Becoming a *Métis* Artist

What is Métis art? I have called myself a Métis artist with confidence for only about twenty years. I'm fifty-seven. Before that, I just considered myself an artist, which I figured meant being creatively free. I saw art as an oasis, separate from the routine world. My art world consisted of an apartment studio, galleries, artist-run centres, art books and magazines, and other artists. Then it included art school. There, too, I was encouraged to practice art as self-directed creative activity unburdened by social responsibilities other than those I imposed on myself. Not that I avoided the concerns of the world altogether. As a critical art writer, and editor, I engaged political, environmental, gender, and Indigenous issues throughout the 90s. I just didn't let these issues affect my art much. However, by my mid-30s I grew restless with aesthetic free play. I wanted my work to have meaning and use beyond myself and the art world, to have an audience other than the art crowd. I spent years building my skills, now I wanted to deploy them in a meaningful way by engaging my Métis identity and community. This essay, memoir really, is a brief account of how I became a *Métis* artist.

Like many Métis born during the century-long Great Silence that followed the 1885 Resistance, I grew up knowing we had "Native blood" but not understanding what that meant. My Dad's great grandparents, Laurent (1840-1921) and Eleanor (1852-1912), fled Red River because of Laurent's participation in the Red River Resistance (1869-70). In 1874, they purchased river lot #7 (269 acres) on the south bank of the North Saskatchewan River, across from Fort Edmonton. Eleven years later, Laurent was jailed for six months for treason and threatened with hanging for his association with Riel and for his rumoured role in the Batoche Resistance. While in prison, Chief Papaschase supported Laurent and Eleanor's large family. In 1896, when the region became swollen with colonists, the family abandoned Edmonton for the refuge community St. Paul des Métis. Sometime later, Laurent returned Chief Papaschase benevolence, building him a home near St. Paul for his retirement. The "Garneau Village" in St. Paul, Alberta, is marked by a large cairn. The Edmonton River lot is officially known as the Garneau neighbourhood. In 1953, the City erected a plaque at Adar Park acknowledging Laurent as a "farmer, community organizer and musician," but not his Métis heritage, or his wife. A later sign, at the "Garneau tree," recognizes them both but not their Métisness. I was born and raised on the other side of the river. Our family visited the older marker, and my Dad told these stories, but I sensed that this was family, not public, business.

I had a typical youth on the edge of downtown. My three brothers, sister, friends, and I went for day-long bike hikes in the River Valley. We drank slurpees, wore bell-bottoms, and watched *Batman* and *Gunsmoke* in black and white, and later *Happy Days* and *The Love Boat* in colour. Métis identity and politics were not on my radar. Our neighbourhood (near 124 St. and Stony Plain Rd.) had a mix of families: middle-class, poor, and really poor; a range of white immigrants, "Indian"[i] and Métis (though I did not hear that word growing up). We played together, oblivious of race, until adolescence (mid-1970s) when divisions formed, and prejudice ruled. While I was rarely racialized (my appearance is more European than Native) racism did affect my alliances and safety, who I hung around with and where. There were times when our group was verbally intimidated and physically attacked for reasons unknown—at least until the specific and cruel words came. I wish I could tell stories of early racial enlightenment, how I saw myself as a proud Métis in my teens, how I defended my First Nations friends. I do remember

some of the latter, mostly its futility and feeling bewildered. I recall poignant conversations with guys who knew we were being funneled into different paths by "life"—a word I now know means anti-Native racism. I remember how defeated they were, conscious of the limits imposed on them that had nothing to do with their positive potential, all before they were thirteen. I continue to be astonished by how subtle and thorough colonial thinking, feeling, and doing remains.

My Grandfather, Robert (Alf) (1909-1987), looked "Indian" but, as far as I know, no one mentioned or asked about his heritage. Like many Métis of that era, he passed as Euro-Canadian. How else could he have been an Assistant Fire Chief (Don't ask, don't tell?)? When my Dad, Richard Garneau (1937-2015), took an active interest in things Métis his mother was upset. She denied that she married outside of the white race, and felt his raking up history (especially priestly collaboration in colonization; Indian Residential Schools; etc.) was sinful. For my 19th birthday he gave me Murray Dobbins' *One and a Half Men*, which is about his great uncle, the Métis political leader Jim Brady (1908-1967?), the man who, in 1953, encouraged him to learn more about his identity. The book showed that our family stories, that we, were part of a larger story, part of local history. Still, Métis consciousness and responsibility were a revelation I eluded for a few more years.

