

## The Métis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conference

June 18-20, 2003

Saskatoon

Day 1 – Tape 3

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**Christi Belcourt:** But each artist has their own reason for creating art with a purpose, and I'd like to discuss for a moment or two some of the reasons why I choose the subject matter of flowers for my own work. I paint shapes and dots and, well, you've seen it outside and, of course, in all the artwork in the poster. Choosing consciously to paint flowers in styles similar to traditional Métis art fulfils me, fulfils in me, within me, to contribute something to our nation. By painting flowers that emulate beadwork, I attempt to raise awareness of the Métis Nation. I am providing commentary on ignorance that exists in mainstream Canada when it comes to the Métis Nation. Like Sherry and others, I'm trying to put our history at the forefront. Why is it that references to our people in books and museums and schools continue to be void of any direct acknowledgement of our people as a nation and the contributions we've made to Canada? We are the least celebrated of all the founding peoples of this country. Not only are we not celebrated, we are a source of shame, to a certain extent. We are a leftover from the past that someone wished that would just vanish. They say, "Sure, Louis Riel and his people lived in the past, but what are you still doing here? Who are you? What is a Métis?" And that's a question I despise. We are misunderstood and our Aboriginal status questioned from all sides in a demeaning manner, as if we have no right to exist. If we, the Métis, are Canada's forgotten people, then I consider it my mission in life to make sure we are remembered. And hopefully my paintings will endure to remind people of that long after I'm gone.

I use beadwork patterns in my work to provide a proliferation of all things Métis; my voice joined with others in the nation. I use beadwork to infer a sense of history and to celebrate beauty within our culture. And I use

beadwork to make the statement that Métis culture is not fossilized, but alive. I use beadwork as a tribute to my ancestors, as a way of saying, "You don't have to worry, our struggle is not as dire. We have survived." As I said earlier, identity is multi-layered, and so while I paint flowers to express my Métis identity, I also have other reasons that don't necessarily have anything to do with me being Métis, but more with me, with a broader sense of myself, as a member of the human race, desiring to contribute something positive to the world.

I would like to just touch on some of the reasons why I choose the subject matter of flowers. The use of flowers in our work throughout the world is not new. For centuries, Chinese artists have used nature, floral designs, in many of their artwork, as has, as have artists in India, and still my flower painting originated over in Europe in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In the past one hundred years, Czech Republic women have used flower paintings in their hand-painted Easter eggs. South Poland women have used, have decorated their houses inside and out with floral design, and the list goes on. Flowers resonate with meaning and symbolic, are symbolic of morality and mortality. And Métis art, I think, traditional Métis art, offers a unique addition to the history of floral artwork throughout the world. For my purposes, flowers and our natural affinity to them lend well at my attempts at creating something beautiful for the viewer. I want to offer a counterbalance to the overwhelming negative forces of destruction, despair, violence, and death we are exposed to on a daily basis. I want to offer respite for tired eyes and weary minds.

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