



Commentary - Beading Witness: Notes on (S)kin

Dr. Mel Lefebvre

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Touching, intimate photos including the artist's hand holding the piece, perhaps over a table top with a notebook. The submission invokes blood and chosen families, memory, mapping, and storytelling. The quotes chosen from the Mawachihitotaak conference are not a translation of the bead work, as the artistic indicates, but work in perfect tandem, drawing you into a connection between an important place, space, temporality where Michif Peoples gather(ed) to share knowledge and this artist's experience as a Michif person. The artist speaks to their own refusal (Simpson, 2007) and acknowledges our collective ownership of Michif stories and lifeways, and connection, inspiration and resurgence.

We can read into the colors, lines, textures, placement, supplies used, but as the artist says: "I hold the keys"... this in itself is a profound statement of empowerment and choice. The fish skin color and texture shown in the photographs recalls pemmican and hide. The cedar branch sprinkled with circular elements conjures spirits, snow, rain, elementals. The beaded lines

feel grounding and one reaches for meaning in the colors: blood, earth, directions, seasons. Initials sewn into skin with care, a legacy of 2SLGBTQIA+, separate and together in tones of the land, falling leaves. A reminder of the queerness or genderlessness of the universe. The reverse of any sewn piece is always an echoing of the time and effort put in, the mixing of heart and mind, an intertwining of hours, days, eons; a different kind of map like a flock of birds' tracks. The piece weaves Michif together throughout time and space, and is a testament to our futures where we "hold the keys".

The quotes are all striking and sit with a profoundness, not heavy but weighted with truth and contemplation. They all speak to relationality, with the self and the wider world, and the navigation we must take on in order to survive. Perhaps thrive? There is a longing in these words and joy, we must never forget the joy.

Overall, the artist's "notes from the field" is a response, reflection, and triumph of Michif existence. A powerful yet subtle work in expressing Michif lifeways and thought, including ancestral practices of fish skin tanning, sewing, and beadwork, and the relational ethics embedded therein highlighting the fish that fed the artist and their family and "nourished" bodies, becoming an expression of that personal relationality and outward into the community to reflect the Mawachihitotaak conference.

Biography

Dr. Mel Lefebvre (she/they) is a Two-Spirit Michif, Nehiyaw, French, Irish mother, traditional tattoo practitioner, scholar, artist, and community worker based in Tiohtiá:ke /Montreal. A citizen of the MMF, Mel's grandmother's family came from Fisher Branch, Manitoba to Quebec in the early 1900s. Some of her Michif family names include Delorme, Desjardins, and Guiboche. Her practice is focused on traditional tattooing as a mode of healing and reconnection for Indigenous people with a particular focus on 2SLGBTQIA+ and Indigenous women as well as reclaiming and imagining traditional tattoos in contemporary and future contexts. Working closely with the Native Women's Shelter of Montreal, Mel is vice president of the board, advocating for the safety of Indigenous people as well as Indigenous representation, education, and employment.