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Mobile Images of the Navajo Nation

Two artists turn a vintage Step-Van into a photography studio to create portraits of Navajo men, women, and children



E Pluribus Unum: Dinétah

Photo courtesy Axle Projects.

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In 2010, Santa Fe, New Mexico–based artists Matthew Chase-Daniel and Jerry Wellman outfitted a 1970 Chevy Step-Van—the kind of vehicle that served as a bread or ice-cream truck back in the day—as a mobile art-exhibition venue. Since then they've opened the space to a series of local artists for temporary shows, and taken part in art events and projects around the region.

They also turned the van, dubbed [Axle Contemporary](#), into a photography studio on wheels. For the *E Pluribus Unum* project, they parked it in various locations in Santa Fe (2012) and Albuquerque (2014) and invited passersby in for a portrait. Sitters were also asked to write about what the American national motto “E Pluribus Unum” (“out of many, one”) means to them. The results were included in gallery shows.

In September, 2016, Chase-Daniel and Wellman took the Axle van into the Navajo nation (*Dinétah* in the Navajo language), which straddles the New Mexico/Arizona border. Setting up shop in communities including Gallup, New Mexico, and Window Rock, Arizona (during the Navajo Nation Fair), they took more than 800 black-and-white portraits of native people, each holding an object of significance for them. The artists gave every volunteer sitter one print of the photo, free of charge, and pasted another onto the outside of the van, turning it into a collective, mobile collage-portrait of the community.

E Pluribus Unum: Dinétah will culminate in a show of the photos, and written reflections on “E Pluribus Unum” by the portrait subjects, at the [Navajo Nation Museum](#) in Window Rock in 2017. An accompanying book will “remain as a portrait of a community in this place and time that can be shared with other communities and with future generations,” the artists write.



