"Contemporary Métis Art: Prophetic Obligation and the Individual Talent"

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“Cross Addressing” (2002) is a painting of two men: one dressed as a cowboy, the other in comic-book-Sioux regalia. They share a common question and thought balloon: “Métis?” If both are, the image presents Métisness as an expanded field, one that includes seeming-cowboys and might-be-Indians. The picture also suggests that Métis appearance is not always easy to read, even for Métis. If either man is of mixed blood, they may be looking for signs of kinship to melt the ice. On the other hand, perhaps one or both are anxious about their Métis status and have adopted over-determined markers of ‘cowboy’ or ‘Indian’ in order to fit into the accepted binary. Only now they are worried they might be found out in this encounter with a ‘real’ cowboy or Indian or, more puzzling still, with another Métis in drag.

If either cartoon character *is* Métis, the viewer may wonder why they are not clothed *bois brûlé* style, with iconic floral beading and sash. That a Métis might choose to wear another’s outfit raises thoughts about costume and the flexibility of our identity displays. If neither is Métis, perhaps the cowboy and Indian are scanning with suspicion for signs of not-quite Aboriginality or not-quite Whiteness; someone who can ‘pass’ for the other;

an Other whose existence raises questions about purity and self-representation and who destabilizes the neat cowboy/Indian dichotomy. The painting reminds us that the apparent division between Canada's founding "races" is blurred. Not only are there 389,785[i] self-identified Métis-Canadians, but many First Nations people and descendants of Settlers also have mixed blood.[ii]

"Cross Addressing" is a self-portrait and remembrance of my first meeting with Bob Boyer (1948-2004). The picture-me mulls the idea that 'Métis' can include a traditional powwow dancer, [iii] while the picture-Bob contemplates the meaning of a cowboy Métis. The painted men are in permanent suspense, unable to satisfy their (or our) suspicions or desires. Confirmation only arises in cross-address across dress. Only by talking with each other outside the frame, beyond costume, can the could-be cowboy, possible Indian, or maybe Métis, learn who is who and what is what. Métis is an open question negotiated through discourse and relationships rather than a narrow inquiry in search of a definitive answer.

However, while Métis is a continuum rather than a fixed identity, it is not boundless. Despite our variety, we are held in orbit by common histories, family and culture, geography, ancient and recent alliances, and, for many, resonant stories of coming to greater Métis consciousness and presence. And not all Métis are as conflicted as our painted men may be. Some grew up in a culture that, while stifled outside, burned warm in the home.

Two art trajectories follow from these complementary experiences. On one hand, there are conservative regional artists, folks who positively and literally conserve and revive traditional Métis cultural forms. They bead, quill, tell stories, sing, jig and fiddle as a means of defining and rejuvenating the people. On the other hand, there are "artworld" artists for whom being Métis is defining but not limiting. They tend to engage issues of Aboriginality generally—post-colonial; stereotype smashing; Indigenous world-view promoting; etc. (Edward Poitras, Bob Boyer, Jason Baerg, Rick Rivet, Lori Blondeau, Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskew, Kevin Mackenzie, Dylan A.T. Miner, etc.)—but they rarely produce Métis specific art, that is art whose subjects or designs are identifiably Métis.

Springing as a *métissage* of both trends is a third group who mix an understanding of the old forms with the aspirations of artworld artists. Some use Métis design as a base from which to develop a distinctive contemporary Métis art (Christi Belcort, Sherry Farrell Racette, etc.). Others use any means necessary to communicate Métis lived experience. Sometimes this is expressed didactically as in the showing of Métis life (Leah Dorion, Jim Logan, Dennis J. Weber, etc.), sites and faces (KC Adams, Rosalie Favell, etc.). Other times, Métisness is a complex in-look and out-look; a hybrid attitude taken to the self and world (Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Tim Moore, and others).

To identify as a *Métis* artist, and not just as an artist, is to resist assimilation and to recognize that your practise emerges from social, political and historical necessity. If there is such a thing as Métis art, it is not simply art made by individual Métis but works that also express the larger Métis community (past and present), art that is recognizably

of a people and unique world-view. Métis is as Métis does. For many Métis, this attitude is a prophetic obligation.

