

We Walk Between:
The Erasure of Métis in Northeast BC and Resurgence
Through Contemporary Art

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Abstract

The Métis experience in British Columbia's northeast is shaped by history, geography, industry, and identity. In the Peace Country, where vast reserves of natural gas intersect with the Métis Homeland, the community is at the crossroads of resource extraction and cultural survival. This land sits atop the Montney Gas Formation, a massive natural gas deposit.

This document is written by Treaty 8-based, interdisciplinary artist, Haley Bassett. Bassett's work explores what makes us who we are, including culture, land, heritage, and history. The works in this paper focuses on the intersection of identity, place, and labour—both physical and economic and spans beadwork, textiles, found objects, and sculpture.

This thesis offers a micro-to-macro view of the interplay between Métis identity, cultural continuity, economic precarity, resource extraction, and legal rights and recognition in northeast British Columbia and within the broader Métis Nation. Personal and family stories are woven throughout to give voice to the experiences of Indigenous people living on the margins of recognition.

Bassett's research questions concern inherent and constitutionally protected rights – abstract concepts that become solidified when exercising dominion over natural resources in a capitalist, resource-based economy. In this sense, such rights are a container for Indigenous identity. A right is a responsibility—a role. Bassett contends that identity is reified by a Nation's duties to the land, water, and sky and by the ability to exercise those rights in opposition to capitalist and colonial forces. How does the lack of such rights affect contemporary Métis identity in BC? Does it render it more permeable or vulnerable? And can this harm be remedied through art making?

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Foreword

We walk between

We walk between worlds

We walk between natives, settlers, continents and nations

Provinces, territories, rights and laws

Between traditions, cultures, languages and peoples

Cuisines, dance, and music

We walk between communities, families, and homes

Lands, waters and histories

Between nomads, farmers, and industries

Between faith and spirit, visibility and obscurity

We walk between

And between

And between

Introduction

I am an interdisciplinary artist of Métis and settler descent. I was born and raised and currently live and work in the Peace Country, a land with many names: northeast British Columbia, Unchaga, Treaty 8, the traditional territory of the Dene, Dune-zaa, Nēhiyawēwin, the Homeland of the Métis, the Peace River Regional District, Where Happiness Dwells, where the Indians wear cowboy hats, God's Country and the Sacrifice Zone.¹²³⁴⁵

My work explores the contributing factors of identity and self, or what makes us who we are, including culture, land, heritage, and history. More recently, I have focused on the intersection of identity, place, and labour—both physical and economic. The work produced during this program spans beadwork, textiles, found objects, and sculpture, drawing on an autoethnographic and place-based methodology rooted in the land, flora, and stories of Treaty 8, or the Peace Country.

I begin by offering a glimpse into daily life in my community of Fellers Heights, our connection to Métis culture, and how our way of life was disrupted by market downturns and an increased reliance on the oil and gas industry. From there, I broaden the scope to examine provincial Métis politics, government policy, and colonial history, highlighting the consequences for communities caught between these intersecting forces.

I consider the Peace Country the crucible that formed my selfhood, as my maternal and paternal ancestors found their way to the region through vastly different paths. My mother's ancestors fled Russia during the revolution and later became grain farmers here. My father's Métis roots reach Choteau, Montana, and Red River. I am a citizen of Métis Nation BC. My family names are Garipey/Gaurdipee, Cardinal, Ducharme, Lalonde, and Demontigny. Our family settled in Fellers Heights, also called the valley, a remote community southwest of Dawson Creek, BC, where they maintained a small enclave of Métis culture. After my parents' divorce, my brothers and I split our time between our mother's house and my father's home in Fellers Heights.

¹ South Peace Historical Book Committee, *Lure of the South Peace: Tales of the Early Pioneers to 1945* (Beaverlodge, AB: South Peace Historical Book Committee, 1981), 6.

² Robin Ridington and Jillian Ridington, *Where Happiness Dwells: A History of the Dane-zaa First Nations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2013).

³ Adrienne Greyeyes, personal communication with the author regarding the origin of the name for our group exhibition at the Dawson Creek Art Gallery, June, 2022. Adrienne was speaking with an Indigenous person (name and Nation unknown) in what is now called southern BC. When they asked where she was from, she replied, northeast BC. "Oh," they said, "that's where the Indians wear cowboy hats."

⁴ Lawrence J. Barkwell, *Fellers, Emilie Garipey* (Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research, March 2, 2016), <https://www.metismuseum.ca/resource.php/148277>.

⁵ David Suzuki and Karl Mattson, *Voices from the Sacrifice Zone*, Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE), July 25, 2022, YouTube video, 1:54:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ofXIKpKqJ8>. CAPE has dubbed the Peace River Region the "Sacrifice Zone" due to the extreme resource extraction in the area, and the little regard the government has shown for the health of the environment, or residents.

Due to my bifurcated upbringing, I am interested in hybrid and postmodern identities. This thesis contends with the social, economic, and political tensions that underpin my experiences of my Métis heritage and explores how colonial boundaries, Indigenous territories, and economic interests influence the formation and expression of collective identities.

I contend that the unique position of Métis in BC's northeast within these factors contributes to our ongoing systemic erasure. To counteract this repression, I weave personal and family stories to illuminate our experiences as an attempt to write ourselves into the canon of the Métis Nation, Métis art history, and the broader conversation surrounding Indigenous rights and identity. My visual work expresses these stories through a series of contemporary regalia, culturally loaded garments and signifiers, and alternative customary items that reflect these complex experiences, inherent tensions, and the labour of undoing systemic erasure.

Life in Limbo

As children of divorce, it seemed my brothers and I were perpetually being ferried from one parent's house to another. Unbeknownst to me then, these drives with my father, between Fellers Heights and my parents' meeting point—the junction of highways 52 and 97—were essentially kinship-tie tours.

Dad never missed an opportunity to point out relatives' homes—nearly every house in the valley. He'd also highlight the land where ancestral homesteads had been and other important sites that triggered memories and family stories.

Every drive was the same routine. He'd point to a house and say, "So-and-so lives there," followed by a brief pause, before continuing, "They're your cousins." He'd then launch into reciting the family tree, outlining our connection. He did so with the same cadence and intonation each time. Reciting our ties rhythmically, like a prayer with a carousel of names: Jones, Carlson, Abel, Bedell, Cooke, Houle, McNabb, more Bassetts, the Fellers of course, and so on.

The sheer volume of information was overwhelming. There were cousins under every rock and tree. Once, during his recitation, I asked, "Why are you telling me this?" His eyes locked with mine. With gravity, he said, "Because if you need help, they will help you."⁶

—

⁶ Jesse Bassett, Métis, Kinship-ties, Personal communication, Treaty 8 and the Métis Homeland, June, 2002.

What seemed to be a peculiar quirk of my father's was his way of orally mapping our community in Fellers Heights. Pushed to the margins of society once again, five generations and counting of my ancestors survived in this remote area thanks to their traditional knowledge and kinship ties.⁷ We shared culture, supported each other as a community, danced and played music, and hunted and gathered in these lands since 1919.⁸⁹

My ancestors, namely the Cardinal family, may have been frequenting this area since the 1790s.¹⁰ However, such research is beyond the scope of this thesis. I believe my family settled here because they knew this place. They regarded it as a haven, calling it "God's Country."¹¹

Growing up, I heard whispers of a less-than-dignified exodus from northern Montana, where our ancestors, the Fellers and the Gariepys, were branded as horse thieves, a common pejorative directed at Métis people at the time.¹²¹³ My father alluded to their departure with a wink and a smile, claiming our family chose to settle high in the valley in Fellers Heights "so they could see the posse coming."¹⁴ This displacement aligns with broader patterns of migration within the Métis Nation, as many families moved north and west, toward the edges of our Homeland, in search of a better life.¹⁵

Martha Harroun Foster describes these regional kinship systems, as outlined in my father's oral maps and histories, as "enclaves", flexible and informal community frameworks that allowed our ancestors to support each other and maintain cultural continuity despite their ambiguous position in Montana.¹⁶ Due to their nomadism, they were denied both US citizenship and Indian Status.¹⁷ I contend that my ancestors recreated this community structure when they "immigrated" to northeast BC, where we are confronted with similar assimilative tactics.

⁷ South Peace Historical Book Committee. *Lure of the South Peace: Tales of the Early Pioneers to 1945*. Beaverlodge, AB: South Peace Historical Book Committee, 1981, 42.

⁸ Lawrence J. Barkwell, *Fellers, Emilie Gariepy* (Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research, March 2, 2016), <https://www.metismuseum.ca/resource.php/148277>.

⁹ South Peace Historical Book Committee. *Lure of the South Peace: Tales of the Early Pioneers to 1945*. Beaverlodge, AB: South Peace Historical Book Committee, 1981, 43.

¹⁰ David V. Burley, J. Scott Hamilton, and Knut R. Fladmark, *Prophecy of the Swan: The Upper Peace River Fur Trade of 1794–1823* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1996), 60.

¹¹ Barkwell, *Fellers, Emilie Gariepy*

¹² Lawrence J. Barkwell, *Judith Guardipee (Gariepy) née Cardinal* (Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research, March 2, 2016), <https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/14798.Judith%20Guardipee.pdf>. I am grateful to the late Lawrence Barkwell, the esteemed researcher, and ally to the Métis people, who enshrined the history of my family, and the founding of Fellers Heights in the Gabriel Dumont Institute.

¹³ Martha Harroun Foster, *We Know Who We Are: Métis Identity in a Montana Community* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Jesse Bassett, Métis, Relocation Family Story, Personal communication, Treaty 8 and the Métis Homeland, May, 2002.

¹⁵ Bartlett, "A Métis Woman's Journey of Discovery."

¹⁶ Foster, *We Know Who We Are*.

¹⁷ Foster, *We Know Who We Are*.

Fellers Heights was founded by a matriarch, Emily Garipey Fellers, my great-great-great-grandmother, her six sons, and their families.¹⁸ Many of their descendants still reside on, or near, their original homesteads, so it's not surprising I grew up surrounded by cousins.¹⁹ Fellers Heights is a historic Métis community; however, we are not a rights-holding community at this time.^{20,21} Without the province's legal sanction, I fear our story will be lost, and our community will be subsumed by the machinery of capitalism, colonialism, and resource extraction.

However, I believe that art can reclaim space where law and policy deny it. I am writing this thesis to enshrine our story within an institutional archive and combat our erasure. While I believe the organizational structure necessary to assert our presence formally may be years, or even decades, away, this thesis can serve as a lobsterstick, guiding future ancestors and leaders in the ongoing struggle for Métis recognition in British Columbia.²²

¹⁸ Barkwell, *Fellers, Emilie Garipey*.

¹⁹ Barkwell, *Fellers, Emilie Garipey*.

²⁰ Métis Nation British Columbia, *MNBC Comments on Murray River Coal Project: Potential Project Effects on Métis Aboriginal Rights and Related Interests* (Abbotsford, BC: Métis Nation British Columbia, 2014), PDF. This document outlines the formal response of the Métis Nation British Columbia (MNBC) to the proposed Murray River Coal Project, addressing the proponent's limited recognition of Métis communities and their rights. It discusses the legal framework surrounding Métis rights (including *R v. Powley*), clarifies MNBC's governance structure, and critiques the exclusion of MNBC from consultation processes. The report highlights the distinct geographical, cultural, and governance characteristics of Métis peoples, and emphasizes the importance of Métis Traditional Knowledge (MTK), mobility, and kinship networks in assessing project impacts. Notably, it also lists historic Métis communities in northern British Columbia including Fellers Heights, Moccasin Flats, Hessler Flats, and Taylor underscoring their continued relevance in regional land use and identity.

²¹ Zachary Romano, quoted in Christopher Gall and Brodie Douglas, "Shifting the Status Quo: The Duty to Consult and the Métis of British Columbia," in *Bead by Bead: Constitutional Rights and Métis Community*, ed. Yvonne Boyer and Larry Chartrand (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021), 61.

"Dispossession and dispersion has been particularly intense for the descendants of the historic Métis Nation represented by the MNBC. The absence of land recognized land rights does not in and of itself mean the absence of a Métis community."

²² Lawrence J. Barkwell, *Lobstick* (Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research, March 2, 2016), <https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/149071.Lobstick.pdf>. "Lobsticks would mark trails or portages, sources of food, or hunting grounds. They were also used as cultural markers, to signify meeting places, burial grounds, ceremonial sites, personal totems or to honour someone."

Horse People



Figure 1. Grandpa and I.

