

COWBOYS AND INDIANS (AND MÉTIS?)

By David Garneau

LIST OF WORKS

- Metis Erasure (II)*, 42.5 X 52.5cm (framed size), charcoal on paper, 2003.
- How the West Was...* (pages 3-8), 6' X 26", oil on canvas, 1998-2003.
- Patrimony* 92 X 61cm, oil on canvas, 2003.
- Riel's Last Portraits (Mug Shots)*, three panels, oil on canvas, each 92 X 61cm, 2003.
- Colour Discrimination Test (Metis Flag)*, 46 x 61cm, oil on canvas, 2003.
- Mobius Strip (Metis Flag)*, 46 x 61cm, oil on canvas, 2003.
- Noose/Fist (Metis Flag)*, 46 x 61cm, oil on canvas, 2003.
- May Tea?* 153 X 122cm, oil on canvas, 2002.
- Cross Addressing*, 153 X 122cm, oil on canvas, 2002.
- Metis/Mountie*, 153 X 122cm, oil on canvas, 2002.
- Riel/Van Gogh*, 153 X 122cm, oil on canvas, 2002.
- Metis Soldiers*, 122 X 153cm, oil on canvas, 2003.
- Cowboys and Indians (and Metis?)*, 122 X 153cm, oil on canvas, 2003.



How the West Was...



Installation: Riel Mug Shots, Metis Flags

BIOGRAPHY

David Garneau is Associate Professor and Head of Visual Arts at the University of Regina. He has a BFA in Painting and Drawing and an MA in American Literature, both from the University of Calgary. Garneau was born and raised in Alberta and has been living in Regina for the past five years.

David Garneau's practice includes painting, drawing and critical writing about the visual arts. Solo exhibitions include: *Sex, Violence and the Death of Heroes*, *Peripheral Pictures* and *Cowboys and Indians (and Metis?)*. His work often engages issues of nature, perception, masculinities, and the negotiation of White, Aboriginal and Metis identities. Garneau recently curated two large group exhibitions in Calgary, *The End of the World (as we know it)* and *Picture Windows: New Abstraction*, and two in Regina, *Transcendent Squares* (Rosemont Art Gallery) and *Making it Like a Man*, a national exhibition and conference for the Mackenzie Art Gallery. He is currently exploring road kill as a still life subject and is curating two exhibitions for 2005 at the Rosemont Art Gallery: *Sophisticated Folk* and *Contested Histories*, which is produced by the Sâkêwêwak Artists' Collective.



Riel/Van Gogh

- ¹ Taken from David Garneau's artist statement for *Cowboys and Indians (and Métis?)*
- ² Eva Hoffman, *The New Nomads in Letters of Transit - Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss*. 1999. pg. 50.
- ³ Taken from a paper I presented for the exhibition *Wintercourt* held at the University of Manitoba, Gallery 1.1.1. curated by Amy Kartinsky and Colleen Cutschall. It was titled *From Brtchen to Bannock - My Métis Transition from Germany to Winnipeg*. 2002.

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THE ART GALLERY OF SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA
710 ROSSER AVENUE BRANDON MB R7A 0K9
PH: 204.727.1036 E-MAIL: INFO@AGSM.CA

DESIGN BY DELORES ORRIDGE



May Tea?

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NOVEMBER 4 - DECEMBER 11, 2004



How the West Was...

ART GALLERY OF SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA

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David Garneau's Métis Self and I – A Work in Progress

A RESPONSE BY CATHY MATTES

The recent work of David Garneau prods reflection about the phases Métis people may go through when coming to terms with cultural identity. These stages usually accompany intense memory overload, as people consider negative or positive personal experiences, and Métis history. This may seem superfluous to some, but it is actually a mode of cultural survival. I believe that for many Métis the experiences of being recognized and recognizing, being and becoming is internalized, and effects how we view ourselves. I would argue that it is embedded in the struggles of our relations, ourselves, government legislation, and being of mixed ancestry. It also comes from the general lack of acknowledgement about Métis people, our experiences, and our contributions. We are whole - a whole nation, whole families, whole individuals, yet sometimes, it seems that we are treated, or recognized as only being half. It is these things that David Garneau's work brings to the surface for me.



