In 1898, citizens of thirty-five Native American nations arrived in present-day North Omaha to attend the Indian Congress. The unprecedented convening coincided with the Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition, Nebraska’s world’s fair. Over two million fairgoers viewed Expo displays showcasing American agriculture and industry. They also toured Native American encampments and attended Wild West shows, events that entwined anthropology and entertainment. Marking the end of a devastating century of Federal Indian policy, fair organizers intended to celebrate the United States’ expansion into Indigenous territories.

Wendy Red Star (Apsáalooke, born 1981) engages these complex historical dynamics with a life-size replica Expo booth of the kind that displayed farm produce, accompanied by American flags and fanfare. In place of apples and potatoes, Red Star arranged hundreds of meticulously-cut out photographic reproductions of Indian Congress members’ portraits taken by Frank Rinehart (1861–1928) in his studio in downtown Omaha. Exceptional for his time, Rinehart recorded these individuals’ names and tribal affiliations, preserving an invaluable record of delegation members and their families. Grouped by sovereign Native nation on tiered display tables spanning the gallery’s length, the portrait cut-outs manifest the magnitude of this Indigenous gathering.

Many citizens of Red Star’s Apsáalooke (Crow) community posed for Rinehart, including White Swan, an artist and U.S. military scout whose larger-than-life portrait welcomes visitors into her reimagined exposition. Through the intimate process of cutting out full-length, bust, and profile portraits, Red Star acquainted herself with Rinehart’s sitters. Details of their poses and attire raised questions about their experience during the Indian Congress and how their attendance might have been a quiet act of resistance. Fair organizers positioned Indigenous people as ethnographic foils to the so-called American progress on display at the Expo. However, Red Star’s arrangement of the photographs inverts this logic by emphasizing the agency of the individual and the power of the collective.

One year after the Indian Congress, Rinehart photographed Apsáalooke people on their homelands in Pryor, Montana—Red Star’s hometown. Primarily taken by Rinehart’s assistant Adolph F. Muhr (later the assistant to photographer Edward Curtis), these stereographs picture community members near summertime gathering locations and culturally-significant sites. The artist positioned this second group of images on a separate table decorated with gold-tipped goose feathers and framed by velvet curtains. Behind it, Red Star’s photo mural depicting modern-day Baáhpuuo (Where They Shoot The Rock), a sacred site and home to powerful beings known as the Awakkulé (Keepers Of The Land), reorients gallery visitors within Apsáalooke lands.

Based on archival research and visits to historical sites in Omaha and Montana, Red Star’s visual scholarship weaves together images of the past with her own experiences. Her reclaimed Expo booth metaphorically reunites the Indian Congress, reconfiguring the history of American empire to honor Indigenous individuals and their stories.
About the Artist
Baaéetitchish (One Who Is Talented) references the Apsáalooke name Wendy Red Star (Apsáalooke, born 1981) received while visiting home. It is the original name of her grand-uncle, Clive Francis Dust, Sr., known in the family for his creativity as a cultural keeper. Red Star works across media to explore the intersections of Native American ideologies and colonialist structures historically and in contemporary society. Raised on the Crow Indian Reservation in Montana, her work is informed by her cultural heritage and her research in photographic archives and museum collections. Her photographs, installations, and fiber works present and reframe this research, offering new and unexpected perspectives that are at turns inquisitive, witty, and unsettling. Red Star holds a BFA from Montana State University, Bozeman, and an MFA in sculpture from the University of California, Los Angeles. She lives and works in Portland, OR.

The Riley CAP Gallery
The Karen and Doug Riley Contemporary Artists Project Gallery presents nationally- and internationally-recognized living artists, as well as emerging talent, selected by Joslyn curators. A rotating schedule of carefully focused exhibitions examine how artists engage with the world today and respond to the issues that challenge them creatively, bringing new perspectives on contemporary art to Nebraska.