“She grew up in a Métis settlement, so she knew cattle and horses.”²³

This section reflects on daily life in Fellers Heights, the deeply rooted horse culture that shaped my upbringing and continues to inform my identity as a Métis artist. Through stories of my grandfather, father, and our community’s shared practices, I trace the continuity of horsemanship as both a way of life and a cultural throughline. What began as childhood experience has come to represent a powerful connection to my ancestors and our enduring relationship with the land, animals, and community.

²³ Conor Kerr, *Prairie Edge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2024).



Figure 2. Grandpa and Ribbon.

My grandfather, Glen Bassett, loved horses. When he recounted his life, he'd mark the chapters, not according to calendar dates, but according to his horses in a sort of equine chronology. There was his prized mare Ribbon, later his team Blaze and Barney, then his saddle horse Clancy, and so on, with many more in between.

Like many Indigenous Nations of the prairies, the Métis are horse people. Our ancestors hunted buffalo on horseback.²⁴ Their prowess in the saddle also made them fierce warriors.²⁵ Horsemanship and cattle-rearing bear particular significance in our family.²⁶ My great-great-great-great-grandfather, Jean-Baptiste Gariépy, was a celebrated buffalo hunter who later turned to cattle-raising when the buffalo were eradicated.²⁷ According to Nicholas Vrooman, the Métis were the first to bring cattle to the plains, well before settlers began operating cattle ranches in northern Montana.²⁸

²⁴ Jean Teillet, *The North-West Is Our Mother: The Story of Louis Riel's People, the Métis Nation* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2019).

²⁵ Teillet, *The North-West Is Our Mother*, 52.

²⁶ Barkwell, *Judith Guardipee (Gariépy)*.

²⁷ Barkwell, *Judith Guardipee (Gariépy)*.

²⁸ Al Wiseman and Nicholas Vrooman, *Revisiting Montana 1889—Métis Discussion Group*, Montana Historical Society, April 4, 2019, YouTube video, 1:22:53, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PwQVhTuqqwo&t=165s>

In keeping with tradition, my grandfather raised cattle and horses on his ancestral homestead in Fellers Heights. Down the road, my father, Jesse Bassett, did the same on his uncle, Frank “Jiggs” Fellers’ land. Our neighbours also raised horses and cattle, as well as buffalo. We had a unique way of feeding and doing other tasks using heavy horse teams and a stoneboat, a low sleigh that was widely used by Métis people in Montana.²⁹



Figure 3. Grandpa and Uncle Steve with the heavy horse team and the stoneboat.

I learned to ride at nine with my two brothers, Colin and Theran, and three step-siblings, Casey, Darcy, and Lance Harris. We helped with the annual cattle drives, branding, sorting, and other chores. Riding was not a leisure activity but a way of life. Horses taught us responsibility, respect, empathy, teamwork, and self-worth. Gaining every new skill, grooming, saddling, riding at a walk, trot, lope, and gallop, was a rite of passage, and a measuring stick. Horses were so central to my childhood that I would feel lost raising children without them.

My grandfather gave me my first saddle. Our horses were gifted to us by family, friends, and neighbours. They were old, slow ex-team ropers and pack horses who should have enjoyed a well-earned retirement. Whisper and Echo, Mini and Shorty, Misty and Dew. They were patient teachers.

²⁹Wiseman and Vrooman, *Revisiting Montana* 1889.



Figure 4. Me and my horse, Missy (left), and my step-sister Darcy, riding Misty (right) in Fellers Heights.

In the spring, we'd herd the cattle to pastures in the Crown land and bring them home in the fall. These drives were community events, as were branding and sorting. Our neighbors, the Hendersons and Kronlachners, would also help. In return, we would assist with their ranch operations. We had a beautiful, reciprocal way of supporting each other.

I remember my nerves at the beginning of each drive. I always knew what to do, even though it was never explicitly explained. Coordinating 200 head of cattle is quite a feat. We all knew the task, however, and worked as a unit. Perhaps it was blood memory at work, evoking our time as buffalo hunters.

In the summers, we would go on horseback trips through the Crown lands. Dad drove our covered wagon, which he had built himself. The kids and our neighbours would follow on our saddle horses. There was music in the evening and pancakes with saskatoon jam in the morning. We'd then break camp and move on to our next destination.



Figure 5. Our team, Babe and Prince, pulling our wagon with Dad at the reins.

I was young then, but I do not remember if an explicit connection was made between these trips and our origins as nomads. This was the world I knew, so I implicitly believed that everyone grew up this way. I don't know if it was an intentional effort to preserve our culture or an inherited instinct to move, to ride en masse, as our ancestors did when they rode from Red River to Pembina.

Horse Girl



Figure 6. *Horse Girl*, 2025, vintage and contemporary seed beads, iron cut beads, pony beads, thread, satin ribbon, my father's cowboy hat and found hat rack

What began as lived experience on the land, with horses, family, and community, gradually revealed itself as cultural inheritance. *Horse Girl* emerges from this recognition, transforming memory and material into a statement of Métis cultural continuity and identity.

Horse Girl (above) is about rendering the invisible *visible*, learning to recognize, or see anew, something that has always been present: our horse culture. It reflects my journey toward understanding this way of life as a vital tradition I was fortunate to inherit. The piece is made from my father's cowboy hat, symbolizing that lineage. Its brim bears burn marks from campfires, a quiet record of the years he wore it during cattle drives and horseback camping trips.



Figure 7. *Horse Girl*, detail

I developed a method for beading both sides of a material simultaneously. To my knowledge, I am the first to use this approach. It is an adaptation of a long-standing tradition made possible only in the present day. Traditionally, our beadwork was meant to be used and worn. Double-sided beadwork complicates that utility, shifting these works further toward the realm of the art object, though not entirely, allowing them to occupy a middle space, reflecting the Métis experience.

In this design, I aimed to echo historical patterns. The pattern on the top of the hat is mirrored on the bottom. The top is rendered in monochrome, while the bottom appears in full colour. This transition to colour symbolizes the moment of realization, when I finally recognized our lifestyle as a Métis tradition.

This understanding came to me relatively late in life. It was one of many realizations I would experience as I began to peel back the layers of systemic erasure. Unearthing these truths can be profoundly disorienting and distressing. Nevertheless, I feel compelled to continue, as though purging poison from my body.

At the same time, I also feel shame for not understanding, or recognizing my culture for what it was, sooner. Yet there is comfort in knowing this is a common experience for many Métis. Renowned Métis physician Judith Bartlett states, “No child can understand the effect of this daily push and pull, this cognitive dissonance in their life.”³⁰ She further reflects on her journey: “What I know now is that my Métis culture had never disappeared, it was always with me.”³¹

This work also engages with the Métis tradition of multi-use items—reconfigurations inspired by the Assumption sash, the Red River cart, and the stoneboat.³²³³ While the Red River Cart had long fallen out of use, the stoneboat was a fixture of my childhood. It helped us clear land and complete chores, ferried us to Christmas Mass, and provided joy and recreation through winter sleigh rides. My father would fabricate attachments or modifications to adapt the stoneboat for specific tasks.

Sometimes, survival requires reinventing or reconfiguring what is already at hand. These multi-use cultural items reflect the creativity, resourcefulness, ingenuity, and pragmatism of Métis people. In that spirit, *Horse Girl* is a hat, a mask, and a lens that sees through systemic erasure, affirms cultural survival, and dispels the colonial gaze that devalues Métis culture.

³⁰ Judith Bartlett, “A Métis Woman’s Journey of Discovery,” in *Métis Rising: Living Our Present Through the Power of Our Past*, ed. Yvonne Boyer and Larry Chartrand (Vancouver: Purich Books, UBC Press, 2021), 235.

³¹ Bartlett, “A Métis Woman’s Journey of Discovery,” 237.

³² Louise Vien and Lawrence J. Barkwell, “History of the Métis Sash,” Gabriel Dumont Institute, accessed May 10, 2025, <https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/14654.History%20of%20the%20Metis%20Sash.pdf>. The Métis Sash had several uses, including an emergency bridle, sewing kit, tumpline, pocket, weight belt, among other things.

³³ Lawrence J. Barkwell, *The Red River Cart and Métis Identity* (Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, n.d.), <https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/07192.Red%20River%20Cartfinal.pdf>. The Red River Cart was amazingly versatile, and could be reconfigured to make a raft, boat, or a shelter.

Masks

Masks are a recurring theme in my work and my exploration of identity. I was drawn to create masks by an unconscious desire to affirm my own identity, combining my Métis ancestry and Russian roots, and to render the cognitive dissonance I was experiencing into something external and, therefore, tangible. Masks are often powerful cultural signifiers.³⁴ When used in an Indigenous context, such as ceremonies and cultural performances, masks can affirm collective identity, shared cultural history, and values.³⁵ In a Western sense, masks are often used in a theatrical context to adopt new personas, which can illustrate insights through imagined characters.³⁶ Universally, masks can conceal, reveal, and transform. *Horse Girl* blends Western and Indigenous notions of the mask as a fitting medium to explore the paradox of living within one's culture without the ability to recognize it as such, and how that disconnection shapes one's sense of self.

This focus emerged during my time studying on the unceded traditional territories of the x̱wməθkʷəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, and səliwətał Nations, also known as Vancouver. Immersed in the carving traditions of these coastal Nations, I was struck by the strength, and vibrancy of their cultures. Given the political and economic forces suppressing my Métis identity in northeast BC, as described below in "Identity and Industry," I understandably longed for an equivalent expression as an antidote to the "cultural disorientation and isolation" that I was experiencing.³⁷



Figure 8. Beau Dick, *Portrait Mask*, date unknown, alder, acrylic, horsehair³⁸

³⁴ Chris Gosden and Adam Warburton, "Masks in Context: Representation, Emergence, Motility and Self," *World Archaeology* 52, no. 2 (2020): 157–169, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2020.1996770>.

³⁵ Gosden and Warburton, "Masks in Context."

³⁶ Gosden and Warburton, "Masks in Context."

³⁷ Bartlett, "A Métis Woman's Journey of Discovery," 235.

³⁸ Fazakas Gallery, "Beau Dick, Portrait Mask, Date Unknown," *Fazakas Gallery*, accessed May 14, 2025, <https://fazakasgallery.com/artists/31-beau-dick/works/13271-beau-dick-portrait-mask-date-unknown/>.

I was particularly moved by the powerful masks of Beau Dick (see Figure 8), who was known for blending the mythology of his Kwakwaka'wakw culture with diverse iconography drawn from sources as varied as anime and Halloween.³⁹ Dick's openness to combining the traditional with the contemporary helped pave the way for my own approach to improvised iconography.



Figure 9. *Self-Portrait (Three Years Later)*, 2022, oil, vintage and contemporary seed beads and thread on canvas, 10 x 8 inches

To reflect my mixed heritage, a combination of Métis and mixed settler, I developed the beaded matryoshka motif (pictured above), a simplified nesting doll face rendered in beadwork. It was inspired by a matryoshka doll my great-grandmother, Mathilda Schikowsky, brought from Russia to Canada.

³⁹ Nancy Lanthier, "Sacred Ritual or Performance Art? A First Nation's Chief Takes Documenta," *Whitehot Magazine*, September 2016, <https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/nation-s-chief-takes-documenta/3511>.

I began the series shortly after experiencing a traumatic event that disrupted my sense of self. To illuminate this experience, imagine yourself as an airplane, flying at 30,000 feet when suddenly someone throws open the door. The contents of you are ripped out through the vacuum and strewn along a mountainside. My practice has since centered on reclaiming what was lost, which is why my work focuses on identity and the self. To reclaim my identity, I turned to my ancestry, believing those who came before me embodied fixed aspects of my selfhood, unchangeable by present events or circumstances. In this sense, one's ancestors form a core part of the self. This concept is elegantly reflected in the matryoshka, or Russian nesting doll.



Figure 10. *Self-Portrait*, 2024, seed beads and thread on embroidery mesh, wire, kokum cloth, sinew, ribbon, buttons, 7.25 x 6.5 x 4 inches

My desire for internal cohesion, for solidity in my sense of self, is reflected in the fully-beaded designs in my self-portraiture (see Figures 9 and 10). Beading in this way adds weight, and creates a hardened shell, like armour, or a mask. The mask conceals and distorts as much as it reveals about my identity. The bold, symmetrical features and fine detail are aesthetically seductive, enticing the viewer to observe closely and reflecting a conflicting desire to be both seen and unseen. Although the design was initially inspired by the matryoshka doll, it has since evolved into something else, something *other*. The doll has become a distant ancestor as my work transitioned into three-dimensions (see Figure 10 above).