How the West Was...

It is through examining stereotypes of Aboriginal people, and the myth of Louis Riel that Garneau exposes some of the phases that one might go through when being and becoming Métis. This process involves decoding, locating, searching for certainty, establishing, acknowledging, maybe even proving a connection to the culture. This incertitude stems from colonization. Like First Nations, Métis have also been subjected to racist government legislation, residential or Métis mission schools, and the large role played by the Church. Some of the older generation was fortunately brought up proud and comfortable

with their Métis selves despite colonization. Others were taught to hide their Métis-ness for fear of racist reaction, and took such measures as hiding the bannock, staying out of the sun, or insisting one is French - even when physical and cultural attributes suggest otherwise.

All of this hiding, or exuding pride affects the present cultural politics that are intense and complicated as a result. There is much dialogue about what the Métis experience is - what constitutes a Métis - what is Métis culture - and who has the

right to define themselves as a Métis. Sometimes the cultural experiences within one family differ between Father and Son, Mother and Daughter. It leaves some at a loss, and like Garneau, there are some Métis who were unaware of their Aboriginality as youths, because their parents' generation was taught to hide their Métis-ness, or they were physically removed from their communities. In a sense, there are many Métis who have lived an exilic existence, and as adults, must come to terms with this.

Examining the myth of Louis Riel becomes central in locating oneself. Riel is one of the few Métis whose contributions are fully recognized - Riel is always considered whole. With Riel's contributions now known, he has become a vehicle to obtain recognition for our own, and our relations' existence as Métis people. Ultimately this is problematic because many of our ancestors and relations are then treated as stepping-stones up to the myth of Riel - their/our contributions only being considered half.

Garneau effectively explores what he calls "the Riel cult" by painting images that remind viewers of both the myth and the human reality of Riel. In one painting Garneau draws comparisons between Riel and Van Gogh - both were committed to a mental institution, both were exiled, believed they were on a holy mission, and met untimely deaths¹. Each now receive much respect, after decades of being described by many as insane, egotistical, traitors, etc. Garneau also paints haunting images of Riel, hooded with a white sheet and with a noose tied around his neck. It is a strong reminder of Riel's humanity, and the Métis nation as a whole having been penalized for the actions taken against the colonial government in the late 19th century.

Garneau's work also delves into the issues surrounding existing stereotypes of Aboriginal people, and how we internalize them when coming to terms with our ancestry. In *How the West Was...* Garneau has created a history painting about the settlement of the Canadian Plains using images taken from non-Aboriginal art historical and pop-culture sources. The work is reminiscent of other Aboriginal artists investigation into the impact of stereotypes, perpetuated by the use of Cowboy and Indian imagery, dime novels, etc. However Garneau expands the issue, by introducing his own family history with stereotypical imagery, thus his personal stake, while acknowledging that Métis culture has also had to endure stereotypical ideals - an aspect that hasn't really been researched by these other artists.

My favourite piece in Garneau's exhibition is the tongue-in-cheek painting *May Tea?* It features a Métis man, with his hand loosely placed around his neck - a disturbing reminder of Riel's execution, and what came after for many Métis. In a cartoon bubble over the man's head are the words "May Tea?" - reflecting the uncertainty that Métis might have. The painting reminds me once again of the

phases Métis people go through when pondering culture, but the play on words also reminds me of the role humour can play.

David Garneau's investigation into his heritage through examining the myth of Riel and stereotypical cultural representation also reminds me of those crucial times in my youth when I felt culturally "outed" - kicked off my fence, exposed, silenced, shamed, or made to feel proud. When I first saw *Cowboys and Indians (And Métis?)* my memory went into overdrive, as I tried to locate myself in reference to the work. There were two personal stories that automatically came to mind when viewing Garneau's exhibition.

First, when I was a little girl, I used to always wish for blond hair and blue eyes. The blond hair, blue-eyed girls at school always seemed to have it made. I figured if I looked like them, I would be treated as they were, or how I thought they were. At that time, I don't think I always knew (though there were times when I was blatantly or harshly reminded) what made me different from the rest of the kids at school. I just knew there was something that some of the parents, teachers, and students noticed about me. In hindsight, I now realize that having blond hair or blue eyes would not have made much difference. I was a girl with a Native mom, a Métis mom, and whether or not I had blond hair and blue eyes that fact still remained.

