

‘Proud of who we came from’: Three artists on National Indigenous Peoples Day

TVO Arts

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THUNDER BAY — June 21 is a day to celebrate and recognize the culture and contributions of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, but it hasn’t always been this way.

In the late 19th century, the federal government controlled First Nations culture by [outlawing ceremonies and dancing via the Indian Act](#). That changed in 1951, when the government, in consultation with First Nations, removed some cultural and religious restrictions from the act. Forty-five years later, June 21, 1996, marked the first national celebration of Indigenous cultures in Canada.

To celebrate the 26th annual National Indigenous Peoples Day (called National Aboriginal Day until 2017), TVO.org spoke with three Indigenous artists about their careers, how their identity influences their work, and what National Indigenous Peoples Day means to them.

Bonnie Devine

Bonnie Devine says it took her a long time to understand that there was an interest in what she had to say as an artist. Devine, an installation artist and member of Serpent River First Nation who's lived in Toronto for most of her life, says that, when she started out as an artist, "there was a very active art scene in Toronto, but really, there was no room in that art scene that I could see for an Indigenous perspective or an Indigenous-rooted practice."

"Artist friends of mine who were moving out into that world actually suggested to me that I would be more successful if I 'dropped the Native stuff,'" says Devine. "But I didn't have anything to say if it wasn't about my family and the stories and the land, and all the stuff that I had learned as a young person."

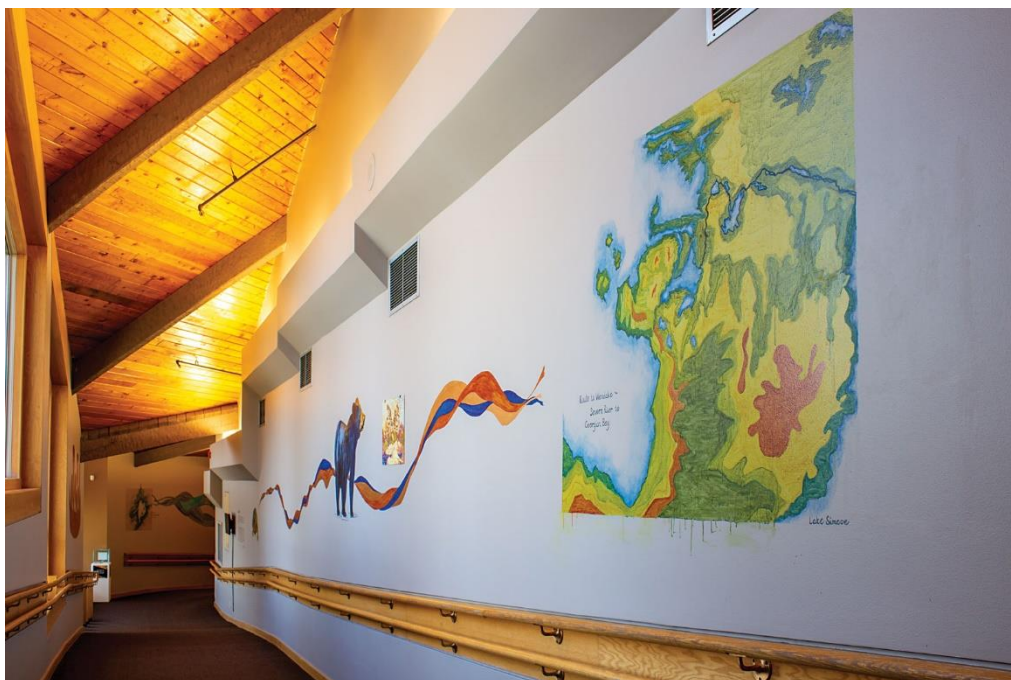


Devine says Indigenous Peoples Day is a day for education. (Courtesy of McMichael Canadian Art Collection)

It was the Oka Crisis — a 78-day standoff between Mohawk protestors and police and the military over a parcel of disputed land on Kanehsatá:ke that occurred in 1990 — that drove Devine to assert her identity as an artist and an Indigenous person. “It resonated very, very deeply with what I had been taught as a young child, that the deepest connection that we have is to the land,” says Devine. “That was really foundational for me to see those people standing up for their rights.”

In her latest exhibition, [From Water to Water: A Way Through the Trees](#), which will be on display at Kleinburg’s McMichael Canadian Art Collection until March 2023, Devine has brought the story of an historical trading route along the Humber River to life in a site-specific mural. The piece, which spans multiple walls roughly aligned with the cardinal directions of the river’s path, explores the Carrying Place Trail, a portage route linking Lake Ontario and Lake Simcoe.

Initially, Devine says, she thought the story of the mural “would revolve around John Graves Simcoe, the Toronto Purchase, the Mississaugas of the Credit — that kind of history.” But part of Devine’s research for the mural included visiting [the Seed-Barker archaeological site](#) in Kleinburg, which Devine learned had been the location of a Wendat settlement around 500 years ago. “I realized that the story that I wanted to tell about the Humber River and about the trail up the Humber River was older than 200 years,” says Devine. “It was a Wendat story.”