The turn to sculptural beadwork is significant. A three-dimensional work has been pulled into this plane of reality, whereas a painting offer an imagined space we must enter. While the beaded paintings reveal the interior, or ephemeral aspects of the self, the move into three dimensions engages with tangible experience. This shift also reflects my turn toward conceptualizing Métis identity through the lens of labour and shared experience, explored in works such as *Gauntlet* and *Valænce*. The labour-intensiveness of such works, also speaks to this connection.



Figure 11. Nico Williams, *Uncle*, 2023. Glass beads, Delica beads and thread, 124.5 × 73.7 cm. Gochman Family Collection. © Nico Williams Photo: Paul Litherland⁴⁰

⁴⁰ National Gallery of Canada, "Sobey Art Award 2024: Nico Williams," *National Gallery of Canada*, October 7, 2024, <https://www.gallery.ca/magazine/exhibitions/sobey-art-award-2024-nico-williams>.

This shift led to the development of new processes, including the sculptural application of flat-stitch beadwork, as seen in *Self-Portrait* (pictured above). While I take inspiration from the beaded sculptural works of Nico Williams, my method of sculptural flat-stitch differs from brick stitch or the peyote stitch that Williams employs, as it requires a fabric backing, leaves a visible stitch that speaks to the labour of its making, and involves what I refer to as "sculpting with tension," using thread tension to shape the form of the beads. The distinctive eye shape, derived from the ultra-feminized eyes of the matryoshka doll, carries through into the cut-outs in *Horse Girl*, which emerges from the same lineage as the self-portraiture series.

Mad Cow

Life in Fellers Heights came with its difficulties, but the beauty and resilience of our community outshone the hardship. This section explores how economic precarity, the oil and gas industry, wage labour, and cultural continuity intersect in our lives.

In May 2003, the Mad Cow Disease hysteria began, causing cow-calf prices to plummet by 50%.⁴¹ For our community, largely composed of cow-calf producers, the impact was devastating. To make ends meet, my dad took contract work with oil and gas companies while continuing to manage the family ranch. He drove crews to sites and built custom fencing around the facilities that sprang up in the valley seemingly overnight. He'd leave before dawn and return after dark, completely exhausted.

As finances worsened, we rationed food and water, limited trips to town to conserve fuel, and gathered firewood to heat the house. We leaned on each other and our neighbours. Sometimes, when we ran out of water, all six of us children would bathe at a neighbour's home.

The hardship strengthened our community bonds, but it also strained cultural continuity. Drawing on his traditional knowledge, my father began working as a hunting guide in Terminus Mountain, often gone for weeks at a time. The cattle market crash and demands of wage labour in the oil and gas industry took both him and our culture from us, and complicated our connection to the land in many ways.

Eventually, he was forced to sell the family cattle operation, a tradition that spanned seven generations. This loss marked the beginning of the end of our time living in Fellers Heights, as my dad ultimately left his ancestral homestead and settled in Sunset Prairie, a nearby area.

One hot afternoon, Dad, my brothers, and I drove out to a natural gas lease deep in the valley. He brought his rifle. We stepped off the gravel pad and into the bush. "We're going hunting," he said, though he seemed worn and scattered.

⁴¹ The Canadian Press, "Timeline: Canada's 2003 Mad Cow Disease Crisis," *Global News*, February 13, 2015, <https://globalnews.ca/news/1830438/timeline-canadas-2003-mad-cow-disease-crisis/>.

I had only been hunting with him a few times. I didn't know much, but I knew this wasn't the way to do it—walking four abreast in the summer heat. Unsurprisingly, we had no luck. My brothers and I piled back into the truck, confused by the aimless outing.

Looking back, I realize those weren't ideal circumstances for hunting. But it was the only time he had to pass that knowledge on to us. It was the last time we hunted together as a family, as our way of life had already begun to change forever.

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Valænce



Figure 12. *Valænce* (WIP), 2025, vintage and contemporary seed beads, thread, used work gloves

While wage labour in the oil and gas industry disrupted the rhythms of our family and community life, it also shaped my understanding of work, survival, and identity. These experiences, rooted in physical labour and marked by economic uncertainty, later became central to my artistic practice. *Valænce* emerges from this exploration of endurance, adaptation, and cultural inheritance.



Figure 13. (right) Maria-Margaretta Cabana Boucher, *Go Help Grandma With the Dishes*

The piece draws inspiration from Métis artist Audie Murray's glove series, which explores "themes of connection, labour, and the transference of energy through hands."⁴² *Valænce* is also indebted to the work of Maria-Margaretta Cabana Boucher (Métis), particularly *Go Help Grandma With the Dishes*, through which Boucher seeks to "explore my Michif identity through lived realities within the spectrum of the everyday."⁴³

In times of hardship, our grandmother-artists often beaded domestic décor items including tea cozies, wall pockets, and shelf valances, not only as expressions of culture but also as a means of supplementing family income.⁴⁴ This tradition reflects how culture and economic survival have long been intertwined in Métis life. Today, that legacy continues in new forms, shaped by the pressures and possibilities of contemporary life.

⁴² Audie Murray, *Celestial Gloves*, 2021, Fazakas Gallery, accessed May 10, 2025, <https://fazakasgallery.com/artists/48-audie-murray/works/12443-audie-murray-celestial-gloves-2021/>. Image not included at the artist's request.

⁴³ Maria-Margaretta, *Go Help Grandma With the Dishes*, 2021, Salt Spring National Art Prize, accessed May 10, 2025, <https://saltspringartprize.ca/artwork/go-help-grandma-with-the-dishes/>.

⁴⁴ Scofield, *Our Grandmothers' Hands*.



Figure 14. *Valænce*, detail

In that spirit, I created *Valænce* from a pair of work gloves I used while employed in the oil and gas industry. The title is a play on words, referring both to the domestic valances (see Figure 17) created by our grandmother-artists and to “valence” or “polyvalence,” the quality of having many different meanings, functions or forms.

As I altered the gloves—removing the thumbs and stitching the fingertips together, a face, or mask, appeared by chance. It was a fortuitous coincidence, once again invoking the Métis practice of reconfiguration. What began as an aesthetic decision, the removal of the thumbs also became a play on utility. *Valænce* became both a mask and a domestic object, referencing Métis cultural adaptability and the layered meanings of labour, identity, and survival.

By deconstructing the gloves and cutting through their reinforced seams, I was undoing the manufacturer’s intent to create something durable and meant to endure hard labour. I felt a release of energy with each stitch I severed. The material slowly returned to something closer to the glove’s origin: tanned hide. This became a symbolic act of reclamation.

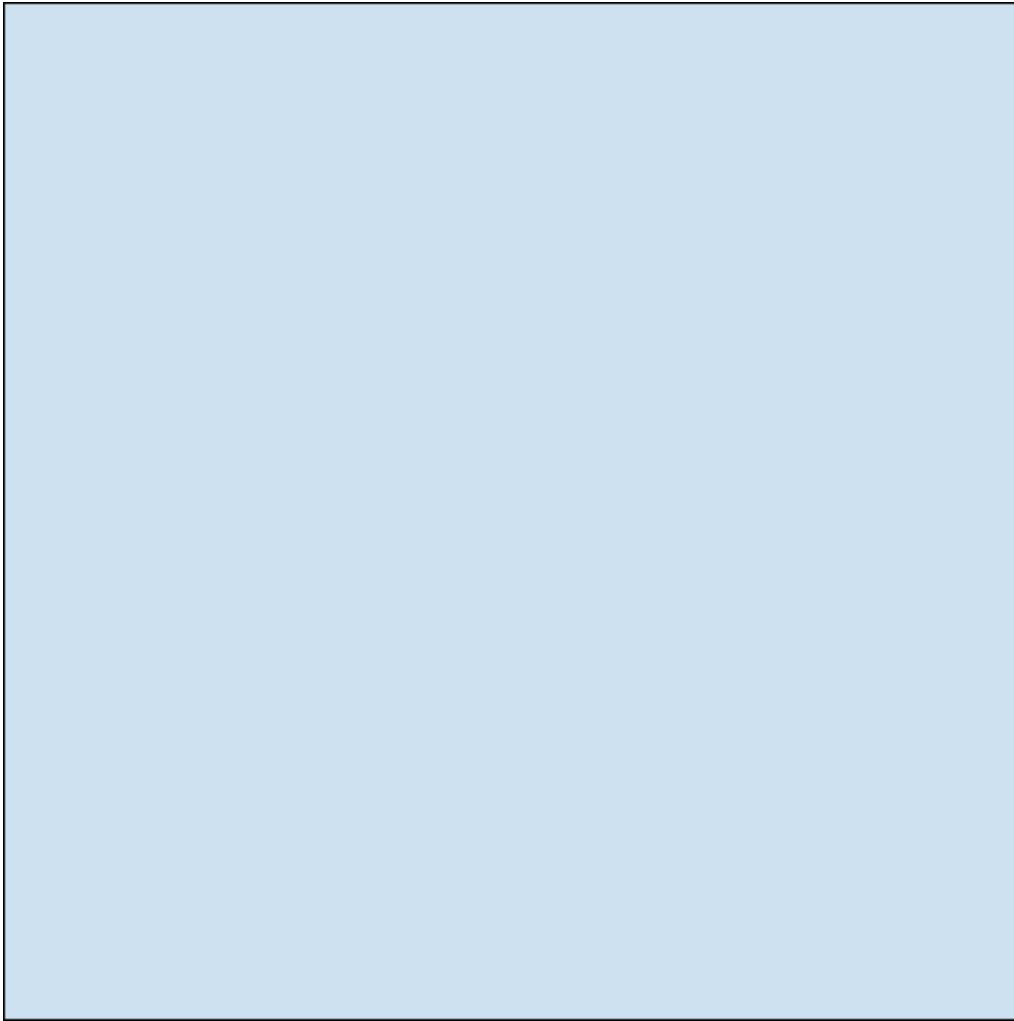


Figure 15. Once-known Artist, wall pocket, Métis, Cree, Saulteaux-Métis, c. 1890–1910⁴⁵

The beaded pattern I used is a master study of a grandmother artist's wall pocket (pictured above). The pattern is intentionally broken and distorted along the fingers. Some elements are incomplete or obscured, leaving only the stitches, or the record of labour, visible. This disruption echoes how the labour of survival can interfere with cultural continuity. While living in "survival mode" can suppress our identity, it is nonetheless part of our shared history as Métis people.

For many Métis, cultural continuity was broken; they did not learn to bead from family but through workshops or Zoom rooms (I learned to bead from my friend, Cree artist Adrienne

⁴⁵ Scofield, *Our Grandmothers' Hands*, 154-155. More information about the grandmother artist wall pocket: "Region: Red River Diaspora/East coast Lake Winnipeg/ Lake Winnipeg
Materials: Brown velvet, bound with black-glazed cotton fabric, lined and backed with black-glazed cotton fabric, cotton thread-strung and couched glass seed beads, black cotton thread loop hanger, two-beaded edging in transparent beads.
Measurements: L. 25.4 cm, W. 19 cm
Location Found: Fairport, New York"

Greyeyes).⁴⁶ In response to this, many beadworkers create master studies of grandmother artists' work to reach back through generations and bridge gaps in cultural knowledge.