I believe this memory came to me more because of Garneau's artist statement and the interview I had with him in which he suggested that he has basically lived the life of a privileged White man. I was impressed with Garneau's wanting it acknowledged that he has enjoyed privileges that many Métis men and women have not. However at the same time it complicates his work for me, and reminds me of the cultural politics happening at this time in Métis communities - politics that I am constantly trying to navigate within and around.

When Métis people search for recognition, we sometimes do so by imagining our nation as a sovereign entity, with everyone having similar goals and experiences. Therefore our definition of Métis culture, and who it includes is narrow. Eva Hoffman suggests "a culture does not exist independently of us but within us. It is inscribed in the psyche, and it gives form and focus to our mental and emotional lives. In a way, we are nothing more - or less - than an encoded memory of heritage."² Garneau's work reminds me of this, and that the Métis experience is not absolute - therefore our definitions of who is Métis, and who has held a Métis existence must be expanded. It is also important to recognize that some have suffered the impact of colonization far more than others, and that difference amongst us exists.

After much reflection upon this issue I would now argue that Garneau's work and existence is not that of a privileged White man, but that of a privileged Métis man, because culture is inherent within us, and can be arranged, shaped, articulated and experienced in a variety of ways.³ There is great diversity within our nation, and it can include those of us who held childhood dreams of erasing our ancestry with blond hair or blue eyes, those who experienced Métis mission school and had their language erased from memory, or those whose Métis experience became recognized later in life. This might seem obvious to some, but when you're constantly negotiating your culture internally and externally, around and through it all, it appears far more complicated. When I saw Garneau's exhibition it was impossible to view his work as solely being about Riel and stereotypes. It exposed far more about identity challenges for Métis, and I once again had to navigate within and around present Métis cultural politics to be able to view, and later discuss his work.

The second memory that came to mind was that as a young university student I worked at a Greek restaurant (and yes, they hired me because they thought I could pass for Greek) in Winnipeg. I remember a First Nations man who had dined at the restaurant asked when he was leaving (in my mind, very loudly so the whole restaurant heard), "You're Métis aren't you?" I recall having this intense feeling of discomfort creep over, and my face get very hot. I don't know what it was that I felt uncomfortable about, whether I was uncomfortable being recognized as Aboriginal, having my regulars find out that I wasn't Greek, which would effect my tips, or that I simply didn't know what to say. At home we rarely spoke about our Aboriginality, and definitely never used the term "Métis" to identify ourselves. We didn't spend our days pondering our culture, we just existed as we were, a mixed family, a military family, living in a time when "difference" was not celebrated.

The man from the Greek restaurant shook my hand and said something that day that I've carried with me since. He told me that I had nothing to be embarrassed about, and *everything* to be proud of. That incident changed me. I no longer wanted to be blond and blue-eyed. I wanted to be proud. I wanted to hold my head high. I wanted to know what he was talking about when he called me Métis!

Remembering this story, even admitting it, makes me uncomfortable. It reminds me that like in the title of Garneau's exhibition, I once held a question mark at the end of the term Métis. It makes me uncomfortable, because being uncertain of what you are, especially if it is primarily the result of colonization, is unsettling. After years of being confident of who I am, and what my culture means to me, Garneau's work (and artist statement) reminds me of those anxious times when I did not.

However, it also reminds me of how resilient Métis people are, and that one's cultural identity is always in transition - how we view ourselves never remains stagnant - and for many Métis, the transition is one that results with great pride and cultural empowerment. My prediction for Garneau is that in his next series of paintings, the work will more visibly reflect his personal experiences and his family story - outside of the Riel myth. (Turning to your own personal experience is often the next step after investigating the Riel myth and stereotypes). In his next series, I bet there will be no question mark behind the term Métis, and no unsettling feeling for Garneau's Métis audience or himself. His work will evoke certitude - of being and becoming Métis, of being whole. ■

Cathy Mattes



Cross Addressing