I always wanted to be an artist. I admired my mother, Noreen Monroe's (1939-), paintings, her skill, taste, inventive creativity in numerous media, and absorbed her devotion to van Gogh. At eighteen (1980), I had my first commercial art exhibition at the Bear Claw Gallery in Edmonton. I made small sculptures of men who I knew from the Marion Centre (homeless shelter) where we went to church. As a teen, I spent a lot of time downtown, at the library or in Winston Churchill Park playing chess with these guys, listening to stories of their youth and living rough. It seemed natural to make their portraits. Lelde Muehlenbachs, an arts reporter from the *Edmonton Journal* asked about my Métis identity. I was puzzled. I don't think I had heard that word used in relation to us. "What do you mean?" "You're a descendant of Laurent Garneau, right?" "Yes." "And you make sculptures of Native men, and you are showing in an Indian art gallery, right?" It was quite a shock. The gallery was a neighbourhood hangout with art I liked. Rather than playing up the Métis angle, her headline read, "Move over Joe Fafard, here comes David Garneau." And the photo caption read, "David Garneau with some of his expressive figurines—he has trouble with women" (a reference to my only making sculptures of men). Double mortification! The encounter led me to my first serious talk with my Dad about our heritage. It turned out that all along he had been taping interviews with elders, burrowing into archives, assembling genealogies, and making notes toward a grand retirement project.

In the early 1990s, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, a singer, performance artist and Papaschase descendant, gently told me that as a Métis man in these difficult times I had responsibilities, which I continued to tip-toe around for a few more years. I worked as an ally through my writing[ii] but felt anxious at what seemed like surrendering my autonomy as an artist if I engaged Indigeneity more personally. Despite Cheryl's recognition and invitation, I only admitted "having Métis heritage," which acknowledges blood and history but not contemporary meanings and responsibilities. I was uncertain about how to wear it. Who is Métis, anyway? I discussed the possible contemporary, political and artistic meanings of being Métis with a few, mostly First Nations, people. Joane Cardinal Schubert was my informal mentor. I made some Métis themed

artwork before 2000, but it was inconsistent and coy. In 1997, I was invited to show along-side Joane in what was to be a western-themed Alberta Biennial the next year. She did a cowboys and Indians installation; I made "How the West Was…..," a sprawling, multi-paneled oil painting depicting the colonization of Western Canada as portrayed through a collage of popular, non-Indigenous media. The panels were arranged in six 'pages' like a comic book[iii]. While there are references to Red River and Batoche, I saw the work as complicating Canadian history and the politics of representation rather than fully engaging my Métisness.

The Atonement Home was a shelter in Edmonton for children, mostly First Nations and Métis, who were removed from their parents for a weekend or up to a year. It resembled a Residential School:[iv] it was run by Franciscan nuns, had a nun's floor, girl's dorms, boy's dorms, common eating and play areas. In July and August everyone went to camp. I worked one summer there (1978), and six months at the city residence (1980). In 1999, I made *Black Pepper* (4 min.), a video about one of my experiences working at the Lac Ste. Anne camp. A young man (Cory Cardinal, Tsuut'ina) listens silently to an off-camera male voice (mine) who tells the story of his punishing a Native boy under the direction of a nun twenty-one years earlier. Cory is meant to be the boy now a man. I was an agent of this colonial institutional, and at 16, also its subject. My small violence can stand in the viewers' imagination for larger ones that happened at Indian Residential Schools and our various complicities. Joane Cardinal Schubert assisted with the video: it was shot outside her studio, she found the actor and offered suggestions about the ethics of such work. It was the first time I made art with Indigenous collaboration and consciousness.

