

Unveiled Perceptions

By Niki Little

Reading and interpreting art can be a passive or an active experience.

David Garneau's solo exhibition *Métis/sage* typifies his ongoing inquiry into the transformative concepts 'becoming' Métis and 'being' Métis in Canada today. Garneau uses a personal narrative to speak about broader experience. Seventeen works of art, shown at Urban Shaman Inc., an artist-run gallery in Winnipeg, span the years 2006 to 2009. This is an exhibition of paintings, which integrate high and low art forms; found and altered objects; and souvenir Louis Riel nooses, available for a small donation.

My initial questions, as an artist with mixed ancestry: Why do these paintings resonate with me? What are they saying? Who are they about? What do they say about the image-maker? Meandering through the multiple points of engagement with Métis culture and images, I began to consider the complexity of the Canadian cultural fabric for the individual and for the whole.

Garneau declares his position on cultural identity within the title of the exhibition. *Métis/sage* is a union of two words – Métis and sage – and of the French and Aboriginal heritages. Garneau sets up a re/clamation and re/appropriation in the translation of the French word and concept *metissage* – the mixing of blood. Rooted in tradition and history, sage is a symbol of women's medicine in Aboriginal culture, conferring strength, wisdom, and clarity of purpose. It is also powerful as a purifying medicine that drives away negative energies and symbolizes the West in the Medicine Wheel, and the West in the sense of the western colonization, a historical moment for the Métis. The West is the geographical location of Métis culture, extending from the Red River Settlement to the Pacific Ocean.

Garneau has self-identified as Métis. Métis can be defined as a person who identifies as Métis, or is of the historic Métis Nation Ancestry and is accepted as such by the Métis Nation. Garneau's reinterpretation and interruption of *Metissage* places the exhibition in motion, gaining new understandings of meaning making the endless supplementary meanings of the concept without losing its origin.

Reading his paintings requires an investigative approach to interpret the layers of cultural and historical metaphors. Situation, place, time, circumstance and viewpoints

unfold and construct new points of identification revealing subtexts rich in experience. An example of the positioning within cultural identity can be found in painting, *Lost*. Garneau draws onto the canvas with pencil a derelict interior of a wooden barn and then veils it small amber dots. The paint absorbs the led pencil altering the original colour. The affect causes my eyes to migrate between the foreground to the background. *Lost* is full of symbolism: the gold, wealth; the barn, economic development; and the dots, Métis culture. The building is unused dissolving by time alluding to an untold memory visualized by Garneau. Each of these signifiers locates the painting within a larger more specific narrative.

Upon entering the gallery, visitors see an 8x5-foot painting, resembling Jacques Louis David's Neo-classical *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*. Upon closer inspection, there is an unexpected leader evoking another time and culture. Garneau's hero is Louis Riel. Rearing a noble steed, Riel is depicted raising a cross over his head. He is enveloped in a billowing, brown cloak with a finger-woven Métis sash and leather pouch peeking out from underneath. His gesture reveals the will of a commander leading his soldiers into battle. The distant landscape reveals not the Alps but the vast, flat fields of Batoche. Garneau's Riel is an act of resistance and re-tells a pivotal story that is rooted in Métis history and memory. This is a satirical play on historical painters, how the west was documented, and the absurdity of the grand gesture in relation to the expansiveness of the terrain.

Métis/sage is a visual experience and a place for interpreting and critiquing experiences about Métis-ness. The works question the multiple conditions and contexts of the hybridity rooted in Métis visual language and symbols.

Garneau is an artist, writer, educator, critical thinker and curator. This is apparent by the use of text, found in paintings throughout the exhibition. Text is used to tell a story when two characters engage in dialogue. Text is also used in the form of words, labels or stereotypes. Sometimes these words act as the title and serve as a compositional base and intellectual starting point. Words and statements like *Metis?* and *Half-breed* come across as literal statements. Looking closer at these paintings, I interpret these texts as uncurbed didactic, goading me to unravel the stereotypes they contain. Garneau places the words in conjunction with challenging images creating a curious banter between the visual and oral projections of Métis culture. The integration of visual symbol and verbal semantics allows me to read Garneau's paintings from a new set of cultural starting

points. I reconsider the simple act of looking.

Garneau's paintings function between a duality of looking and reading: what is seen and what is implied. Two large yellowish canvases with animal heads employ this strategy. A single animal head floats on an ochre-soaked canvas beside another canvas with an identical background. The second canvas includes two animal heads, both looking in the same direction. The heads resemble a drawing from 1874 Germany. At first glance, I see a duck. Then I am surprised to see a rabbit. What I once thought was static shifts between two mutually exclusive states into a strange and intriguing hybridity. These bistable images draw on the relationship between viewing and making sense. Garneau's wit allows us to read into the relation, challenging us to go beyond the first layer of literal perception to activate secondary perception systems. These paintings became a metaphor. They use cognitive dissonance in play with social and cultural perceptions about Métis-ness.

The archeology of memory can be interpreted as the braiding of historical and personal narratives. Two 4x5-foot paintings expose a memory full of quiet annunciations from an unusual main character tracing a story of loss, racism and cover-up. These paintings are part of a series honouring the life of seventeen-year-old Neil Stonechild. In 1990, Stonechild was found frozen to death in a snow-covered field on the perimeter of Saskatoon after he had been dropped off by local police officers. It was common for police to apprehend Aboriginals who were under the influence of alcohol and drop them in remote locations so that they could walk back to sobriety. The legacy of Stonechild's tragic story comes to represent all Aboriginal people who have gone missing, met with violence and experience racism.

Starlight Tour is a reconstruction of evidentiary details from the inquiry. There are images of Stonechild's coat, the lacerations on his forehead, his missing shoe, the handcuffs, an investigator's suit jacket, and comic-book style action and narration bubbles. The images are broken flashing pivotal moments throughout the investigation. In **XX** one is simultaneously aware of the picture's surface and its content. I am confronted with the terrible reality of a body lying limp on the ground, while figures stand above. Garneau defuses the scene by veiling the image with a constellation of painted dots. The result is an oscillating image that allows me to engage and disengage with this disturbing scene. I lingered for a while, wondering about our responses and our personal positions in relation to this tragic event.

Publishing and reclaiming are other strategies used by Garneau to re-conceptualize of the physical and cultural landscape. There are beaded maps that describe the path of Métis people. Three 4x5-foot paintings depict Edmonton in the 1880s, Red River in the 1870s and Ste. Madeline today. All are about migration. They reveal the transition from the French river lot system to British gridlike surveying and segregation system. In these contemplative and quiet paintings, the overlay of painted dots referencing Métis beadwork is a reminder that these communities began as Métis settlements. Beadwork can trace a family history that connects the Métis culture back to the land.

David Garneau integrates the history of painting and elements of Métis culture. He asks questions to provoke a collective wondering and create a dialogue that connects individuals to the collective memory and the story of Métis heritage. He is an investigator of historical, material and contemporary Métis culture. The space Garneau redefines is both linear and non-linear and is a natural consequence of the combination of unveiling visual narratives and verbal word play. Métis/sage reveals Garneau's true sensibility, allowing for the re-telling of culture through memory, politics, and desire.