

## **Exploring Métis Identity and Cultural Revival: A Dialogue on Art, Kinship, and Reclamation**

Juliet Mackie & Alexandra Nordstrom

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*Juliet Mackie is Métis (Cree, Gwich'in, and English) with maternal roots in Fort Chipewyan and Red River. She is a citizen of the Métis Nation of British Columbia. Juliet is a visual artist currently located in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal. Raised in the Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island, her art practice is inspired by her love of nature, her family, and Métis culture. Juliet is a painter, beader, and student. She holds a BFA in painting and drawing and is currently a PhD candidate in the Individualized Program at Concordia University. Her multidisciplinary research explores portrait painting as a means of strengthening the cultural identity of Indigenous women and 2S people. She considers beadwork an important part of her connection to family, community, and culture. As a child, Juliet would watch her grandmother, Greta, stitch birch bark baskets, moccasins, and floral beadwork. Greta would tell her stories about growing up on the trapline at Hill Island Lake. Juliet learned how to make beaded earrings in 2019 at a workshop in Montreal, and during the COVID-19 quarantine in the spring of 2020, she turned to beadwork as an act of self-care. Since then, this practice has transformed into her business, Little Moon Creations. Although Juliet's earrings are her own interpretation of Métis beadwork, her grandmother's traditional artwork is an important influence on her contemporary designs.*

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*Juliet's first solo exhibition, Matrilineal Memory, showed at the Shé:kon Gallery in Montreal from September 9 to December 22, 2023. Featuring painted portraits and beadwork, this new body of work focused on the dynamic nature of intergenerational connection. Serving as a convergence for contemplation and discussion, the creation of works for this exhibition offered Juliet an opportunity to ponder the diverse and nonlinear methods through which knowledge, stories, experiences, and cultural practices are shared among the Métis women in her family.*

**AN:** What inspired you to focus on your Métis kin for this new series of work?

**JM:** When I am making art, I am often thinking about the past, remembering, and in my thoughts. Beading can feel very nostalgic for me, perhaps because I feel like I am connecting with my family as I recall moments like beading with my grandmother. Being in the flow state, my mind constantly floats through my memories of different times and places. I rarely think about the future when creating.

While working on the paintings for *Matrilineal Memory*, I was inspired by old photographs of my mother, grandmother Greta, great-grandmother Evelyn, great-great-grandmother Emily, and great great-great-grandmother Janie, all from various points in their lives. For instance, I painted my mom in her 30s and my grandma in the 1960s when she was pregnant with my mom. For the paintings of Janie and Emily, I spoke with my grandma Greta about what they were like as people, what they liked to do, and how they spent their time. My grandma did not meet Emily or Janie in her lifetime, so all of her stories about them were passed down from her mother Evelyn.

When I was painting Emily and Janie, my only reference photos were blurry, old black-and-white pictures, which did not reveal much about them. So, I thought a lot about the stories my grandmother told me. These stories helped me paint them, visiting with them while I painted them. I spent a lot of time reflecting on the stories of their lives and thinking about what they must have experienced. The black-and-white photos of them are very stiff and don't reveal anything about their personalities or even their smiles. I wanted to represent them in a way that radiated warmth and liveliness.

Painting my great-grandmother Evelyn allowed me to reflect on my own memories of her as a child. I wanted to depict her warmth and kindness. In *Granny Oak*, I painted her and myself as a child in her hydrangea garden at her home in Edmonton. I really enjoyed making this painting because I was flooded with memories of easter egg hunts in her backyard. She died when I was seven or eight years old, so painting her felt like I was reconnecting with her and our short time together.

I am very close with my grandmother and mother so painting them was a way to honour this relationship. Similarly, the beadwork pieces in the show are named after my aunty Judy and cousins Jackie and Jaymie as well as Jaymie's daughter Eiylah. Like the paintings, these pieces allowed me to spend time reflecting on our connections as a family and as women. By honouring these matriarchs, I was able to learn a lot about myself, my family, and my history, reflecting on the ways I show up in the world as a Métis woman and community member. It was a very grounding experience and made me feel more connected to my family.