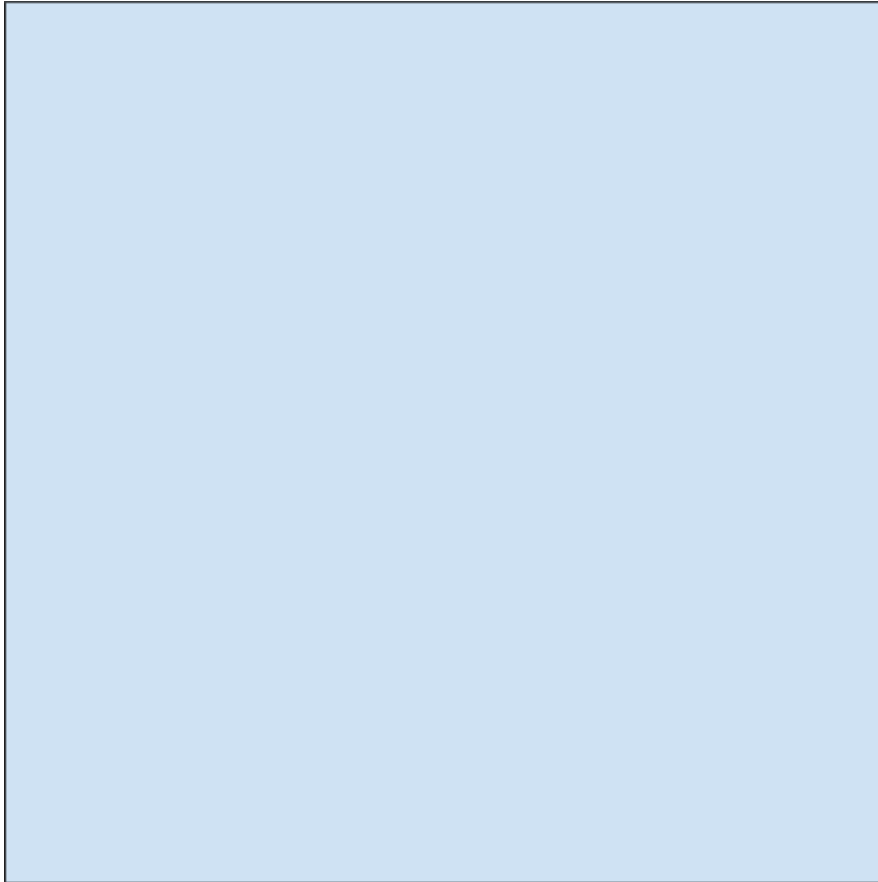


Figure 16. Once-known artist, possible connection to the Inkster-Sinclair family, Manitoba, shelf or mantle valance, Métis, Cree-Métis, Dene-Métis, c. 1875-1880

I chose the wall pocket (Figure 16) for its improvisational quality; the design seemed to have been created freehand, with organic forms that appeared to bloom as they were stitched. This intuitive approach suited the unconventional substrate of the gloves. I added the looped fringe, which is commonly found on historic beadwork from the late 19th century, especially on domestic items, as exemplified in Figure 17.⁴⁷ I found myself elaborating on the original pattern, replacing colours with what I had on hand, enlarging elements, and adding embellishments spontaneously. This process allowed me to learn directly from a master beadworker while embracing the continual reinvention that defines Métis culture.

⁴⁶ Catherine Ruddell, *Catherine Ruddell – Before the Peace*, Before the Peace, June 21, 2024, YouTube video, 50:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnKNaaZm6QM>

⁴⁷ Scofield, *Our Grandmothers' Hands*, 214-215. More information about the shelf valance: "Region: Red River Diaspora/Great Slave Lake-Mackenzie River Region
Materials: Balck velvet, sinew-strung and cotton thread couched glass seed beads, polished iron faceted beads, cotton fabric backing, cotton thread.
Measurements: L. 85 cm, W. 27.9 (side drops), W. 21.5 (middle drop)
Location Found: Ottawa, Ontario

Identity and Industry

While *Valænce* reflects an intimate engagement with labour and cultural inheritance, these themes extend far beyond the personal. The complexities of Métis identity in northeast British Columbia are deeply entangled with resource extraction, legal recognition, and colonial structures. My own search for work in the oil and gas industry brought these tensions into sharp relief, revealing the contradictions faced by Métis people striving to survive within and often despite systems that both employ and erase us.

—

I entered Triple J Pipelines' office one autumn looking for work, although I knew my chances were slim. Oil and gas was in a "bust" cycle, and the wet conditions didn't help much. "I'm Métis," I told the office manager, feeling distaste for myself. I hoped they would take me on as a diversity hire. "Half our crew is Métis," he said. "Call Curtis Belcourt. He might have something".⁴⁸

Curtis was a respected elder and community leader from Kelly Lake, a Métis settlement just within the BC border. He was also a contractor working in the oil and gas industry. He proclaimed his Métis pride with two full-sized infinity flags streaming over his company vehicle. On the back windshield, his logo combined Métis and industry symbols.

I met Curtis at Tim Horton's with a couple of other prospective hires. We met for coffee a few times that damp September. Although work never materialized, I enjoyed our visits. His manner of speaking was passionate and animated, like my grandfather's. He passed away in 2024.

—

For Curtis, his occupation and identity melded seamlessly, at least, it appeared so. For me, five years working in the oil and gas industry was a mark against my Métis identity. It made me complicit in the destruction of the land. The "real" Indians are land defenders, I thought. There I was, sticking a knife in and grabbing a paycheck.⁴⁹

⁴⁸Triple J Pipelines Office Manager (name unknown), personal communication to the author regarding the Métis workforce, Dawson Creek, BC, September 2015.

⁴⁹ The Guardian, "Fort McKay: The Canadian Town That Sold Itself to Tar Sands," *The Guardian*, May 28, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2015/may/28/carbon-bomb-canada-tar-sand-s-fort-mckay-town-sold-itself>. Cece Fitzpatrick, a community member from Fort McKay, and a former heavy equipment operator at Syncrude, voices a similar sentiment: "I used to feel like I was betraying myself and betraying my people because I was working at an industry that was destroying the land."

The Métis, perhaps more than any other Indigenous group, have strongly associated identity with occupation and industry. We emerged as fur traders, voyageurs, interpreters, and diplomats.⁵⁰ We were also guides, buffalo hunters, and resistance fighters.⁵¹ Arguably, our ethnogenesis, our very being, was facilitated by the policies of the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company.⁵² As the centuries wore on and the diaspora ranged wider, so have our experiences. It is difficult now for one or even a handful of occupations to stand out as integral to our story in the present moment.

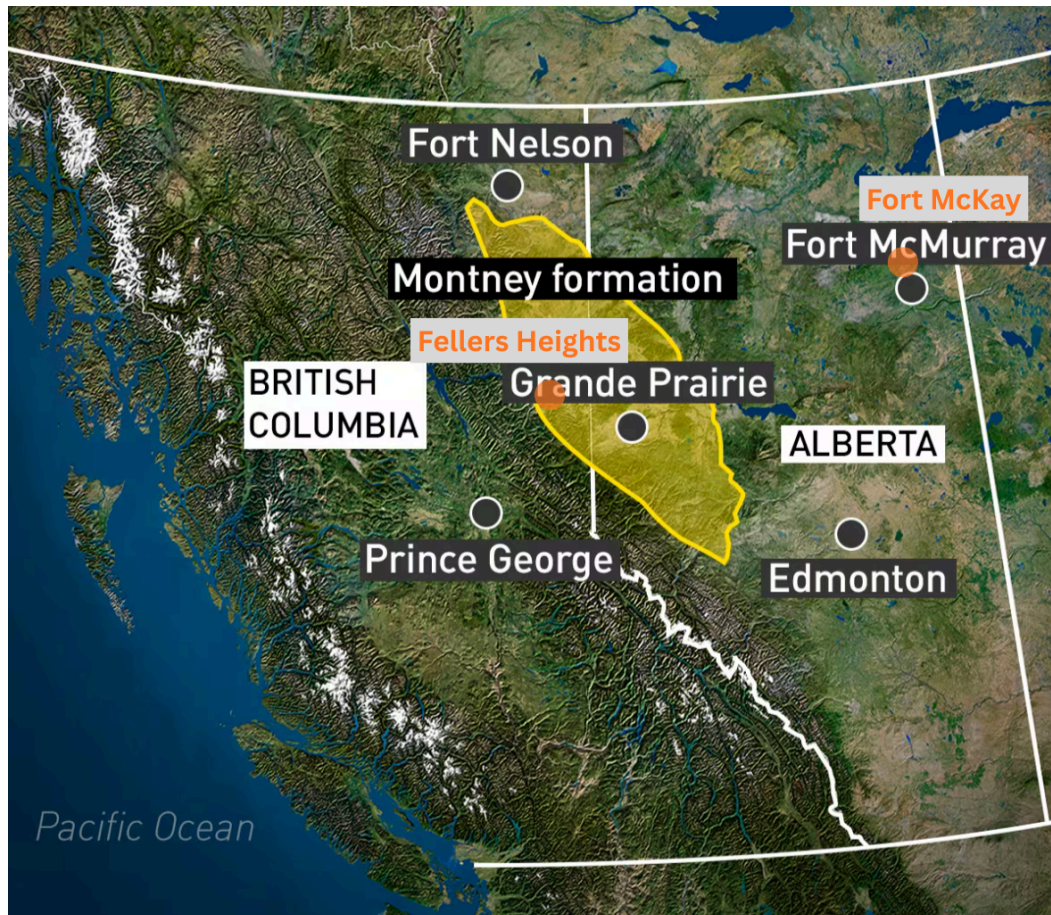


Figure 17. The Montney Gas Formation.⁵³

However, for Métis in BC's northeast, one industry looms over all else: oil and gas, due to our position within the Montney Gas Formation.⁵⁴ The dominance of oil and gas is also acutely felt by Métis communities on the Alberta side of Montney and, to a greater extent, by Métis in Fort McKay and their neighbours who have withstood ecocide in Alberta's oil sands.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Teillet, *The North-West Is Our Mother*.

⁵¹ Teillet, *The North-West Is Our Mother*.

⁵² Foster, *We Know Who We Are*.

⁵³ CBC News, "What's the Problem with Montney? Challenges Loom for Canada's Hottest Natural Gas Play," *CBC News*, November 2, 2016,

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/montney-natural-gas-challenges-1.3829007>. Note: Fellers Heights and Fort McKay added by the author.

⁵⁴ CBC News, "What's the Problem with Montney?"

⁵⁵ France 24, "Fort McKay: Where Canada's Boreal Forest Gave Way to Oil Sands," *France 24*, November 14, 2022,

Although British Columbia does not perceive itself as an oil and gas province like Alberta, it very much is.⁵⁶ The industry has run rampant in the region for decades, causing untold environmental harm.⁵⁷ It is a legal battleground where local First Nations have won landmark cases against the provincial government for infringing on their treaty rights.⁵⁸

Métis Nation BC (MNBC), has a close relationship with oil and gas.⁵⁹ MNBC's stake in the Enbridge Northern Gateway Project spurred a backlash among First Nations and MNBC citizens.⁶⁰ MNBC's relationship with Enbridge and its perceived role in facilitating pipelines that cross First Nations' territory propelled the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs (UBCIC) to pass a resolution denouncing what they call Métis colonialism.⁶² In January 2024, the BC Government updated its Distinctions-Based Approach (DBA), which contends, "It is not appropriate to include Métis as rights-holders in any of the Province's processes, matters, projects, or initiatives that relate to the land, water, or air in British Columbia."⁶³

According to Patrick Harriott, MNBC's Minister of Culture, Language, and Heritage, "The DBA was supposed to clarify the different approaches when it comes to land based First Nations' rights on these lands, and those of us who are Indigenous people grateful to be living in this beautiful place. Unfortunately, it did not do that and instead muddled the waters to include non-site-specific social sector issues such as education and culture."⁶⁴ As a result, Métis people, as well as Inuit, non-status, and non-BC First Nations individuals living in British Columbia, now face significantly reduced access to funding and support. The BC government defends these outcomes, asserting that they align with the United Nations

<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20221114-fort-mckay-where-canada-s-boreal-forest-gave-way-to-oil-sands>.

⁵⁶ Brent Jang, "Natural Gas Overtaking Forestry as Top Contributor to B.C. Government's Resource Revenue," *The Globe and Mail*, March 7, 2024,

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/article-bc-natural-gas-resource-revenue/>.

⁵⁷ Amnesty International, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Gender, Indigenous Rights, and Energy Development in Northeast British Columbia, Canada* (London: Amnesty International, 2016),

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr20/4872/2016/en/>.

⁵⁸ Mandell Pinder LLP, "Yahey v. British Columbia, 2021 BCSC 1287: Case Summary," *Mandell Pinder LLP*, 2021,

<https://www.mandellpinder.com/yahey-v-british-columbia-2021-bcsc-1287-canlii-case-summary/>.

⁵⁹ Métis Nation British Columbia, "Métis Nation British Columbia: Sponsorship Opportunities," accessed December 6, 2024,

<https://www.mnbc.ca/node/3986#:~:text=As%20a%20sponsor%2C%20your%20organization.and%20communities%20across%20the%20province>.

⁶⁰ *Terrace Standard*, "Enbridge Deal Divides Métis," November 10, 2022,

<https://www.terracestandard.com/news/enbridge-deal-divides-metis-6008615>.

⁶¹ Relationships with major corporations are not unique to MNBC, nor is it a specifically Métis issue, as many First Nations communities have similar arrangements. I am speaking simply from my own experiences and affiliations.

⁶² Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, "UBCIC Unanimously Passes Resolution Denouncing Métis Colonialism," last modified June 7, 2023,

https://www.ubcic.bc.ca/ubcic_unanimously_passes_resolution_denouncing_metis_colonialism. "The UBCIC Chiefs Council has unanimously passed Resolution 2023-39, denouncing Métis colonialism in what is now known as British Columbia (BC), and rejecting the false, unfounded, and deeply offensive assertions of the Métis that the Métis hold independent land and water-based inherent and constitutionally protected rights in BC, including related jurisdiction."

