

Conversation with Métis Artists in Residence

Inglewood Bird Sanctuary Nov/Dec 2024

From November 6 to December 16, 2024, the Inglewood Bird Sanctuary hosted two Métis Artists in Residence, **Danielle Piper** and **Riel Starr**.

During the residency, Danielle worked on various projects at the sanctuary, including tufting with animal hair, beading, and painting on parfleche (similar to rawhide). She also worked with other artists on preparing a moose hide and an elk hide for making traditional smoked leather.

Riel provided maintenance on the Red River Cart commissioned as part of the City of Calgary's Tipi Project in 2023. He also engaged in other forms of art such as beading and hide scrapping.

We had a chat with the artists to share a little more about their artistic practices and artwork.



Conversation with the Artists

Q: Can you tell us a little more about yourselves?

Danielle: My name is Danielle Piper, and I am an interdisciplinary artist based in Mohkinst'sis, Treaty 7 territory. I am a band member of Cold Lake First Nations

in Treaty 6 territory, and of nehiyaw, Métis, Denesuline and European mixed ancestry.

Riel: And I am Riel Starr, a Red River Métis artist also based in Mohkinstsis, Treaty 7 (Calgary, Alberta).

Q: Can you tell us about your art practice?

Danielle: My artistic practice is rooted in traditional craft techniques and articulated in a mixture of nêhiyawêwin-my ancestral language, and english. Utilizing craft, I've found the potential for material exploration to become a gateway through which to deconstruct the colonisation of our everyday lives. The slow labour of craft echoes that of reclaiming my language and cultural identity, as well as the labour required of us all to build forward in mutual understanding.

Q: And how about you, Riel?

Riel: My practice counters the settler-colonial understanding of Métis people and our culture through interdisciplinary modality and discusses themes of site specificity and local histories. I examine the way past and present ways in which people engage with the land around them by making work that challenges and undermines colonial ways of knowing by revealing overlooked and hidden histories through zines, writing, and recontextualizing personal and found objects as well as archival materials.

Q: What influences your art and who are your artistic role models?

Riel: At the core of my practice are concepts defined in the works of Gerald Vizenor, Sara Ahmed, and Chantal Fiola whose writings discuss notions of survivance, queer phenomenology, traditional Métis teachings, and appreciation for the lands we are responsible for, and which hold us.

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I am the prairie grasses
nourished by bison spit
I am a wicker person
I am moulded and shaped by mud and branches
my hair is braided sweetgrass
and my heart is a wild strawberry
pumping my river water blood

That is beautiful, Riel. Thank you for sharing your poem.

Q: How does art help you to connect with your culture?

Danielle: I believe that as an artist my foremost duty is to my ancestors, to honour work that they did to survive and pass down the knowledge that we all need to move forward in a good way. My next responsibility in making is to honour the materials and the land itself through deep consideration for the lived histories held within them. I am striving to express the complex interconnectivity of our existence in human bodies through the use of varied materials including animal skins, seashell, porcupine quills, fish scales and plant fibres, but also paints, nylon, synthetic furs, and upcycled textiles. Animal and plant materials have perhaps a more obvious context for their past lives, yet the synthetic and recycled materials you also find littered through my work deserve the same level of recognition. With needle and thread, I explore the tensions within the land as I work to heal alongside her.

A: Can you tell us more about the larger pieces you worked on during the residency?

Riel: The Red River Cart is a traditional tool popularized by the Métis people as they travelled west out of the Red River settlement in Manitoba. The carts were made without the use of metal joinery like nails and screws, instead employing the use of wood joinery and rawhide wrapped around the joints for added strength. The result was a modular and easily repairable vehicle that the

Métis used to transport goods to trade or even to carry their entire families and livelihoods if they lived on road allowance. To this day, Red River Carts remain a significant symbol of Métis ingenuity, survival, and culture.

The cart I have worked on was built in 2023 for The City of Calgary to accompany the trapper's tent acquired to educate the public on local Métis history as part of the Tipi Project. The cart is a symbol of historical resilience as well as modern dedication to upholding our traditional ways of making and living, and our ongoing efforts to preserve these skills for generations to come.



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Danielle: We hosted sessions for community members to contribute to the bead work on the panels that hang in The City of Calgary's trapper's tent. I was responsible for drawing the seven unique panel frames. When I was working on them, I spent a lot of time examining my own family beadwork, as well as numerous museum pieces. I particularly focused on the 1880's period, to match the era of the photos chosen by Matt Hiltermann. As digital art, this is somewhat different to what I normally create, and was a great exercise in appreciating the unique swirls and balanced asymmetry which characterizes our beadwork. I also chose colours for the backgrounds which reflect the materials mostly used traditionally; buckskin, velvet and wool.

Beadwork has been a wonderful teacher in my life, and through it I can more fully appreciate the connection I hold to my Métis ancestors. In inviting participants to spend time with these designs and add their own touch through beading, I hope that people learn more of the unique qualities of Métis beadwork and are more able to differentiate it from others. As the panels live, they will slowly become filled with beadwork, heavier and heavier with the touch of hundreds of people's work and care, helping to build community as they go.



Q: You also had the opportunity to work on hides during the residency; Can you tell us a bit about that?

Danielle: I am always in a good mood when I get to work hides, and it makes me feel so connected to my community and my grandmothers. There is a lot encoded into the experience of traditional hide tanning, and I will be pulling at those threads for a very long time.

Of course, there is the death of the animal. I have been a vegetarian for over a decade, and I still do not eat the meat of the animals I help process, but, my father and brother have always and will always hunt, and this is the best way I know to take care of those animals once their lives have ended. It was a goal of mine for many years to bring hide tanning back to my family and to the animals

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who sustain us, and to use more of what we take. Using as much of the animal as possible is the best way to show our respect for the life lost and to show that we truly do place value on that and give thanks.

The slowness teaches us as we work, that the value of work can be the act of doing and being. When I gather with help to work on the skin, I am so happy to be surrounded and connected to one another as well as the land. This time is treasured, and while I look forward to the end result, I do not find myself anxious for it to be over at all. I think of the strength of my Kokom and my chapam as I work, and know that they did the same.

Q: Where can people learn more about your art?

Danielle: DaniellePiperArt.com

Riel: RielStarr.com

Thank you, Danielle and Riel!