Métis are the descendants of the offspring of First Nations women and European men who organized themselves separately from their parental cultures in the 18th century. We have home communities, but most of us are urban. We have a language, Michif, which a few speak.[iv] We have distinct histories, oral and material cultures. Our collective identity was forged through resistance to fur trade monopolies and colonial expansion, tested in two battles[v] with government troops and chastened with the execution of Louis Riel for treason in1885. Many Métis were displaced during subsequent rapid colonization and indoctrinated in residential schools and in public schools alongside our First Nations cousins. Some are members of the 'stolen generation:'[vi] the state-sponsored adoption of native children to Euro-Canadian families within and beyond Canada's borders.[vii]

Following the Batoche Resistance of 1885—also known as the Riel or Northwest Rebellion, and to the Cree, ê-kî-mâyakamikahk, "where/when it went wrong"[viii]—the Canadian governments endeavoured to erase the Métis from the national imagination and the actual landscape. As Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's Métis policy famously stated: "Half Breeds must be either white or Indian." "If they are Indians, they go with the tribe; if they are half-breeds they are whites."[ix] Métis as a fluid space between and among the red and white binaries was difficult for the colonial mind to conceive and impossible to permit without changing the (conscious) nature of the emerging nation. After they were defeated, chased and cheated of their lands, some Métis did join their First Nations relations on reservations and many more were seemingly, but not seamlessly, assimilated into Settler culture. There was a scattering of resilient folks who held onto their remote communities; some formed new ones; others were forced to became 'squatters', Road Allowance people[x]—literally living in the margins between the fences of the new arrivals (for whom they were a source of cheap labour). This was the period of The Big Silence, the Forgotten Years,[xi] when the people kept their heads down.

Well, not everyone remained bowed. Activists such as Jim Brady[xii], Malcolm Norris, Peter Tomkins Jr., Joe Dion and Felix Callihoo fought for Métis rights beginning in the 1930s. By 1938, the provincial government signed the Métis Population Betterment Act and created twelve Métis 'colonies' in northern Alberta. Though, two decades later these were reduced to eight, they remain the only Métis reserve-like settlements in Canada. A wider political re-awakening, though, had to wait three more decades for the rise of global Indigenous activism. Then leaders including Harry Daniels, Elmer Ghostkeeper, Jim Sinclair, Clément Chartier, Howard Adams, Yvon Dumont, and many others, revived the struggle, eventually winning constitution recognition of the Métis as an Aboriginal people in 1982. [xiii] Land claims are pending.

At the same time, a handful of artists identifying as Métis emerged to national prominence, including Bob Boyer, Edward Poitras, Rick Rivet, Sherry Farrell Racette, and Rosalie Favell.[xiv] This trickle widened to a stream by the 1990s as more Métis made art and more artists identified as Métis, including some First Nations and Non-Status people who publicly acknowledged the Métis aspect of their lineage.[xv]

While the constitutional amendment (section 35.2) recognizes the Métis as an Aboriginal people along with the First Nations and Inuit, it does not define membership. Who is Métis in the eyes of the Canadian government and who counts as Métis to the Métis remain a heated debate. There is not enough space here to fairly outline the arguments,[xvi] only to acknowledge that Métis membership is contested in the political world, but this essay, emerging as it does not from that realm but from the Indigenous artworld, considers Métis artists as those who publicly identify as such, have Métis lineage and are accepted by the Indigenous artworld.

The Indigenous artworld—composed of Aboriginal artists, curators, gallerists, publishers, critics and academics who recognize themselves as participants in a common body—is barely four decades old and still finding its feet. It is consolidating itself and struggling to comprehend its constituents. Until recently, for example, Inuit art lay outside the contemporary Indigenous artworld. Even living Inuit artists were rarely shown alongside non-ethnographic First Nations art and were almost never written about within the current critical context. This is changing, in part, because the works of artists such as Annie Pootoogook and Shuvinai Ashoona are reaching into the space between the two worlds and because curators are seeing the familiar in what was once thought alien. Métis art emerged differently; it was not 'developed' by government policy as (commercialized) Inuit art was. For the most part, art school/artworld Métis progressed alongside their First Nations cousins and joined the Indigenous artworld as colleagues. It is important to note that the professional curation of Aboriginal art by Indigenous curators has as a matter of course always included Métis artists.[xvii] Jim Logan and Bob Boyer were founding members of SCANA (Society of Canadian Artists Native Ancestry) and, more recently, the ACC (Aboriginal Curatorial Collective) has many Métis members.