⁶³ British Columbia Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, *Distinctions-Based Approach Primer*, accessed December 6, 2024,

https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/indigenous-people/aboriginal-peoples-documents/distinctions_based_approach_primer.pdf.

⁶⁴ Patrick Harriott, email to author, March 02, 2025

Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.⁶⁵

Kelly Lake, a Métis settlement within the BC boundary, is mounting a case to prove their Section 35 rights.⁶⁶ If they are successful, BC's Distinctions-Based Approach will be upended in theory. However, it takes time for legal decisions to be implemented in practice. As Métis people well know, governments are not above dragging their feet to render legal remedies effectively null.⁶⁸

Ironically, in a news release, UBCIC President, Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, stated, "First Nations in BC take no issue with the Métis Nation, the Métis people, or their struggle to protect and advance their rights within their historic Homeland."⁶⁹ Yet, somehow, northeast BC, which sits within our historic Homeland, is ground zero for these divisive pipelines, and the people most affected do not factor into this conflict.⁷⁰ Our presence here has been elided entirely. We have been rendered invisible in our Homeland.

Relations Shaped by the Land

The Peace Country, named for the Peace River where the Dene-zaa and Nēhiyawēwin smoked the peace pipe, has a quiet beauty.⁷¹ It is a vast, open country where the prairies meet the mountains, and space and time expand and contract with the seasons.

To the west are the Rocky Mountains, which live in my mind as distant fixtures visible only on clear days. To the east is the Alberta border, an invisible line marked by a sign, and an apparent shift in road maintenance policies. Joined by the river and irrespective of provincial boundaries, the Peace Country encompasses northeast BC and northwest Alberta. Here, the Rockies enmesh the Peace's tributaries, forming a network of rolling foothills, valleys, and pockets of grassland that gradually expand as mountains give way to endless prairies.

⁶⁵ BC Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, *Distinctions-Based Approach Primer*.

⁶⁶ Métis Nation British Columbia, "Historic Kelly Lake Accepted as Métis Nation British Columbia's Newest Chartered Community," *Métis Nation British Columbia*, October 16, 2021, <https://www.mnbc.ca/news/historic-kelly-lake-accepted-metis-nation-british-columbias-newest-chartered-community>.

⁶⁷ Paulette Flamond, MNBC Director for Region 7, phone call with the author, February 28, 2025.

⁶⁸ *Manitoba Metis Federation Inc. v. Canada (Attorney General)*, 2013 SCC 14, [2013] 1 S.C.R. 623, Supreme Court of Canada, <https://decisions.scc-csc.ca/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/12888/index.do>. The Supreme Court of Canada found that the federal government failed to implement the land grant provisions of The Manitoba Act, 1870, in a manner consistent with the honour of the Crown. This failure contributed to the mass immiseration of Métis people.

⁶⁹ Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, "UBCIC Denouncing Métis Colonialism."

⁷⁰ Métis Nation of Alberta, "Guidelines & Requirements," accessed December 10, 2024, <https://albertametis.com/registry/guidelines-and-requirements/>.

⁷¹ Garry Oker, Dane-zaa, How the Peace River got its name, Personal communication, Treaty 8 and the Métis Homeland, August, 2019.

Sandwiched between the Rocky Mountains and the Alberta border, northeast British Columbia holds little political or cultural significance for the rest of the province. Even its quasi-boreal, prairie-like landscape exists in a kind of ecological liminality. The Peace Region is similarly marginal within the broader mythos of the Métis Nation, as no major historical events, such as military battles, have taken place here.⁷² Meanwhile, just 30 minutes east, Métis in Alberta have recently secured the right to self-governance.⁷³

This topography has undoubtedly shaped relationships between First Nations and Métis alike. This is especially evident when comparing maps of Treaty 8, the Métis Homeland, and Indigenous language regions, all overlapping in northeast British Columbia.

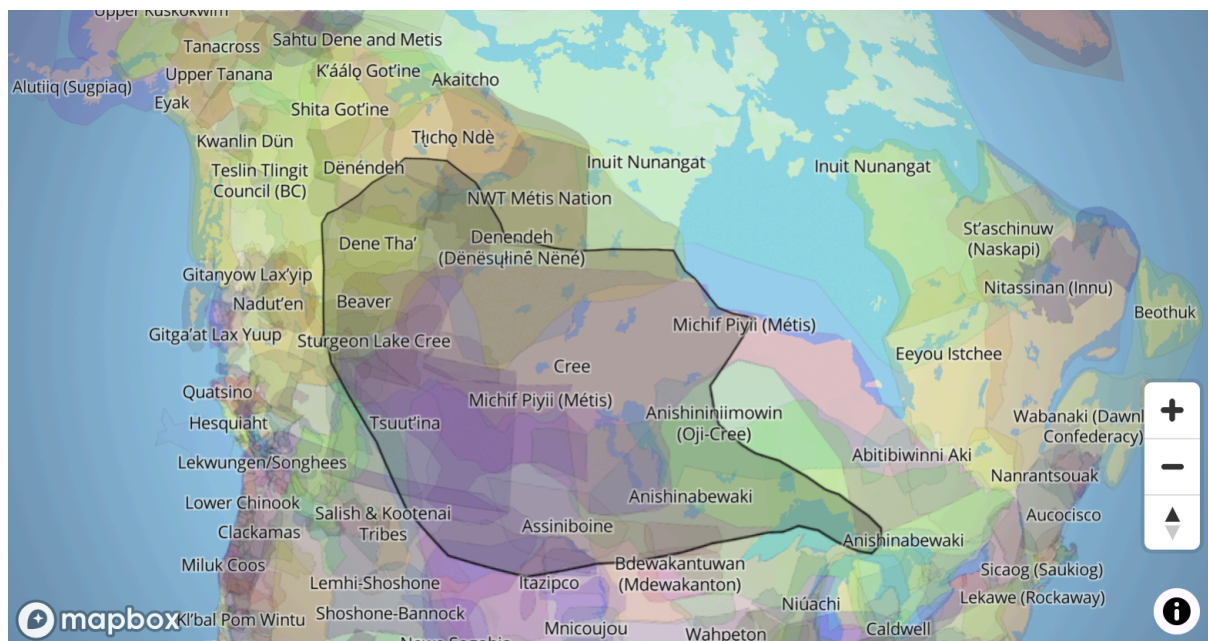


Figure 18. A Michif language map.⁷⁴

⁷² Gabrielle Legault, "Métis Networks in British Columbia: Examples from the Central Interior," *BC Studies*, no. 143 (2004): 55–78, <https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/bcstudies/article/view/193712/191111>.

⁷³ Métis Nation of Alberta and Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, *Métis Nation within Alberta Self-Government Recognition and Implementation Agreement*, February 24, 2023, <https://albertametis.com/app/uploads/2023/02/Self-government-and-Implementation-Agreement-signed.pdf>.

⁷⁴ Native Land Digital, "Michif Piyii (Métis)," *Native-Land.ca*, accessed May 14, 2025, <https://native-land.ca/maps/territories/metis>.



Figure 19. A map of Treaty 8⁷⁵



Figure 20. A map of the Métis Homeland⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Doig River First Nation, "Treaty 8," *Doig River First Nation*, accessed May 14, 2025, <https://doigriverfn.com/about/history/treaty/>.

⁷⁶ Native Land Digital, "Michif Piyii (Métis)."

It is essential to consider how this region came to be divided. The southern, zigzagging portion of the BC/Alberta border was surveyed between 1913 and 1924.⁷⁷ There was no need to continue the survey until oil and gas deposits were discovered north of the established boundary.⁷⁸ In 1949, survey work resumed in a straight line along the 120th meridian and was completed in 1953.⁷⁹ This is the origin of BC's peculiar shape (see map above). Its southern half more closely reflects natural boundaries and watersheds, while the northern portion is an arbitrary line that signifies nothing but colonial greed.

Unsurprisingly, traditional Métis land use has nothing to do with an imaginary line drawn in 1953. Métis presence has been recorded in the region as early as the 1790s.⁸⁰ Yet, this line has cut off my community from our neighbours and kin to the east and tethered us to a colonial government based over 1000 kilometers away.

Legal Lacuna

In my view, Métis across British Columbia have become convenient scapegoats for the provincial government, corporations, and political organizations, occupying the paradoxical role of a kind of Schrödinger's Halfbreed: simultaneously Indigenous and non-Indigenous to BC, depending on political or corporate convenience.⁸¹ Whether it's the UBCIC, federal or provincial governments, or companies like Enbridge, our status shifts to suit strategic needs.

Broadly speaking, our Indigeneity is affirmed when it supports pipeline development west of the Rockies, yet denied within our own Homeland, the northeast, where our rights could obstruct these projects at their source.⁸² Either way, Peace Region natural gas continues its journey to the West Coast. This pressure will only grow amid the ongoing trade conflict with the United States and Canada's renewed efforts to export oil and LNG to overseas markets.

This cycle will continue as long as our legal status in BC remains ambiguous. Christopher Gall and Brodie Douglas draw attention to our conflicting legal status, or "legal lacuna," asserting that, while Métis Nation BC is recognized by the federal Crown, British Columbia

⁷⁷Land Title and Survey Authority of British Columbia, "The AB-BC Boundary & the Surveyor General," LTSA, December 14, 2023, <https://ltsa.ca/our-stories/the-ab-bc-boundary-the-surveyor-general/>.

⁷⁸LTSA, "AB-BC Boundary & the Surveyor General."

⁷⁹LTSA, "AB-BC Boundary & the Surveyor General."

⁸⁰Burley, Hamilton, and Fladmark, *Prophecy of the Swan*, 60.

⁸¹ Sara A. Metwalli, "What Is Schrödinger's Cat?" *Built In*, last modified March 7, 2024, <https://builtin.com/software-engineering-perspectives/schrodingers-cat>. The term Schrödinger's Halfbreed is a play on Schrödinger's Cat, a thought experiment in which a cat is placed inside a sealed box along with a radioactive atom, a Geiger counter, a vial of poison, and a hammer. If the Geiger counter detects radiation (due to the atom decaying), it triggers the hammer to break the vial, releasing the poison and killing the cat. If no radiation is detected, the cat remains alive. According to quantum mechanics, until the box is opened and an observation is made, the atom exists in a superposition of decayed and undecayed states. Consequently, the cat is simultaneously alive and dead. Opening the box collapses this superposition into one definite state: the cat is either alive or dead. I am drawing a parallel here to illustrate a point about Métis people experiencing a similar state of superposition (existing in multiple states simultaneously) in British Columbia.

⁸² BC Métis Federation, "Sunrise Expansion Program (Enbridge)," accessed May 13, 2025, <https://bcmetis.com/programs-services/sunrise-expansion-program-enbridge/>. The BC Métis Federation's cooperation with Enbridge's Sunrise Expansion Program, that extends from Chetwynd to Chilliwack, is but one example of this double-standard.

claims it has no duty to consult Métis people.⁸³ According to Gall and Brodie, “The Province’s policies are not legally grounded.”⁸⁴

The provincial government itself confronts a contradiction in its own policies toward Métis people through the DBA: “the Métis Homeland, as defined by the Métis National Council does not extend into British Columbia west of the Rocky Mountains.” Notably, however, the Province implicitly acknowledges that the Homeland *does* overlap with British Columbia east of the Rockies. It further defends its exclusion of Métis people by asserting, “There has been no court decision applicable to British Columbia that has confirmed the existence of any identifiable historic Métis community or Métis homeland in British Columbia.”⁸⁵

This statement is technically accurate, for now. Across the Métis Homeland, landmark legal victories have been achieved through court cases centered on harvesting rights, such as *Powley* and *Goodon*.⁸⁶ These have proven to be effective legal strategies. In British Columbia, however, conservation authorities appear to have deliberately obstructed this pathway. Anecdotally, it is widely understood within my community that conservation officers avoid prosecuting individuals who claim Métis identity; charges and fines are often dropped as soon as someone identifies as Métis. This practice effectively prevents our Section 35 rights from being tested in court. In the meantime, Métis people in the region continue to face the threat of arrest, property seizure, and fines simply for trying to feed their families.

I’ve heard the Peace Country disparagingly called “the frontier.” While I resent that characterization, it is sadly accurate. Supreme Court rulings, such as the *Powley* and *Daniels* decisions, which have enshrined Métis rights, are flouted on the frontier.⁸⁸ On the frontier, corporations can leverage the ambiguous position of Métis to push their projects through. The frontier is lawless. The frontier is where the robber barons make their fortune. On the frontier, you do what you must to survive.

⁸³ Christopher Gall and Brodie Douglas, “Shifting the Status Quo: The Duty to Consult and the Métis of British Columbia,” in *Bead by Bead: Constitutional Rights and Métis Community*, ed. Yvonne Boyer and Larry Chartrand (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2021), 52–70.

