

The Métis in the 21st Century Conference

June 18-20, 2003

Saskatoon

Day 1 – Tape 3

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Christi Belcourt: For all of us, our identities are multi-layered, and at times contradictory. We play many roles in this, the grand stage of life. I play the roles of artist, daughter, mother, and wife. I am Métis by birth, and yet my soul knows not time nor place nor race, and herein lies the paradox, because as such my perceived identity—is it individual? And my views about our collective Métis Nation are sometimes at odds with the context, my concept of spirituality and the self, and, like I said, I'll just let you all read that if you care to.

I, personally, when I started questioning purpose in art, I started to wonder, to look at my own practice of art, and I really felt as though what I was doing was simply an expression of my own ego. And then I thought, "Well, you know, what is the point of my life if it's just to express myself in that?" So I thought that maybe I should just quit painting and go work at the food bank or something; that might be better. Or, or, you know, maybe I should just, well, actually I came to the conclusion that what I should do is take my prayers for a better world and try and incorporate that into my art somehow.

And I don't believe it's the obligation of Métis artists to represent the Métis Nation or to do anything other than to live up to their own potential as artists. A Métis artist produces Métis art whether or not they choose to create art that is in sound or appearance Métis. However, agreeing that one form of art is not superior to the other, there are artists all over the world who make the personal choice to try to do more with their art than simply express themselves. Their goal is to create works that have a purpose beyond themselves in their intent. For example, many Aboriginal artists use their art to provide commentary on contemporary issues framed in the historical

context of injustice and cultural genocide, and I find the use of historical context to be the common link between Métis artists and other Indigenous artists.

To what extent does art created by Métis visual artists in the Métis Nation lend collectively to the telling of Métis people in contemporary terms? I don't know. That's an open-ended question that we'll try and answer later on, I guess, all of us together. If you take, for example, Sherry Racette's beautiful work, her paintings are full of movement and life, and you become absorbed in the warm colours and brushstrokes. Her work is full of historical references and she educates viewers through her paintings. You could feel what it was like for our people at the time of the buffalo hunts. Her paintings speak a thousand words, and she paints with intent and purpose. Not to merely entertain the viewer, or herself, but to raise awareness of the Métis. (Have a drink here. I'm very, very nervous.)

And, that's likewise with another Métis artist you may not even know, is an artist, Jean Teillet, my friend. And she is a brilliant lawyer who successfully, we think successfully, will have argued *Powley* at the Supreme Court of Canada. But Jean, before she chose her second career as an, as a lawyer, she was actually a professional visual artist and a dancer. She uses beads and, really, it's hard to describe, but, but the textures that she creates through the beads are just phenomenal. And she, she uses them and creates large pieces of work using beads. Her subject matter varies, but she says it always comes down to one concept: that nothing is forgotten, and the knowledge of the people remains intact.

David Hannan's work, he's an artist from Ont-, Métis artist from Ontario, and he includes historical references and explores issues of identity. His image content, developed from research of written histories and the oral histories of family and friends. Using mixed media, he explores issues of Métis identity, to contribute to the discourse on Métis needs, which are often marginal to the mainstream. By exploring the relationship of history to the

present and how it affects us as knowledge, he says there's a place made to interpret what it means to be Métis at this point in history.

Of course, these are just three examples of many. If I were to guess, I would suppose that the use of historical references in Métis artists' work is done partly as a reclaiming of one's own personal history and an expression of the individual identity of each artist. But looking at it collectively, it would seem to me that it's all adding up to a reclaiming of our collective history. Métis artists are calling for past wrongs to be made right. Métis artists are calling for the settling of outstanding claims. The Métis artists are calling for justice.

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