**AN:** How do painting and beadwork help you to express yourself as a Métis person?

**JM:** When I was younger and would visit my grandmother, she would often be beading moccasins or making birch bark baskets with bark that she harvested with her cousins in Fort Chipewyan. So, when I started beading, it felt very familiar to me. I assumed that my grandmother had learned how to bead as a child from her mother. It wasn't until years later that I learned that my grandmother taught herself to bead from a book when she was in her fifties. My grandmother was raised seasonally between Fort Chipewyan and a trapline on Hill Island Lake. Her mother, Evelyn, and father, Alvar, were trappers and raised their three daughters — Greta, Ingeborg, and Patricia — in the bush. When my grandmother was six, Evelyn moved their family to Edmonton to avoid having their children taken to Residential School. In the city, they tried to protect themselves by assimilating, but still faced discrimination and hardships. While Alvar was away trapping, Evelyn worked three jobs and my grandmother remembers being sent to their neighbours to ask for food. During these years, they did not engage in cultural practices. My grandmother describes being called back to beadwork later in life, and I think I felt the same calling myself years later.

For me, beadwork is a tangible embodiment of my culture. In my family, the transmission of this practice and associated knowledges did not happen linearly from one generation to the next due to forced assimilation. When I was a preteen, my grandmother tried to teach me flat-stitch beading, but I wasn't as interested at the time. When I moved to Montreal in 2015, I was twenty-one and more interested in learning beadwork. I was volunteering at the Native Women's Shelter of Montreal, where I would help facilitate arts-based workshops with the women and discuss sexual health. During these workshops, I started beading again. I remembered teachings from my grandmother but also learned new techniques. In 2019, I took a workshop to learn how to make beaded earrings, led by artist Cory Hunlin. Since then, I have made beaded earrings almost every day. When I went back to British Columbia for visits,

I would bead with my grandmother and we would make small projects, like key chains or change purses. I eventually taught her how to make beaded earrings, and she taught my mother. Now, we spend our visits sitting around my grandmother's kitchen table beading.

My painting history is less complicated. I have always been interested in painting. My dad likes to tell people that as a young child, I would sit in my highchair for hours drawing dogs and other unidentifiable animals. I always loved art classes and would often make paintings of the people in my life. There was a time in my life when I prioritized painting over learning beadwork. In school, I was taught indirectly that if I wanted to be taken seriously as an artist, I needed to master European methods of making and that beading was just a hobby or craft. I had to unlearn this colonial way of thinking. I now centre my art practice in beadwork and the teachings from my grandmother. Combining beadwork and painting for *Matrilineal Memory* felt very natural and allowed me to mix two mediums that I love.

**AN:** Can you tell me more about the interplay between portraiture and representation, and how this dynamic is woven into both your artistic and scholarly practice?

**JM:** I am interested in “remapping” narratives and representations of Indigenous people through portraiture. Scholar Mishuana Goeman describes remapping as reconsidering or reimagining colonial narratives through art or literature. As an artist and scholar, I am interested in how Indigenous artists work to challenge the histories of colonial misrepresentation. In my research, I am painting Indigenous women and 2S kin in my community. In this process, they are invited to choose how they want to be represented. They decide what or who surrounds them in the painting, what clothing, regalia, or jewellery makes them feel most strong, proud, or beautiful. They can curate, for themselves, what their painting will look like. The intention of this is for us to have conversations about cultural belonging and explore the possibility for strengthening pride and connection through consensual and identity-affirming representation. In this context, portrait painting is a means to facilitate these conversations. My art practice and research are braided together by foundational themes of identity exploration, cultural belonging, representation, and reclaiming narratives of self-determination.

**AN:** How do art and creative practice serve as a way to both understand and educate non-Métis about the intricacies of Métis identity?

**JM:** In my work as an artist and scholar, I aim to challenge or reshape superficial or stereotypical narratives about Métis peoples. I see painting and beadwork as forms of storytelling and ways to communicate. In my art practice, I use portraiture to share stories about identity, family, and community. Sometimes the story will be obvious to a viewer, and sometimes it's a story I've told to myself in order to create the art piece. In *Matrilineal Memory*, I tried to share the stories of the women in my family through their painted or beaded portraits.

Similarly, my beadwork practice has allowed me to share about Métis identity and culture. Becoming a jeweller and making wearable art has allowed me to connect with so many people, which is something that I didn't expect. It has been nice to hear from so many non-Indigenous folks that wearing my beadwork motivated them to learn more about Métis or other Indigenous cultures and histories. I like seeing non-Indigenous women wearing my jewellery because it helps normalize, integrate, and highlight Indigenous art into day-to-day life in mainstream society. By doing so, I hope it's assisting in starting conversations or addressing misconceptions about Métis culture, even on a micro scale. I design my beaded jewellery pieces for everyone to wear, but it makes me proud to see other Indigenous folks wear my beadwork. I take it as a big compliment. Being accepted as a vendor for the Indigenous Fashion Arts Festival 2024 is an accomplishment I am extremely proud of and will hopefully allow me to continue to share Métis culture and history through my beadwork.