⁸⁴ Gall and Douglas, “Shifting the Status Quo,” 55.

⁸⁵ BC Ministry of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, *Distinctions-Based Approach Primer*.

⁸⁶ *R. v. Powley*, 2003 SCC 43, [2003] 2 S.C.R. 207. “The respondents, who are members of a Métis community near Sault Ste. Marie, were acquitted of unlawfully hunting a moose without a hunting licence . . . The trial judge found that the members of the Métis community in and around Sault Ste. Marie have . . . an aboriginal right to hunt for food that is infringed without justification by the Ontario hunting legislation.”

⁸⁷ CBC News, “Manitoba Métis Win Hunting Rights Case,” *CBC News*, September 7, 2009, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/manitoba-m%C3%A9tis-win-hunting-rights-case-1.784627>. “A man has won a five-year legal battle against the Manitoba government with a landmark court ruling on Métis hunting rights.”

⁸⁸ CBC News, “Landmark Supreme Court Decision Says Métis, Non-Status Indians Are ‘Indians’ under Constitution,” *CBC News*, April 14, 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/landmark-supreme-court-decision-metis-non-status-indians-1.3537419>. “The Daniels decision classifies non-status Indians and Métis as “Indians” under section 91(24) of the Constitution. This clarifies that both groups are a constitutional responsibility of the federal government and not the provinces.”

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During my last pipeline job, I was assigned to “spot” an excavator working under a power line. My task was to stand and stare at the line, airhorn in hand, to ensure the excavator’s bucket didn’t snag it. The temperature was hovering around -35°C, with a wind chill of -50 °C. They don’t work heavy equipment below -35°C because it’s hard on the machinery. Wind chill doesn’t affect machines, though.

I stood for hours in the howling wind, squinting through the icy crust that had formed around my safety glasses. The cold ripped through me and radiated from the frigid ground through my steel-toed boots. I glanced at the boys slinging skids. It was brutal work, but at least they were warm enough to break a sweat.

In my periphery, a piece of cardboard was caught between the wind and a frozen lump of earth. I don’t know where the idea came from. It seemed to come from outside myself, like a gentle tap on the shoulder. I slid the cardboard under my feet. The insulation it provided from the ground made me instantly more comfortable. I’ve never felt so close to my ancestors as I did at that moment.

Métis Mobius Strip

My grandfather was a bright student who showed great promise in his studies. However, his family couldn’t afford the tuition for middle school, so he was offered a scholarship to attend a boarding school in Dawson Creek.

When he arrived, he learned it was the “town fathers,” as he called them, who had funded his education. Upon discovering that he would be indebted to these leaders of the faith, he immediately left the school and walked the 40 miles home. He would make his own way in life, with a grade seven education.⁸⁹

—

Métis Elder Norman Fleury once said that Métis heritage “is why you are where you are.”⁹⁰ He was referring to our history as a nomadic and diasporic people. But for many of us, our heritage also explains why we are, where we are on the socioeconomic ladder. A legacy of disenfranchisement and immiseration, including barriers to education, such as the remoteness of Métis communities, has left many in northeast BC vulnerable, and prime candidates for the labour force in oil and gas.⁹¹

The industry is a double-edged sword. While it brings significant social and environmental harm, it also offers one of the few avenues for upward mobility, and is often the only option

⁸⁹ Eva Bassett, Personal communication with the author regarding Glen Bassett’s education, Treaty 8 and the Métis Homeland, April, 2025.

⁹⁰ Norman Fleury, Métis, Discussion about Métis identity, Ktunaxa Territory. Rocky Mountain Métis Association Michif Language Class, April, 2021.

⁹¹ Statistics Canada, “Barriers to Postsecondary Education among First Nations People, Métis and Inuit,” *Statistics Canada*, February 6, 2025, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2025002/article/00002-eng.htm>.

for many Métis people.⁹²⁹³ As Ron Quintal, chief of the Fort McKay Métis, puts it, "The reality is that they shut off the oil sands tomorrow, my community would starve."⁹⁴ My own work in oil and gas helped fund my post-secondary education and set me on the path to becoming a culture carrier.

This paradox is what I describe as the "Métis Möbius Strip." Like the infinity symbol on our flag, it represents a closed loop: we are drawn into resource extraction because of historical marginalization, and our involvement is then used to question the legitimacy of our Indigeneity. The legal and economic systems conspire to both erase and exploit us.

Gauntlet



Figure 21. Northern style mittens by Kaija Heitland⁹⁵

⁹² Amnesty International, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind*.

⁹³ Marion Thibaut, "Fort McKay: Where Canada's Boreal Forest Gave Way to Oil Sands," *Phys.org*, November 14, 2022, <https://phys.org/news/2022-11-fort-mckay-canada-boreal-forest.html>.

⁹⁴ Thibaut, "Fort McKay."

⁹⁵ Indigenous Nouveau, "Moccasins, Mittens and Gloves," *Indigenous Nouveau*, accessed May 14, 2025, <https://www.indigenounouveau.com/portfolio-1/project-one-zyc4h>.

In 2023, I was mentored by Kaija Heitland, a celebrated Métis artist and culture carrier, in the art of making traditional gauntlets, decorated gloves made from animal hide and fur.⁹⁶ As with many traditional Métis garments, the patterns can often be traced back to specific regions and families.⁹⁷ These garments speak not only to craftsmanship but to identity; they declare who you are and where you come from.



Figure 22. *Gauntlet (Skin Side)*, 2024, Vintage and contemporary, seed, pony and crow beads, vintage iron cut beads, thread, imitation sinew, and found welding glove.

Inspired by this tradition, I created *Gauntlet* using a found welding glove, as a way to tie my experience in the oil and gas industry to contemporary Métis life. Working in trades and resource extraction was almost inevitable for me, as it was for many in my family and community within the Montney Gas Formation. We share these experiences, and often kinship ties, with Métis from communities like Fort McKay, where the oil sands have shaped lives and landscapes alike.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Lawrence J. Barkwell, "Gauntlet Gloves and Mittens," *Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture*, 2013, <https://www.metismuseum.ca/resource.php/14317>.

⁹⁷ Gregory Scofield, *kôhkominawak ocihcîwâwa – Our Grandmothers' Hands: Repatriating Métis Material Art* (Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute Press, 2023).

⁹⁸ France 24, "Fort McKay."



Figure 23. *Gauntlet (Flesh Side)*, 2024, Vintage and contemporary, seed, pony and crow beads, vintage iron cut beads, thread, imitation sinew, and found welding glove.

Gauntlet draws on traditional Métis beading motifs: red and pink roses, mouse tracks, and iron-cut accents.⁹⁹ I intentionally overcrowded the beads and pulled the stitches tight. The beadwork nearly subsumes the glove, twisting and warping the leather. It is changed, misshapen, but undeniably Métis. It tells a complex story, one of cultural inheritance, legal ambiguity, and our complicated entanglement with the very systems that marginalize us.

⁹⁹ Lawrence J. Barkwell, *Characteristics of Métis Beadwork* (Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, n.d.), <https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/13489.Characteristics%20of%20Metis%20Beadwork.pdf>.

Methodology

Métis identity in northeastern British Columbia is a complex tapestry woven from history, culture, and economic necessity. The region's distinctive geography and colonial past have shaped our experience, fostering a deep connection to the land while also imposing significant challenges. From preserving cultural traditions to navigating the harsh realities of resource extraction, Métis communities in the Peace Region exemplify resilience and adaptability. This section explores the interplay between Métis heritage and contemporary life, highlighting how art, labour, and cultural practices sustain identity amid systemic disenfranchisement and environmental pressures.

As a Métis person, invisible systems, colonial boundaries, and legal frameworks entwined with economic interests have profoundly shaped my identity, sense of self, and lived experience, pulling at me like strings connected to an unseen puppet master. For example, the experience of living within a Métis community in a province that denies our existence created profound cognitive dissonance and emotional distress. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to trace these strands throughout this program. The only way I could hold these conflicting notions at once while maintaining some semblance of grounding was through the concept of *wahkotowin*, which helped me carry these contradictions simultaneously.

Wahkotowin and Storytelling

To connect the unique factors suppressing Métis identity and self-determination in BC's northeast, I use the Cree-Métis concept of *wahkotowin*, or the interconnectedness of all creation, as well as the tradition of storytelling embedded in Métis art.

Métis Elder Maria Campbell describes *wahkotowin*:

"Today it is translated to mean kinship, relationship, and family as in human family. But at one time, from our place, it meant the whole of creation. And our teachings taught us that all of creation is related and inter-connected to all things within it."¹⁰⁰

Campbell notes that *wahkotowin* has long been expressed through Métis material culture:

"[Métis women] wove the stories of *wahkotowin* and the histories of our people in and out of their beading, embroidery, and berry picking."¹⁰¹

Métis Elder Rose Richardson elaborates on storytelling through beadwork:

¹⁰⁰ Maria Campbell, "We Need to Return to the Principles of Wahkotowin – Maria Campbell (2007)," *M. Gouldhawke (blog)*, last modified November 5, 2019, <https://mgouldhawke.wordpress.com/2019/11/05/we-need-to-return-to-the-principles-of-wahkotowin-maria-campbell-2007/>.

¹⁰¹ Maria Campbell, "Foreword," in *Women of the Métis Nation*, comp. Lawrence J. Barkwell, Leah Marie Dorion, and Anne Carrière-Acco (Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute Press, n.d.), 1–2, <https://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/149695.Women%20of%20the%20Metis%20Nation%20-%20Maria%20Campbell%20Foreword.pdf>.

“As our ancestors picked and used plants, they told stories, and in the winters, they retold those stories in pictographs and patterns they sewed and beaded on jackets and clothing. All our bedding and household belongings told stories of our spirituality, our respect, and our understanding of the signatures of a divine power.”¹⁰²

With these principles in mind, I incorporate traditional beading elements into my work, creating storytelling devices as our ancestors did.

Squaring Circles

As Métis people, we are often required to navigate contradiction and ambiguity in nearly every aspect of our lives. Frequently, we must hold two opposing truths at once. This way of being is arguably central to the Métis experience.

In my work, this duality is expressed through the use of opposing pairs: interior and exterior, bead and stitch, monochrome and colour, top and bottom, spiritual and practical, use-value and aesthetic-value, seen and unseen.¹⁰³ Each element, even those typically considered incidental, like a beading stitch, is treated with equal importance, even if it is not easily visible in the final presentation. Revealing the stitch also paradoxically reveals the source of tension: the underlying systems that erode Métis identity and sovereignty, as well as the labour undertaken by our ancestors to preserve who we are.

Hidden details are intentionally suggested rather than fully revealed. The viewer becomes aware that not everything is visible at once. This positions them within a Métis vantage point, shaped by partial visibility and layered meaning, and invites them to undertake the labour of imagining or straining to perceive what lies beneath the surface.

This approach reflects the “iceberg” nature of Métis identity: what is visible is only a fraction of what exists. Much has been obscured or suppressed through assimilation and colonization. What lies beneath the surface holds the key to easing the cognitive dissonance many Métis experience and offers a path toward reconciliation with the self and our shared history.

¹⁰² Rose Richardson, quoted in Christi Belcourt et al., *Medicines to Help Us: Traditional Métis Plant Use: Study Prints & Resource Guide* (Saskatoon: Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2007).

¹⁰³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 125. Marx makes a distinction between exchange-value and use-value stating: “The utility of a thing makes it a use-value. But this utility is not a thing of air. Being limited by the physical properties of the commodity, it has no existence apart from that commodity.” I am drawing a comparison between Indigenous historical utilitarian artworks, such as beaded or quillworked garments, and the Western notion of fine art, which historically lacks use-value.

Métis-Specific

In June 2025, I will attend a visual arts residency called *Kapishkum: Métis Gathering* at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. The residency aims “to bolster Métis-specific art, creative forms, methodologies, and unique ways of being, knowing, and doing.”¹⁰⁴

Too often, we are perceived through the colonial lens of “halfbreed.” Métis culture is frequently mischaracterized as inauthentic, a patchwork of borrowed elements from our European and First Nations ancestors, rather than a distinct and cohesive cultural identity.¹⁰⁵ This persistent misunderstanding underscores the importance of initiatives like *Kapishkum* and the timeliness of this thesis.