In 1999, I moved to Saskatchewan to teaching painting and drawing at the University of Regina. I quickly fell into the Indigenous arts community. Bob Boyer (1948-2004), who I met a year earlier in Calgary, became a friend and mentor.[v] On Cheryl L'Hirondelle's sponsorship I joined the Sâkêwêwak Artist-Run Centre's board. Lori Blondeau, from Tribe Artist-Run Centre, Saskatoon, curated *Black Pepper*. In addition to the warm welcome from these folks, Neal McLeod, Bea Lavallee, and others, my transition to Métis artist was further encouraged by my father's publication in 1999 of his life's work. *Canadian History: a Distinct Point of View* is a sprawling website[vi] (http://metis-history.info/author.shtml) featuring, among other things, an extensive Garneau genealogy. He also wrote about Laurent Garneau for the book *Métis Legacy* (2001).[vii] That he was publically calling himself Métis made it impossible for me not to. To pass seemed like a betrayal, like participating in the erasure.

"Cross Addressing" (2002)[viii] is a comic book style painting of two men, one in headdress, the other looking like a cowboy. Both wonder if the other is Métis. I think of myself as the one in western drag and Bob Boyer as the fellow in regalia. Bob was Métis but also danced in First Nations' powwows. The painting reflects on the range of Métis identities and display possibilities. "Ways of Knowing; Ways of Being" (2003)[ix] is a similarly themed diptych. On the left a bison skull rests on a grandfather, suggesting learning from the land. On the right, a cow skull rests on a pile of books, implying book learning and domestication. I hoped viewers would consider the virtues and necessity of both but find themselves leaning one way a little more than the other. The paintings reveal my continued journey through mixed feelings.

In the mid-2000s, I toured up and down the Carleton Trail looking for Métis sites. At first, I sought out the official ones—markers, forts, museums. Later, with the help of Métis Elders and

knowledge keepers, I visited homier and almost invisible ones: graveyards, homesteads, road allowances. I also made a series of map paintings showing how cities like Winnipeg and Edmonton began as Métis settlements with long narrow river lots. “Red River 1870s (beaded map)” (2006)[x] is the first time I moved away from European-style illusionistic representational painting and toward something closer to Métis material culture. I visited Métis clothing in museum collections and came upon the idea of making small dots to imitate beading. I had not yet seen Christi Belcourt’s phenomenal paintings or the “dot” paintings of the Aboriginal artists from Papunya, Australia. Once I had, I came up with a hybrid style combining a Métis ‘beaded’ screen with an illusionistic under-painting.

In 2008, my partner, Sylvia Ziemann, and I drove a friend to fill out her forms for the Indian Residential School settlement. It was a long process, so I wandered the RCMP grounds (Regina). Suddenly, a young man I did not know jogged up to me. Pointing to an older man near a tipi behind him, he said that the Elder wanted me to come to the sweat. I said I was busy; I had to work. He explained that the Elder was inviting me to a sweat. It was a life altering experience. Afterwards, I told the Elder that I was an artist and wanted to commemorate the moment. I knew I could not paint the lodge, but was there something else I could represent. He paused, then, with a jerk of his head and pointing of his lips, he said, “You can paint that.” He seemed to indicate the top of the tipi we changed clothes in. “Vision” (2008)[xi] was the first of a dozen large paintings in this series. Each features a tipi at an important event I attended; mostly Métis events: Back to Batoche, Arcand’s fiddle camp, etc. The bottom suggests the skin around a rib cage; while the upper part implies an inverted metaphysical body, stripped and extending into the sky. The ‘beading’ in many of these paintings is based on Métis beadwork in the Royal Alberta and Glenbow Museums. Some include hidden images of animals.

I have made more than a hundred Métis themed paintings since moving to Regina. I have also curated exhibitions, written papers, and given talks on Indigenous topics throughout Turtle Island, Australia, and New Zealand. More recently, I have returned to performance art. In *Dear John; Louis David Riel,* dressed as Louis Riel, I accost sculptures of Prime Minister John A. Macdonald across Canada. So far, I have taunted and then slighted statues in Regina, Kingston, and Ottawa.[xii]

