

Britt Thomas: *Indian Spirit*

Galveston Arts Center, 2020

www.galvestonartscenter.org/britt-thomas



➤ About this Exhibition

Indian Spirit documents the Port Neches-Groves Indians high school football traditions and the community who keeps those traditions alive. The photographs take an observational approach to PN-G's unique fusion of Texas football customs and Native American cultural appropriation that has existed in this community since 1925. The title, *Indian Spirit*, emerges from the name of PN-G's mascot and reflects the community's intense commitment to their motto of "Honor, Pride, Tradition."

Britt Thomas is a multidisciplinary lens-based artist based in Houston, TX. She frequently makes use of photography and video for her concept-driven work due to their uncanny ability to both reflect and manipulate reality. At the center of her art exploration is the idea of the shared experience; she seeks simple yet complex ways to analyze her relationship to others and to culture at large.

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➤ **Discussion and Discovery**

Concept: *Cultural Identity*

Culture is what we call the collection of common behaviors, customs, and values shared by a group of people over time, and can include things like food, language (including slang), clothing, tools, music, art, traditions, and beliefs. Culture is not limited to nationality or ethnicity; any group of people can share a common culture. For instance, those who share a workplace sometimes talk about their “office culture” or people of the same generation may feel connected through media in what’s called “popular culture.”

What different cultures can you recognize in *Indian Spirit*?

◇ _____	◇ _____
◇ _____	◇ _____

What culture(s) do you belong to? Together, these form your cultural **identity**.

◇ _____	◇ _____
◇ _____	◇ _____

Activity: Find a few items in your own home (or draw some) that represent your cultural identity. Pair up with a partner or group to compare these items.

- How are your items similar or different from your partner’s or group’s?
- What is your attitude toward each of the items you selected? (Proud Neutral Negative)
- How do you and your partner(s) feel toward *each other’s* items? –Be honest, but respectful.
- What does this tell you about your group’s cultural identity?

Imagine a person who is different from you in every way you can possibly think of—age, gender, education, place of origin, income level, family size, beliefs... Do you think they might also feel a connection to any of the items you chose? Are there any items they would not understand unless you explained? Why not?

Concept: *Cultural Appropriation*

Cultural appropriation is defined as “the act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture.”

Are there some circumstances where you think cultural appropriation is okay? Why/why not?

What, in your opinion, is the best way to show respect for someone else’s culture?

➤ Artistic Exploration and Practice

Different kinds of Photography

All photography involves three players: 1.) the photographer, 2.) the **subject**—the people, places, objects and events being recorded, and 3.) the viewer, or audience. One way to understand professional photography is to think about the intended audience—who the photographs have been made for. This helps you understand the photographer’s choices.

Commercial photography, for instance, is made for a **client**—a paying customer; its purpose is to portray the subject in an *appealing* or *flattering* way. The client is the one who chooses the subject and they usually give the photographer at least some direction.

Fine Art photography is more about artistic expression; it is meant to *challenge* or *move* the viewer or stir emotion. The artist makes all the choices about subject, positioning, lighting, color, framing, and technique, based on whatever he or she wants to convey.

Documentary photography—often associated with reporting or journalism, provides a straightforward and accurate representation of its subject without interfering with it. Documentary photography can also be presented as fine art, as is the case with *Indian Spirit*. In any case, the intended audience is the public. The work is meant to *inform* or *spark discussion*.

Try your hand at Documentary Photography

Using a camera of any type, take a day or a week to document the customs and culture of your home, neighborhood, school, or community. Try to get about 10 different shots. Most cameras come with some built-in photo editing software; try playing around with it by adjusting color, contrast, and cropping.

Share your photos and see what they communicate:

How do the images you captured reflect the culture of your subject? What behaviors, values, or customs were you able to show? Imagine a viewer who is from a different culture (or share your images with one, if you can!) How might that person interpret your images?

Even as a documentary photographer, your artistic choices can still influence what viewers think of your subject. Choices like what you choose to show, and what you leave out, angle, **scale**—how much space the subject takes up in the frame, which is determined by how close you got, color, etc.) all give your photographs a unique **perspective**, or point of view.

➤ Vocabulary Review

**culture
identity**

**subject
audience**

**client
scale**

**appropriation
perspective**

➤ Additional Resources

Artist’s statement and image gallery: britt-thomas.com/artwork/photography/indian-spirit