RIP	SERTA	LGS
RIO	SAT	LAHR
ALIENCONTACT	PIANUTS	CAMAROS
SHAFT	TITANIC	SKYFALL
UTERUS	ANAL	ILE
PEET	XTRA	ORDERED
IN	SAP	ERR
BIGCONS	PIRACY	THEORY
ARC	DESTI	ARNAZ
ARID	MEIS	TRE
ASTO	TIMERS	SAWTHE
DEPARTED	ASPCA	EMBRYO
LANKARD	ROCKYS	LEEPER
ROSY	AWE	EEE
ENS	XEDIN	EPA
MISTRESS	BEERS	IDOS
ITSY	NOT	ORIOUS
KINGPIN	STEP	ERICAKANE
ABROUSE	HYDE	NERDIEST
NATTER		

Challenger

6	6	1	3	16
7	7	7	7	28
8	8	8	9	34
7	6	8	6	27
28	28	24	25	27

Chess

1. Qb7! (threatens)
2. Rxg7ch Qxg7
3. Qxg7ch Kxg7
4. a5 and the White pawn queens easily)