Last year, I was honoured with a commission to make public art for my old hometown. The Tawatina, a new LRT and pedestrian bridge over the North Saskatchewan River, will lie a few kilometers east of the Garneau River lot. With the assistance of mostly young Indigenous artists in Edmonton and Regina, and with the council of First Nations and Métis knowledge keepers in Edmonton (especially Elder Jerry Saddleback and Jo-Anne Saddleback), my team and I are producing more than 500 acrylic paintings that will be attached to the 200-meter-long ceiling above the pedestrian walkway. The paintings are on dibond (weatherproof sheets of aluminum sandwiching a plastic core) cut into animal, canoe, plant, Métis clothing, and other shapes. These shapes and the paintings that cover them will have Métis and First Nations themes and styles relating to material culture of the region that was collected by the Royal Alberta Museum; the plants and animals of the river; but also the stories of the region entrusted to me. The project is scheduled to be installed in the summer of 2020.

The best part of this work is extensive community consultations, which means visiting people. These knowledge keepers have revealed the world beneath, before, and unseen by the city. As mentioned at the start of this essay, Laurent and Eleanor Garneau were close friends of Chief Papaschase whose band's reserve occupied what is now much of South Edmonton. They were disenfranchised of their land and dispersed to make way for colonists; an injustice yet to be redressed. The Tawatina project (and other creative projects I did there in 2017 with Cheryl L'Hirondelle) has afforded me the opportunity to work with Chief Calvin Bruneau, descendant of Papaschase. I am honoured to renew the ancient relationship.

The phrase 'Métis artist' suggests two paths depending on which word you emphasize. There are Métis *artists* and there are *Métis* artists. Métis *artist*s are Métis people who do not necessarily or consistently express their heritage in their work. They are artists first. They have assimilated into the dominant art world. They are free. *Métis* artists, however, take Louis Riel's prophecy seriously. His most famous quotation is "My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back."[xiii] Dispossessed of land and livelihoods, and impoverished by colonial invasion, after the failure of the 1885 Batoche Resistance most Métis retreated to the margins or tried to assimilate. Culture was difficult to sustain and advance when survival occupied the hands and minds of most Métis. Riel saw this coming. A poet as well as a political leader, he knew that while political action could result in material improvement, aesthetic work, politics by other means, was necessary to sustain people spiritually, to move them beyond reason. Displaying and contemplating your people's art unifies and deepens us. And making art—beading, sewing, singing, dancing, storytelling, engaging in the intimate, handmade re/production of our material culture—binds hearts to hands to minds, and people together as a People. Art is essential to Métis revival. To proudly place 'Métis' in front of 'artist' is to recognize that community is inseparable from your creativity. Calling yourself a *Métis* artist is a public declaration that you belong to a Nation; that a People claims you not only as a member, but also recognizes you as one of their cultural workers. This does not require turning your back on the mainstream art world; it just means that you do not center yourself there. Your work participates in Métis creative sovereignty.

I was not born an artist, or with full Métis consciousness. I have come to both identities slowly, sometimes reluctantly. I had to learn these roles. I am learning still. Embracing Indigeneity meant waking to the fact that my previous comprehension of art was, in many ways, an expression of privilege that I occupied only by suppressing my Métisness. The art books, magazines, and the art world that I aspired to were almost completely a Euro-American one. At the time, I could not see my Métis self in those spaces. To be both Indigenous and an artist required finding new art communities, new art histories, new ways to be Métis *and* an artist.

Otipemisiwak is a Cree nickname for the Métis. It translates as "the people who own themselves." It recognizes Métis status as an independent people controlled neither by First Nations nor European (later Canadian) protocols exclusively. The word suggests to me not individual self-ownership but a collective autonomy. For me, Métis art is individual expression that comes from a collective culture and community need.

For me, being a *Métis* artist means a daily choice to put community and self in dialogue. It does not mean that I am subservient to Métis people and culture—that I am their aesthetic

instrument—though that may sometimes be true. It means that my practice is often an extra-personal struggle to discover, negotiate, invent, and picture contemporary Métis identity, aesthetic forms, meanings, and complexity. This includes learning and extending Métis material culture through, for example, traditional beading. It may also require the creation of works that seem to disrupt, push, and even breech settled notions of who we are. Customary art practices help culture endure; contemporary art practices help culture adapt.