Currently, there is little division between artworld Métis and First Nations artists. In fact, it could be said that most artworld Métis artists make Indigenous art rather than Métis art. One of our most important artists, Bob Boyer, for example, rarely cited Métis art or history. His vision was more expansive. Boyer's *Blanket Statement* series combined Cree and Souan design elements with Modernist abstraction to create beautiful yet painful evocations of the colonial experience. However, knowing that he was Métis adds poignancy to paintings such as "A Minor Sport in Canada" (1985) that include both aspects of his heritage. While Métis artists critique colonialism, it is harder to convincingly assume an us-vs-them posture when you are the product of both us-*and*-them. In his later career, Boyer's work quoted sources far and wide across the Indigenous Americas, and in the end reached for pure forms that while identifiably Indigenous sought a personal, abstract visual language for the ineffable and universal.

Edward Poitras, Governor General's Award winner and the first Aboriginal artist to represent Canada at the Venice Biennial (1995) is our most cerebral artist. Working experimentally and in a variety of media, he makes clever and eviscerating objects that engage the big themes of history and colonization but always through local examples. He has recently taken on historic sites, memorials (Treaty Four) and public buildings (the Manitoba legislature) and either deconstructs their meanings or Indigenizes them.[xviii]

While he only occasionally addresses Métis themes (Riel and Brady), his practice is a *métissage*. Some Métis artists do not feel the weight of traditional practice, protocols and prohibitions as acutely as many First Nations artists do. Nor are they beholden to European conventions. They take what they need from both parental cultures to forge new tools. In Poitras' case, he uses these devices to dissect local history to find why things are as they are, but he always leaves room for mystery, portals that defy an all-encompassing rationalism.

Cheryl L'Hirondelle and (the late) Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskew are multi-media artists seeking to Indigenize both real and digital realms. While their strength comes from the local, their reach is international. Perhaps because they have lineage from the new and old worlds, some Métis artists feel comfortable with global Indigeneity. Examining one's own hybridity makes you aware of the constructedness of identity and—if it does not make you perpetually anxious or rush to the safety of either tradition or assimilation—you find yourself free to adapt and invent. The individual talent will do what it must for its own reasons, but when his or her private efforts reflect the struggles of members of the community, then this work can be the source of future Métis art and identities.

Regional Métis have a more straightforward sense of their cultural duty and how it ought to be discharged. These artists revive traditional media as tangible proof of Métis endurance. Their practices are the fulfillment of a cultural mission motivated by community need and spurred by a prophetic obligation from Louis Riel: "My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back."

Riel's sentence separates "awakening" from "spirit," suggesting that coming to political consciousness is followed by a restoration of a less tangible but foundational aspect of collective identity. In fact, it was nearly a century after his execution (1885) that the Métis 'awoke' and were recognized (1982). This hard-won inclusion secured political dignity, but more than a stroke of the pen is required to restore spirit to a people so long disenfranchised, dispersed and silenced. Riel casts artists as warriors and sages. If it is the "artists who give them their spirit back," then artists must either be keepers of "the spirit" during the century of sleep and are waiting for the right time to share it; or, they do not have it and are warriors who must seek, capture and share it as a boon. In either role, Riel mandates the artist to serve the community.

This invocation of Riel's words is not the unearthing of some obscure quotation. It is his most famous sentence, published frequently and cited by innumerable Métis cultural workers and organizations as a source of inspiration.[xix] Many interpret this calling conservatively. They research and revive material culture from the Métis golden age: quill work, beading, embroidery, finger weaving, capote making, etc. The 'classical' Métis of the 19th century, "the beaded flower people," were famous for their distinctive merging of European and First Nations forms.[xx] Among the cultural revivalists, Sherry Farrell Racette is the most learned and wide-ranging in her accomplishments. She not only teaches Métis beading but has recently completed a doctoral dissertation on the subject. This conservation and perpetuation are at the heart of the Métis revival. You

must know where you come from to know where you are going. However, central to the idea of refreshing the culture is to recognize, as Farrell Racette demonstrates in her scholarship and art practice, just how inventive these pioneers were and to revive this creative spirit, not just its antique forms.