Métis-specific art is characterized by several qualities: a strong emphasis on aesthetics, skilled craftsmanship, and fine detail, traits rooted in our reverence for our grandmother artists and their beadwork, quillwork, embroidery, and tufting.¹⁰⁶ Our art is steeped in traditional knowledge of the land, kinship, and culture.¹⁰⁷ It often serves as a vehicle for storytelling, continuing our oral traditions through visual means.¹⁰⁸

There is also an inherent resourcefulness and ingenuity born of our “in-betweenness,” our mixed heritage, and our historical necessity to remix and adapt cultural elements for survival. Much of our work is highly time and labour-intensive, a testament to the grit and determination that runs in our blood. And often, there is a spark of humour, a big belly laugh, that makes everything lighter and easier to bear.

¹⁰⁴ Banff Centre, “Visual Arts – Kapishkum: Métis Gathering,” *Banff Centre*, accessed May 14, 2025, <https://www.banffcentre.ca/programs/visual-arts/visual-arts-kapishkum-metis-gathering>.

¹⁰⁵ Maria Campbell, *Halfbreed* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973).

¹⁰⁶ Scofield, *Our Grandmothers' Hands*.

¹⁰⁷ Scofield, *Our Grandmothers' Hands*.

¹⁰⁸ Richardson, quoted in Belcourt et al., *Medicines to Help Us*.

Reclaiming Identity Through Art



Figure 24. An ammunition pouch and fire bag by Gregory Scofield¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Gregory Scofield, "Photos," *Facebook*, accessed May 14, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/gregorya.scofield/photos>.

In 2022, I was mentored by esteemed poet, artist, and Métis culture carrier Gregory Scofield on how to make octopus bags, also known as fire bags. They are traditional Métis items used to carry fire-making materials, such as flint and tinder, one's pipe and tobacco, or ammunition. They are traditionally made by Métis women for their husbands or other male family members (Barkwell, 2010).



Figure 25. *Indian Paintbrush*, 2022 (left). Figure 26. *Prairie Fire*, 2022 (right) photo credit: Jake Kimble

Learning from Gregory changed my life. The ability to create and hold a piece of one's culture is an incredible gift. I fell in love with fire bags and have made seven since then. There was something about their weight, their tangibility, and the way they moved with the body that grabbed me. I endeavoured to bead my fire bags as heavily as possible. I loved the weight of the beads on the fabric. It made them more *here*, more present in physical reality somehow. I believe this was an unconscious reaction to our ambiguous status in BC, which I had internalized, thus suppressing my identity.

Tall Grass



Figure 27. *Tall Grass*, 2023, Vintage and contemporary seed beads and bugle beads, vintage Swarovski crystals, thread, cotton fabric, sinew, cotton twill, wool yarn, melton wool, denim, photo credit: Jake Kimble

In 2023, I created *Tall Grass*, a fire bag inspired by a field in Fellers Heights, where my ancestors' homestead once stood. The piece holds many meanings for me, including an attempt to counter our erasure by affirming our connection to the land in northeastern British Columbia. I fully beaded the front panel as a way to insist on our presence here. My father's house once overlooked that field, and watching the waves of grass ripple in the wind brought me a sense of calm and grounding. I made this bag to recreate that feeling of centeredness I experienced as I watched the grass swaying in the wind.

Tall Grass is a reminder of my family's connection to Fellers Heights. However, it also carries the weight of its time. This work responds not only to personal memory but also to the devastating wildfire season of 2023 and the broader crisis of climate change, an issue in which this region is deeply implicated due to the prominence of oil and gas extraction. I was also working on *Tall Grass* as I witnessed the genocide in Gaza that began in October 2023.

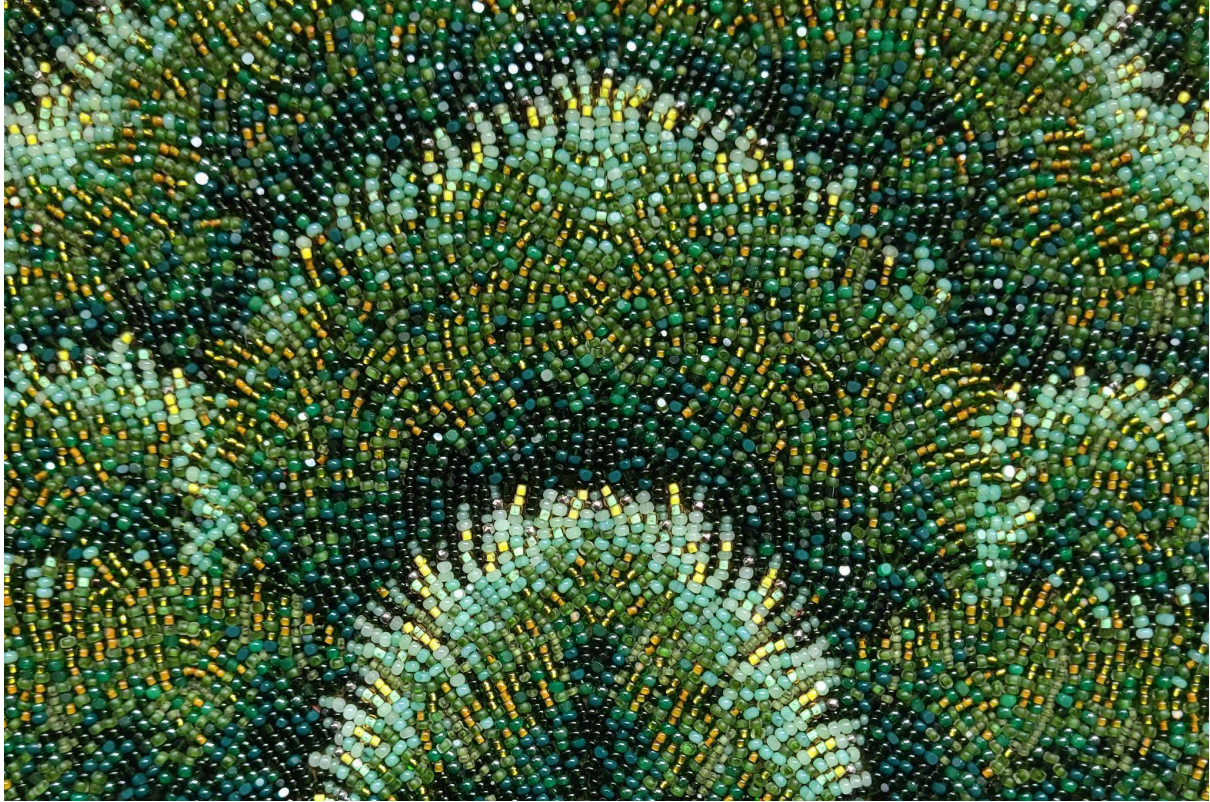


Figure 28. *Tall Grass*, detail

In Métis tradition, it is believed that one's feelings and experiences are transferred into objects through beadwork. This bag is therefore imbued with those stories, of fire, grief, and resistance. As an Indigenous person whose presence is inconvenient to power and capital, and who is thus subject to ongoing pressures of assimilation, I feel a resonant, albeit minor, connection to the experience of the Palestinian people.

In response, I wrote a poem dedicating *Tall Grass* to the people of Gaza, including a Cree translation by Barbara Belcourt. It is included here as a reflection on the interconnectedness of land, identity, and global struggle.

Tall Grass, by Haley Bassett, translated by Barbara Belcourt

Tall Grass was conceived
before I put needle to stroud.
To make solace
and breathe through the smoke.
Tall Grass was named
for the field below Dad's house—
Jiggs' Place, lush in June.

Lee Maracle says
find freedom in the context you inherit.
Why devote something beautiful
to children under rubble?
It wasn't up to me.

Some say beading is ceremony.
Some say beading is prayer.
Tall Grass made ceremony in October.
Tall grass, from the Jordan to the Peace.
Tall Grass is a prayer for the colonized
to behold our homelands
and breathe easy.

timaskâw ki-osîhcikâsew
pâmeyes sâponikan saminam ayiwinisekan
ta nistasiskakewin
ekwa ta yehe kaskâpatewin.
timaskâw wihâw
ka wâsakânkatek askîy capasis nohtâway wikihk
Jiggs' ta ka wikiht, maskosiya ka miyokihkwâk opâskâwehowi pîsimohk

Lee Maracle itwew
miska tipiyimisowin ta ka mekiwin
tanîhki ka pakitinisewiyin kikway ekatawasisik
awasisak atami wepinikewinihk
namoya nîya nitôtamowin

atiht itwewak mîkisihkahcikewin isîhcikêwin
atiht itwewak mîkisihkahcikewin kakesimowin.
timiskâw isihcikew pimihowipîsimohk
timiskâw Jordan ohci iskoh sâkitawâhk
timiskâw kakesimowin ohci wapiskiwiyasak
îh wapahtakihk kitaskîyinaw
ekwa ta miyoyehe

Prairie Love Song



Figure 39. *Prairie Love Song*, 2024, vintage and contemporary seed beads, bugle beads, thread, cotton fabric, sinew, cotton twill, wool yarn, melton wool, denim, approx. 19.5 x 10 x .5 inches, photo credit: Jake Kimble

Prairie Love Song is a prime example of storytelling through beadwork. It tells a love story, a courtship mediated by the land. My partner, Matthew Dalen, is a celebrated opera singer, and this work captures the story of our first summer together through the flora of the Peace Country: wild roses, saskatoons, bluebells, wolf willow, and strawberries. While much of my work explores hardship and difficulty, it is just as important to hold both light and dark, the beautiful and the challenging, together, allowing each to give meaning to the other.



Figure 30. A detail of *Prairie Love Song* in progress

My partner and I are artists with different backgrounds: a settler boy, a Métis girl, a musician, and a visual artist. *Prairie Love Song* celebrates our story and the shared principles of our art forms: balance, movement, rhythm, and light and dark.

I wanted to experiment by combining traditional and contemporary elements with an asymmetrical yet balanced design. Such designs originate from our Anishinaabe ancestors and represent the balance between the masculine and feminine.¹¹⁰ In keeping with tradition, buds, blooms, and berries represent the changing seasons and the passage of time.

¹¹⁰ Barkwell, *Characteristics of Métis Beadwork*.

Beadwork as Method: Time, Labour and Continuity



Figure 31. Left to right: Grandpa Glen, Uncle Steve, my Dad, Jesse, and Uncle Frank taking a break in the field.

Our ancestors filed for land deep in a hidden valley, Fellers Heights. To keep the land, they had to clear a portion to make it “productive” in the government’s eyes.¹¹¹ My family could not afford machinery, so the clearing was done by hand and horse. From a very young age, my father and his brothers spent many hours labouring on the land, picking rocks and roots.

—

One day, Grandpa and his oldest son, Frank, were picking rocks on the land. Uncle Frank was about five years old then and didn’t think much of picking rocks.

After hours of hard work, the stoneboat was piled high with the fruits of their labour. Fed up with the ordeal, young Frank asked my Grandpa, “How many rocks do you need?”¹¹²

—

We’ve been in the valley for generations.¹¹³ Every acre cleared was an investment in our future. After generations of displacement, my family worked to *have* something—to build something for future generations.¹¹⁴

My great-grandparents, Harvey Bassett and Hazel Fellers, picked rocks on the homestead so my grandfather could attend elementary school. My grandparents, Glen and Eva Bassett, picked rocks so my father, Jesse Bassett, could finish high school. My father picked rocks so I could attend university. Thanks to the vision and determination of my ancestors, I can live as an artist.

I also picked rocks as a labourer in the oil and gas industry. My version of rock-picking now is beadwork. Like our homesteads in Fellers Heights, my work is a generational project, my gift to future ancestors.

Beadwork is not so different from rock-picking. Both are repetitive acts, meditative in their ways, but hard on the body. They require patience, some skill, determination, a clear vision of a future outcome, and faith that the result will be beautiful.

I bead to make my culture visible in colonial space. Just as my ancestors shaped the land to build a future, I shape material to preserve a past and assert a present. Beadwork makes a gift of time and renders it material. It fortifies, beautifies, and binds. It turns memory and identity into tactile form. It is a means of survival and a way to reclaim visibility. Every stitch is a moment materialized, a defiant assertion of presence.

Uncle might ask, “How many beads do we need?”

¹¹¹ Barkwell, *Fellers, Emilie Garipey*.

¹¹² Howard Bassett, Métis, Rock-picking story, Glen Bassett’s Eulogy, Treaty 8 and the Métis Homeland, May, 2023.

¹¹³ Barkwell, *Fellers, Emilie Garipey*.

¹¹⁴ Barkwell, *Fellers, Emilie Garipey*.

Conclusion

According to Métis scholar David Garneau, the reserve is often privileged as the “authentic site of Indigeneity,” which causes non-reserve Natives to be viewed as “diluted versions of the real.”¹¹⁵ He further states, “This diminishment is felt in our bodies, minds, and spirits, and we often perform accordingly.”¹¹⁶ As a Métis woman who grew up in a Métis settlement within British Columbia, whose presence is actively denied by the province, I can personally attest to the accuracy of this observation.