**AN:** How do you navigate the intricate and, at times, challenging terrain of being an emerging Métis artist and scholar within different institutional spaces?

**JM:** I learned how to navigate academic institutions as an Indigenous undergraduate student. At times, this has meant dealing with ignorance, lack of structural support, and a lack of understanding from individuals who may not recognize the importance of Indigenous research. It also meant that I was more motivated to find a community of support and create networks for myself to mitigate the institutional shortcomings. I am very fortunate to have an all-Indigenous supervisory committee, and I know that this is not the case for most Indigenous graduate students. I have been able to connect with peers through debriefing our shared experiences, which has created friendships that now expand outside of academia.

During my undergraduate degree, studying painting in an academic environment was challenging for me. Having to produce artwork in such high volume for consecutive years led to a creative burnout that I am still recovering from. Today, as an artist, I recognize the importance of rest as part of my practice. In my experience, rest is not prioritized within institutional spaces, and it took a long time for me to discover why I felt so creatively drained and uninspired. In my art practice and in academia, downtime between creative projects is now a necessity for me. Adapting a seasonal or periodic approach to art making allows me to dive into a project when I feel called to do so, and once it's complete, it might be months before I pick up a paintbrush. Since finishing my BA, I have incorporated beadwork as a fundamental element of my art practice. Studying in a multidisciplinary PhD program has allowed me to bring beadwork and painting into my research, which has allowed me to step away from "traditional" academic procedures and protocols within my degree. For example, with the encouragement of my supervisory committee, I was able to create beadwork and painting pieces as part of my comprehensive exam for my PhD. Being able to incorporate cultural practices into my academic experience helps mitigate some of the pressure within academia.

**AN:** Given your recent exploration into the narratives, aspirations, and lives of your Métis kin through *Matrilineal Memory*, how do you envision your artistic practice contributing to a broader discourse on the experiences and dreams of Métis peoples and communities?

**JM:** Although I cannot speak for all Métis people, I think there is a need for further understanding of who the Métis are and how we are our own distinct culture. There is a misconception that being Métis is synonymous with being mixed race. Like all cultures, the Métis experienced an ethnogenesis, and we have our own cultural practices, music, dances, food, and art forms. By depicting my foremothers, I hoped to share insight into their experiences as Métis women, all of whom lived their own cultural experiences throughout the decades. These experiences range from living on the land as trappers, being language and knowledge carriers, and being mothers and artists to surviving forced assimilation and then reclaiming cultural practices.

When I was working on this body of work, I was thinking about my experiences and connections with family and community. It was an opportunity to visit and honour the matriarchs in my family. In a way, I felt like I was introducing myself as an artist by introducing my ancestors. I wasn't thinking much about how others might view the works or connect with the pieces. Since then, I have had the privilege of having conversations with others and hearing about how visiting the exhibition moved them to reflect on their own foremothers and remember family stories. I didn't expect that the works would invite others to think about their relations, but I realize that the notion of family can connect us all in different ways. I am happy that I was able to engage in a broader conversation about our connections and honouring our ancestors.

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## Biography

Juliet Mackie is Métis (Cree, Gwich'in, and English) with maternal ancestral roots in Fort Chipewyan and Red River. She is a citizen of the Métis Nation of British Columbia. Juliet is a visual artist currently located in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal. Raised in the Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island, her art practice is inspired by her love of nature, family, and Métis culture. Juliet is a painter, beader, and student. She holds a BFA in painting and drawing and is currently a PhD candidate in the Individualized Program at Concordia University. Juliet's multidisciplinary research explores portrait painting as a means of strengthening cultural identity for Indigenous women.

Alexandra Nordstrom (Nehiyaw, Poundmaker Cree Nation) is an art historian, curator, and writer based in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Currently, she is pursuing her PhD in the Interuniversity Doctoral Program in Art History at Concordia University, with the support of the SSHRC Joseph-Armand Bombardier CGS Doctoral Scholarship. Her curatorial projects include *Matrilineal Memory* (2023) at She:kon Gallery, *Miyo Nepin* (2022) at Fort Battleford National Historic Site, *Braiding Our Stories* (2019) at the VAV Gallery, and *Poundmaker: Life, Legacy and Liberation* (2019) at Poundmaker Museum and Gallery. Her writing has been featured in *RACAR*, *C Magazine*, *Room Magazine*, and the catalogue of the 6th Contemporary Native Art Biennial / Biennale d'art contemporain autochtone (BACA). Nordstrom holds an MA in art history from Concordia University (2020) and a BA in art history from the University of British Columbia (2018).

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