Christi Belcourt is in the forefront of developing a new Métis visual language that is rooted in tradition. She makes paintings based on Métis beading, but rather than simply transfer these designs to canvas, she develops deeper content. For example, while traditional beading is primarily decorative, many of Belcourt's images are instructional pictures of indigenous medicinal plants. Recent work, such as "Honouring My Spirit Helpers - Baagitchigawag Manitou" (2010), is even more ambitious. It evokes Métis spirituality. Belcourt's unique style honours without copying Métis traditional designs and contributes content the older forms could not carry. If this style or methodology were picked up by other Métis artists, it could mark the beginning of new creative modes for the generation and transmission of cultural information. A collective Métis style would also help identify Métis to the larger world as surely as the Woodlands school or Haida styles are visual signifiers of those peoples.

The creation of a Métis style is not on the agenda of all Métis artists, but increasing visibility is. Sherry Farrell Racette, Leah Dorion, and Jim Logan use viewer-friendly illustration styles to tell stories missing from the Canadian narrative. They literally picture Métis into being. This sort of work is foundational to the articulation of the specificity of the Métis experience. KC Adams and Rosalie Favell use photography to critique colonial residue and show the range of Aboriginality. Both projects create a huge archive of Aboriginal faces (including Métis) in the hopes of regaining space and ensuring an indelible presence.

Riel does not say how artists ought to fulfill his mandate, only that he is confident that they will. While I share this confidence, what I am advocating here is an acceleration of the process, the creation of a self-conscious project. An emphasis on novelty and individualism is a quality of the Modernist artworld. Individual example may lead to a break-through that is useful to others, but it might not. Such practices may be more meaningful to the artworld than Aboriginal worlds. An emphasis on communal 'spirit' and tradition is a quality of Aboriginal communities. Traditional art will certainly perpetuate a culture, but adaptation is required if it is to remain relevant and symbolically useful. If there is such a thing as a Métis artworld it would surely consist of a métissage of these forces.

So far, I have concentrated on the somewhat insular meaning of contemporary Métis art to Métis people and within the wider Indigenous scene; however there is also a role for Métis art within Canada's identity formation. In *A Fair Country*, John Ralston Saul argues that Canada is a "metis civilization. What we are today has been inspired as much by four centuries of life with the indigenous civilizations as by four centuries of immigration."[xxi] Artists, he explains have a central role in the nation's image/imaginary. "In the last half-century Canada has begun crawling toward a sense of the essential Aboriginal role in our civilization. The most obvious sign is the extent to which their art

has burst into the mainstream of our creative imagination. West Coast and Inuit art in only a few decades have become central to how Canadians represent themselves—that is, how we imagine ourselves."[xxii] The irksome aspect of this argument, for a Métis artist, is that his proofs are West Coast and Inuit art. Ralston Saul is well aware of the 1982 recognition of the Métis as an Aboriginal people but we do not make his list. This oversight reminds us that actual, contemporary Métis people and culture remain nearly invisible to mainstream Canadians; however "metis" those Canadians may be. The metisishness of Canada is a compelling and constructive concept but could become an extension of assimilation if lowercase metis clouds the contributions of the actual Métis as a distinct people.

On the other hand, Ralston Saul's slight is not completely without warrant. As I have argued above, the best artworld Métis currently specialize in Indigenous rather than Métis art. The development of a specifically Métis art would not just be a service to Métis but also to those who share this land. If Canadians are a "metis" civilization and are "crawling toward a sense of the essential Aboriginal role in our civilization,"[xxiii] it makes sense that they should not only be contemplating First Nations and Inuit art, but these "metis" might get something from the actual Métis artists who embody and express the complexity of this coming together most deeply.

Yet, another reading of "Cross Addressing" is that "Métis" is a concept(ion) that hangs between the two founding cultures, the European and First Nations. The future of Métis being evolves from this pioneer/primal scene as a nascent presence signalled but not yet able to be pictured or quite realized. Métis is a restless possibility. On one hand, there are culturally secure Métis who hunger to signify to themselves and others, who want to break the Big Silence, to be and be counted. But they are barely part of Canadian consciousness. The word 'Métis' finds itself into more documents and programs than actual Métis bodies find their way into the institutions that generate them. Apart from a few sepia toned images, and the sense that we are not-quite Indians or Settlers, the dominant imaginary has little grasp of us—there are few stereotypes to smash.