I see the toxic, suffocating effect it has on my community. We have lived with an unseen boot pressing on our necks, and I have only recently learned its name: settler colonialism, capitalism, and resource extraction, magnified within an internal colony.¹¹⁷ Such an environment is corrosive to both Indigenous community and identity.

We internalize these forces and the ways they shape our experiences. We believe that the changes they have wrought move us further from the idealized, “real” Native. In reality, these experiences are shared by Métis across Turtle Island and should be recognized as part of our collective struggle and a testament to the resilience of our people.

I did not publicly identify as Métis until my late twenties. I kept silent partly because of the internalized racism imposed by settler family and society. This personal and societal repression is compounded by the broader political implications of identifying as Métis within my specific context in B.C. Doing so defies over a century of colonial rule, volumes of government policy, and the economic interests of the state and major corporations. Within the confines of resource-based capitalism, this also pits First Nations and Métis interests against each other in a zero-sum game. These structures render simply being, simply stating one’s experience, a deeply radical and political act.

While it can take decades to name the forces that suppress us, we feel them acutely, gnawing at our sense of self and eroding our community bonds. We instinctively understand the threat and self-censor to protect ourselves from harm. Caught in a vicious cycle of erasure, we come to see our lack of recognition and rights as proof of our non-existence.

¹¹⁵ David Garneau, “Migration as Territory: Performing Domain with a Non-Colonial Aesthetic Attitude,” *Voz-à-voz/Voice-à-voice*, September 2015, accessed May 31, 2025, <http://www.vozavoz.ca/feature/david-garneau>.

¹¹⁶ Garneau, “Migration as Territory.”

¹¹⁷ Glen Coulthard, “‘Settler’ and ‘Internal’ Colonialism in ‘Canada’: Reconciling Competing Framings of Indigenous-State Relations,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 15, no. 1 (2025): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/19427786241299042>. “Classic scholarship about internal colonialism in Canada demonstrated how northern and other ‘frontier’ regions (where Indigenous peoples often constitute a demographic majority) serve as economic peripheries for more developed metropolitan regions in southern Canada, where non-Indigenous settlers form a demographic majority. The economies of Canada’s internal peripheries tend to be dominated by the extraction of primary resources . . . activities which tend to disproportionately benefit and be controlled by, non-Indigenous people and institutions based in metropolitan centers in southern Canada.”

For Garneau, “Art is essential to Indigenous resurgence.”¹¹⁸ It can out-manoeuvre legal structures, stonewalling politicians, bureaucrats, and corporations to raise consciousness and break these destructive cycles. Art and culture, like our nomadic ancestors, pay no mind to invisible lines. I believe our cultural contributions to the province of British Columbia expose the incoherence of its policies. Our art, culture, and traditions are an irrefutable, living record of our presence.

Whatever government policy may say, we have left an indelible mark, helping to shape the identity of this place: Unchaga, Treaty 8, the traditional territory of the Dene, Dune-zaa, Nēhiyawēwin, Homeland of the Métis, Where Happiness Dwells, where the Indians wear cowboy hats, and God’s Country.¹¹⁹¹²⁰¹²¹¹²²

Final Reflection

On the opening night of our thesis exhibition, I was approached by a young girl I did not know. “Are you Haley Bassett?” she asked. When I confirmed that I was, she said, “My mom says we’re related.” I then met her mother, Tracy Meier-Ragazzi, a cousin from Fellers Heights. Her grandfather and my great-grandmother were siblings.

Tracy and her daughter, Natalia, are regular attendees at Emily Carr’s opening receptions. They did not expect to find my work that night. After reminiscing about our family and the valley, Tracy asked her daughter how she recognized me. Natalia simply said, “She looks like a Bassett.” Natalia has spent her young life far from our ancestral homesteads in Fellers Heights, and yet, our connection was such that she could pick me out in a crowd of strangers.

Before writing this thesis, I was not forthcoming about my father’s community. I assumed we were too insignificant, too obscure, too marginal to be recognized. In a word: invisible. I was shocked to learn that we are known to researchers such as Lawrence Barkwell and institutions like the Louis Riel Institute and Métis Nation BC. I attribute this to internalized erasure—the result of our marginalization in British Columbia.

Meeting Natalia and Tracy brought to the surface the layers of decolonization I have yet to undertake. I wonder what assimilative beliefs still live, unexamined, in my mind and spirit. Yet our small reunion illuminated the power of kinship ties that ring true and clear through colonial static. It reminds me that the quagmire we find ourselves in is external to who we are. I try to envision a world in which our existence, rights, and identity are affirmed and encapsulated in a simple statement: “We’re cousins.”

¹¹⁸ Garneau, “Migration as Territory.”

¹¹⁹ *Lure of the South Peace*, 6.

¹²⁰ Ridington and Ridington, *Where Happiness Dwells*.

¹²¹ Greyeyes, personal communication, June 2022.

¹²² Barkwell, *Fellers*, *Emilie Garipey*.

Thesis Exhibition Documentation



Figure 32. Installation view 1. Photo credit: Samson Cheung

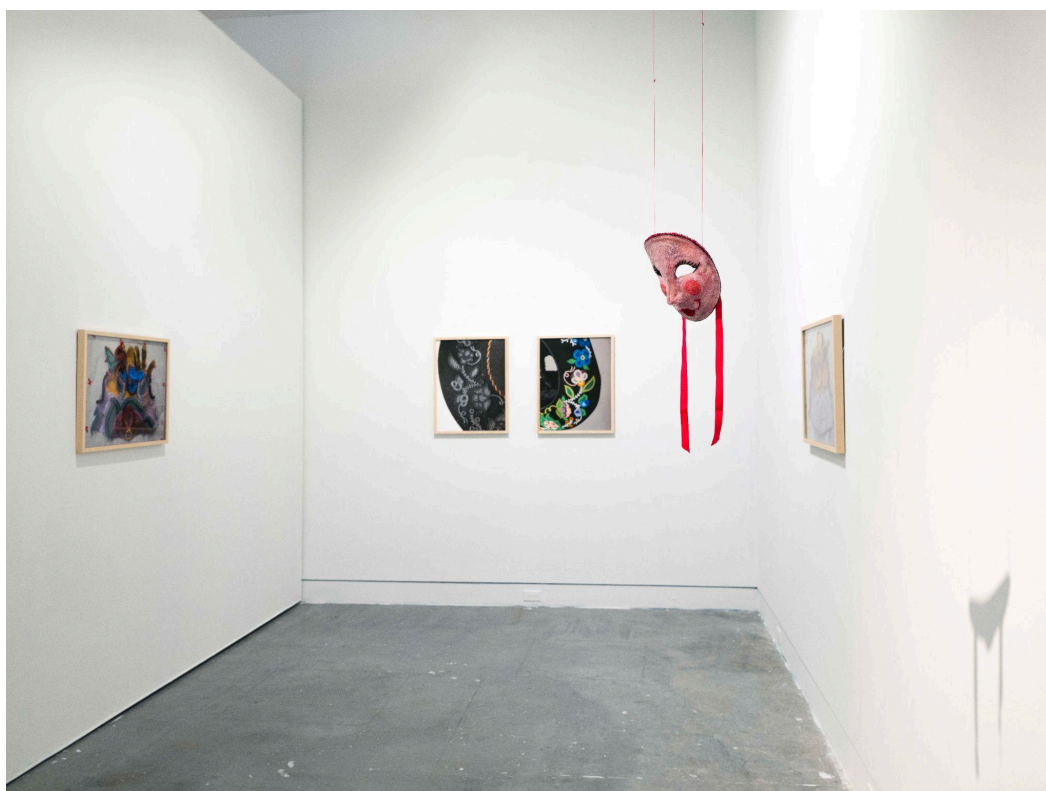


Figure 32. Installation view 2. Photo credit: Samson Cheung



Figure 33. *Horse Girl (skin side/flesh side)*, 2025, inkjet print. Photo credit: Samson Cheung

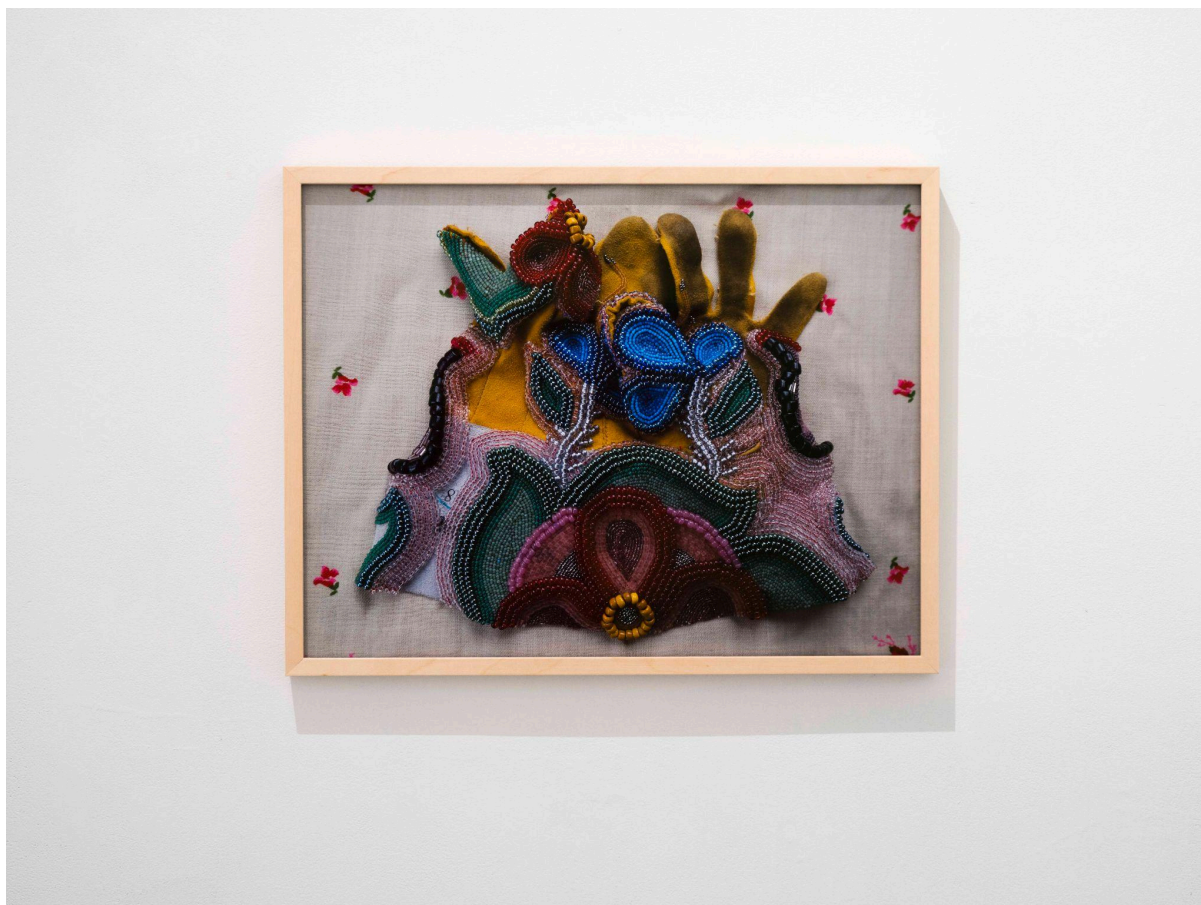


Figure 34. *Gauntlet (skin side)*, 2025, inkjet print. Photo credit: Samson Cheung



Figure 35. *Gauntlet (flesh side)*, 2025, inkjet print. Photo credit: Samson Cheung



Figure 36. *Self-Portrait* installation view. Photo credit: Samson Cheung



Figure 37. *Self-Portrait*, detail. Photo credit: Samson Cheung



Figure 38. *Prairie Love Song* and *Tall Grass* installation view. Photo credit: Samson Cheung



Figure 39. *Prairie Love Song* detail. Photo credit: Samson Cheung



Figure 38. *Horse Girl* detail 1. Photo credit: Samson Cheung



Figure 39. *Horse Girl* detail 2. Photo credit: Samson Cheung



Figure 40. *Gauntlet*, 2025, install view. Photo credit: Samson Cheung



Figure 41. *Gauntlet* detail. Photo credit: Samson Cheung



Figure 42. *Valænce*, 2025. Photo credit: Samson Cheung



Figure 43. *Valaence* detail. Photo credit: Samson Cheung

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