

FALL 2014

DAVID GARNEAU: DEAR JOHN; LOUIS DAVID RIEL.



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ART
GALLERY

IN SITU

David Garneau: *Dear John; Louis David Riel.*

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 3:00 PM
VICTORIA PARK

An Irreducible and Irreconcilable Gesture

by Dylan Miner, PhD (Métis), Associate Professor, Michigan State University; Coordinator, Indigenous Contemporary Art Initiative and Adjunct Curator of Indigenous Arts, MSU Museum

Throughout his highly productive and critically-acclaimed career, Métis artist David Garneau has been at the forefront of what could be called contemporary Métis art or Métis contemporary art. His artistic practice, particularly his painting, pulls upon Métis history and cultural signifiers by placing them in a never-ending conversation with popular culture, both settler-Canadian and Indigenous. At the center of his work is what Garneau calls “irreconcilable space(s) for Métisness”.

Garneau’s performance, *Dear John; Louis David Riel.*, taking place in Regina’s Victoria Park on the 130th anniversary of Louis Riel’s execution, is one of his most challenging works to date. Riel, an enigmatic and prophetic Indigenous leader who was hanged for treason in Regina, signifies many things within contemporary Canada, a settler-colonial nation with a troubling relationship with Indigenous peoples.



While not immediately obvious, there is a relationship between assertions of Indigenous sovereignty and the artistic practices of contemporary artists like Garneau. Riel, himself a poet, understood the complex and anti-colonial nature of the arts and envisioned that art could awaken an entire Indigenous people from colonialism's anesthetic power over our bodies and sovereignties. In the oft-quoted passage attributed to Riel, artists will be at the center of awakening Indigenous communities from the mental and physical demands of oppression.

In a similar manner, the Idle No More events of 2012 and 2013, initially conceptualized by four activists in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (Nina Wilson, Sheelah Mclean, Sylvia McAdam, and Jessica Gordon), conceptualized the power embodied within a drum to be a multifacteted signifier; it was simultaneously the beat of the earth, the beat of the ancestors, and a call to action.

Through autonomously organized round dances, a winter social dance with origins in Nehiyaw (ᑭᐱᐃᐅᑦ) or Cree communities, Idle No More reclaimed capitalist spaces of commerce by asserting Indigenous presence within them. The drum, and the songs associated with it, was paramount to the success of Idle No More and its ability to galvanize the multiplicity of Indigenous voices and issues, not only across Turtle Island, but around the world. Such a simple object and series of gestures transformed the state of Canadian politics, even if only momentarily. For *Dear John; Louis David Riel*, the beat of the drum emerges

both from the north and the south. From the north emanates the sounds of a Nehiyaw handdrum, while from the south we can hear the militaristic nature of Euro-Canadian war drums.

Within the context of *Dear John; Louis David Riel*, a tongue-in-cheek reference to Canada's first premier John A. Macdonald, who refused to pardon Louis Riel, the drum has the ability to both colonize and liberate. It signifies both settler-colonial manifestations of military encroachment of Indigenous lands and the drum's ongoing implication within Indigenous communities to be a harbinger of social, political, and aesthetic organization. The drum means many things and offers us, as active participants in Garneau's performance, a remembrance of Riel's execution at the hands of the Canadian state.

The fact that Garneau-as-Riel wears a gray felt suit is also quite significant. Felt, and the role it played within the fur trade and the Anglo- and Franco-Canadian colonization of Anishinaabewaki or Turtle Island, is central to the main theme that Garneau develops in this work: an irreconcilable space of Métisness. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, felted beaver was used in making fashionable hats throughout Europe. As such, the North American beaver was needed by the tens-of-thousands. By placing himself-as-Riel in a gray felt suit, Garneau alludes to the long and complicated history of commerce and what that means for Métis and other Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island.



As the performance continues, Garneau-as-Riel confronts the statue of Macdonald, a proxy for the possible dialogue between the Métis and Canada. The dialogue between the two, if such a thing is possible between humans and statuary, is based on various moments in Métis history including transcripts from Riel's trial. Riel spits on Macdonald's shoes and begins to wipe the spit off in an act that appears to only shine the bronze of Macdonald's figure. As we watch this interaction, one cannot help but remember Macdonald's famous words upon upholding Riel's death sentence: "He shall die though every dog in Quebec bark in his favour."

It is in this space that Garneau's "irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality" functions in a palpable and powerful way. For Garneau, not all spaces can be reconciled and the very notion of reconciliation ignores the sovereignty of Indigenous nations by reducing indigeneity from the level of the collective or communal to that of the individual. At the same time, reconciliation also presupposes a prior relationship between two parties that was amicable, well-balanced, and equitable. Settler-colonialism, as we know too well, was none of these.

Instead, "irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality" are those autonomous, decolonial, and Indigenous spaces that exist outside the Settler gaze and its not-quite omni-present control. As Garneau has previously written: "These spaces

are irreconcilable in the sense that their function depends upon a difference from Settlers. It is axiomatic that their contents are not candidates for reconciliatory discourse. They are also irreconcilable in that they do not have a mythology that places them in previous seamless accord with Settlers or a theory that proposes a future other than one of perpetual struggle with the dominant.”

The Daniels’ Decision in 2013 and its reaffirmation by the Court of Appeals in 2014 is but one example in which the Canadian state refuses to engage with Indigenous people on an equitable and amicable level, even when its own juridical system mandates it to do so. Instead of naively hoping to reconcile a relationship that cannot be reconciled, Garneau gestures toward the irreducible and “irreconcilable space of Métisness” through his performance. By doing so, Garneau reaffirms Métis sovereignty in the face of ongoing settler-colonialism.

Artist Biography:

David Garneau is Department Head and Associate Professor of Visual Arts at the University of Regina. His work focuses on painting, drawing, curation, and critical writing.

CREDITS

DAVID GARNEAU, *Dear Jobn; Louis David Riel*, Performance, 2014

Photo: Eagleclaw Thom

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