On the other hand, there are many more Métis for whom the meaning of their identity is in flux. They have no certain or singular sense of self to push into the light of day. Announcing you are Métis is often met with a polite nod and blank expression. What does it mean to be a contemporary Métis? The terrific thing about this cultural moment is that Métis is an open question asking for provisional answers. Métisness is there for the individual talent to discover, explore, describe, extend, even invent. It is a social as well as a personal quest. Métis visual artists are challenged to produce images that bring us to sight; stories that call us to mind; songs that sing us into being. If the dominant narrative constituting 20th century Métisness was survival, the Métis story of the future will be renaissance.

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[i] "2006 Census: Aboriginal Peoples in Canada in 2006: Inuit, Métis and First Nations, 2006 Census: Métis" http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/as-sa/97-558/p10-eng.cfm

[ii] The Canadian Encyclopaedia explains that "many North American whites have some aboriginal ancestry and rates of European genetic admixture among status-Indian groups in eastern and central Canada range in some instances from 20% to over 40%. Biologically, *métissage* has gone on since earliest European contact, but overtime and in different areas people of that ancestry have grown up and lived out their lives in a vast variety of circumstances, leading them and their descendants to be categorized and to classify themselves by many different criteria."
http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0005259
[iii]In addition to being a pioneering Métis painter, professor, curator, and my mentor, Bob Boyer was a traditional powwow dancer. This painting is in the permanent collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization.
[iv] 600 according to http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=crg
[v] The battles include the events at Red River (1869-70) and Batoche (1885). The pre-Canadian, Battle of Seven Oaks (1816), between the Métis and Governor Semple, was also a defining moment.
[vi] This is also called the '60s Scoop'. Kimelman, Judge E.C. *No Quiet Place: Review Committee on Indian and Metis Adoption and Placements*. Manitoba Community Services. 1985.
[vii] For a good account from a Métis perspective, see: Dorion, Leah and Darren Préfontaine. "Deconstructing Métis Historiography: Giving Voice to the Métis People." *Metis Legacy*. Lawrence J. Barkwell, Leah Dorion and Darren Préfontaine, eds. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications. 2001. 13-36.
[viii] McLeod, Neal. Personal communication Feb. 2005.
[ix] http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0005259
[x] Campbell, Maria (trans.). *Stories of the Road Allowance People*. Penticton, B.C.: Theytus Books Ltd. 1995.
[xi] Sealey, D. Bruce and Antonie S. Lussier. *The Métis: Canada's Forgotten People*. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications. 1975.
[xii] My great-uncle.
[xiii] For a full account, see: Weinstein, John. *Quiet Revolution: The Rebirth of Métis Nationalism*. Calgary: Fifth House Press. 2007.
[xiv] While several Métis artists have been individually celebrated—especially, recently, Bob Boyer—there is very little scholarship on contemporary Métis art. The only overview I know of is: Mattes, Catherine. "Metis Perspectives in Contemporary Art." *Metis Legacy*. Lawrence J. Barkwell, Leah Dorion and Darren Préfontaine, eds. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications. 2001. 189-192.
[xv] For example, many artists not only identify as Métis but also as a further blend, for instance, Métis/Cree (Jim Logan). Cheryl L'Hirondelle sometimes lists the whole catalogue: Métis/Cree-non status/treaty, French, German and Polish.
[xvi] For a quick sketch of the debate, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%A9tis_people_(Canada)
[xvii] For example, Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin curated Bob Boyer, Jim Logan, Edward Poitras, Rick Rivet and Eric Robertson into the ground-breaking *INDIGENA: Perspectives of Indigenous Peoples on Five Hundred Years* (1992, Canadian Museum of Civilization).
[xviii] I recently visited New Zealand for the first time and saw how Māori are not just integrated into the larger cultural landscape but are partners in its formation and management. Many streets and place names are in Māori. Saskatchewan is about 13% of the population, the same as percentage as Māori in New Zealand, and yet only a handful of streets in Regina, for example, are named after Aboriginal people, things or places.
[xix] Surprisingly, the source of this familiar, even foundational quotation is unknown. The frequency of this sentence's reiteration is expressive of a broad desire that is worthy of attention, even if the words are apocryphal.
[xx] Racette, Sherry Farrell. "Bead, Silk and Quills: The Clothing and Decorative Arts of the Métis." *Metis Legacy*. Lawrence J. Barkwell, Leah Dorion and Darren Préfontaine, eds. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications. 2001. 181-188.
[xxi] Ralston Saul, John. *A Fair Country*. Toronto: Viking Canada. 2008. 3.
[xxii] *ibid* 52.
[xxiii] *ibid* 52.