I am a Métis contemporary artist. My paintings are informed by Métis culture but, as a bicultural person living in a colonized territory, I also engage art styles beyond the Indigenous. This is a means of being legible to non-Indigenous audiences, of engaging in a common discourse, but also as a means of disrupting the dominant visual understanding of Indigenous people and of the land now known as Canada. It is also important for our cultural growth to develop images of Métisness that engage but exceed 18th or 19th century tropes. Being a Métis contemporary artist also means that I am Indigenous, I am allied with other First Peoples here on Turtle Island and around the world. Being a Métis artist is not only about promoting our culture; it is also about holding an Indigenous world view. Stripping out the harmful aspects of colonialism from my consciousness and behaviour and learning and embracing non-colonial Indigenous ways is an on-going struggle. For me, Métis is more becoming, than being. It is a network of relations and a personal history of doings. Métis begins in blood and territory, but only continues and deepens with will, work, and relationships.

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[i] While the word "Indian" is a white misnomer for people native to Turtle Island, a place mistaken by Columbus as the Indies, some (now) First Nations people, particularly in the United States, continue to identify with the word. I use it here, in quotations, as it was used in Edmonton in the 1960s to refer to First Nations people. That is within a racialist lens that only recognizes "Indians" as those who look like Natives are thought to look, the racial phenotypes of darker skin, eyes and hair, epicanthal eye-folds, etc.

[ii] For example: "Beyond the Pale: Looking for E/Quality Outside the White Imaginary." *Parallelogramme*. Summer 1994. Vol. 20, #1: 34-43.

[iii] Each page is 180 x 120cm. The total size of the work is approximately 180 x 1000cm. 1997-2003. Collection of the Glenbow Museum, Calgary (2008).

[iv] It operated like one in previous generations but because it was operated by the church and had not federal involvement, attendees were not able to file claims under the IRS Settlement Agreement: http://www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/FULL%20List%20of%20Schools-%20ENGLISH.pdf

[v] While his academic colleague, I was clearly his junior and learned a great deal from Bob before his death in 2004. In 2003, the Royal Canadian Artists Society had an exhibition, *Lodestar* (Kenderdine Art Gallery, Saskatoon) for members and their mentees. I was honoured when he choose me as his mentee.

[vi] http://metis-history.info/author.shtml This website was launched in 1999.

[vii] Leah Dorion, R.D. (Dick) Garneau, Margaret Gross, and Lawrence Barkwell. "Alberta Métis Leaders." *Métis Legacy.* Barkwell, Lawrence; Dorion, Leah; and Prefontaine, Darren; eds. (Louis Riel Institute; Gabriel Dumont Institute of Métis Studies and Applied Research) Pemmican Publications Inc. Winnipeg. 105-114.

[viii] "Cross Addressing." Oil on canvas. 153 x 122.5 cm. 2002. Collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

[ix] "Ways of Knowing; Ways of Being," diptych, oil on canvas (each 4' x 5'), 2003.

Collection of Indian and Northern Affairs.

[x] "Red River 1870s (beaded map)." Acrylic on canvas. 122 x 153cm. 2006. Collection University of Saskatchewan.

[xi] "Vision." Acrylic on canvas. 122 x 153cm. 2008. Collection of the City of Regina.

[xii] . Curator: Blair Fornwald. Dunlop Art Gallery/Victoria Square Park, Regina, SK. Nov. 16. 2014; and *Dear John; Louis David Riel*. Curator: Erin Sutherland. Queens University, Kingston, ON, City Park, Jan. 10. 2015. file:///C:/Users/garneaud/Desktop/Exhibitions/Performance%20Art/Media/CanadianArt-Garneau.pdf

[xiii] I can't cite the source. Some claim Riel said it not long before he was executed for treason, November 16, 1885. But the sentence does not appear in writing before 1985 when Métis artist Edward Poitras, having heard about it from Tim Low, put it in the middle of a page in *New Breed* magazine's centennial commemoration of the 1885 Batoche Resistance. *New Breed: Voice of the Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan*, Vol. 16, No. 3, March, 1985. Also see: Edward Poitras. "House of Charlemagne." *Close Encounters: The Next 500 Years*. Sherry Farrell Racette, ed. 2011. 116-118.