From Water to Water: A Way Through the Trees is on display at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg until March 2023. (Courtesy of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection)

“We hadn’t learned this history when I was in school, certainly, and I just came from a couple of classes that I’ve given at the McMichael with Grade 7s and Grade 8s, and they don’t know it either,” says Devine. “I’m infuriated that we aren’t told the story of our province — it’s as if we are to be ashamed of this or something, when I believe that these are things to be proud of. There was a civilization here that had an established trade route.”

For Devine, National Indigenous Peoples Day is a day for Indigenous people to “be proud of who we came from” and an opportunity to share stories and educate others. Devine says that, when she was growing up, “we weren’t really trumpeting our identity. We weren’t taught to be proud of who we were. In fact, we were taught to be humiliated about our background. The idea was that Native people were a problem population for the country.”

“We would never have thought that there would be something like [National Indigenous Peoples Day], where we would be proud of who we came from,” says Devine. “For me, this is an opportunity for us to educate ourselves, because we have lots to learn about our own history — but also to educate interested Canadians.”

Darla Fisher-Odjig

Darla Fisher-Odjig says you can learn a lot about a person by looking at their artwork. A First Nations painter, writer, and art therapist, Fisher-Odjig says painting and poetry saved her: “It’s saved me in the way that I was able to actually get things out, process through, and accept things. It’s a beautiful way of learning oneself.”



Painting and poetry is a beautiful way of learning about oneself, says Fisher-Odjig. (Courtesy of Darla Fisher-Odjig)

Fisher-Odjig began developing her skills as an artist when she was in grade school, taking pictures from the Bible and reproducing them on wood panels. “I’d use the oil paints, like the old oil paints that they used way back when that had lead in it,” she says.

“The Bible is not something that a lot of First Nations want to hear about,” says Fisher-Odjig, who grew up Catholic. “As a Native who grew up with the Bible, with Catholicism, it’s a part of me, and I cannot throw that away, because then I would be throwing away a part of who I am.”

“I was told by my aunt Daphne [Odjig], she said, ‘Paint what you want to paint. Don’t paint what other people want you to paint.’ And that’s stuck in my mind because there were times when people were saying, ‘You should do this,’ or ‘You should do that,’” she says. “I want to get something out there that shows who I am and who First Nations are, and this is the way I’m going to do it.”

Fisher-Odjig was keen to learn from her aunt Daphne, an accomplished artist who was the driving force behind the [Indian Group of Seven](#). “I wanted to get under her wing and go and paint with her and learn some of her stuff, but she said, ‘No, you’ve got to do this on your own.’”

“So I did it on my own, and I’m still doing it on my own,” says Fisher-Odjig. When she was growing up off-reserve in Sault Ste. Marie, she says, she was “like a rebel in the way that I was on my own most of the time, so I had to stick up for myself, and I used to stick up for other kinds that I would see being bullied.” It’s a trait that has found an expression in her art: “Being an advocate ... I’ve always tried to educate non-Natives about who we are and what our rights are.”



Fisher-Odjig's painting called The Rapture is part of her latest exhibit, Beneath the Mask. (Courtesy of Darla-Fisher Odjig)

Fisher-Odjig's latest exhibit — called [Beneath the Mask](#) and featuring six paintings and a sculpture — recently wrapped up at the Thames Art Gallery in Chatham-Kent and will be [moving to the Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery](#) in Sarnia this fall.

Or National Indigenous Peoples Day, Fisher-Odjig says, “If I could, and I had a place to go, I would go out with my plaque and probably protest somewhere.” But, because of family responsibilities, she will be marking the occasion by honouring the children “that we’ve lost.”

(Full disclosure: Darla Fisher-Odjig is the author's step-father's sister.)

Michel Dumont

In 2018, Michel Dumont won the City of Thunder Bay's Arts and Heritage Awards in the visual-arts category. During his acceptance speech on stage at Magnus Theatre, he said something that he would later make him cringe: “I want to be able to show in Paris and New York.”

“For a couple years there, I cringed when I looked at that acceptance speech, thinking, oh geez, it's pure hubris that I dream out loud,” says Dumont, a queer, disabled artist who was raised to identify as Métis. “Well, during the pandemic, I showed my artwork virtually twice in Paris, and I'm now just finishing an eight-month fellowship with the Leslie Lohman Museum [of Art] in New York,” which will culminate in a group exhibition “in the next couple of years.”



For Dumont, Indigenous Peoples Day is a day to reconnect with his roots. (Courtesy of Michel Dumont)

Dumont tells TVO.org that he prefers to say he was “raised to identify as Métis,” because the Métis “moniker is [fraught with debate](#).” He has done research on his genealogy, talking to relatives, researching historical Métis settlements, and digging through church records. “I was in the basement of St. Ann’s church on the reserve in the late ’90s with this old priest who was hand-rolling cigarettes. There was a bare lightbulb in the basement, and he was chain-smoking cigarettes, and he was helping me find my family history back to the 1800s through the maternal line,” says Dumont. “So I’m Ojibwe-French. My dad’s French, and my mother [who is Ojibwe] raised us to call ourselves Métis, whether or not that is really correct is really a big debate in this country.”

Like Devine, Dumont was also discouraged from embracing his identity: “I had been told, ‘You know, Michel, don’t tell people you’re gay. Don’t tell people you’re Indian. It’ll only marginalize your work, and your artwork should speak for itself.’” Yet, Dumont says, “my intersections have only made me more versatile and more resilient.” “My intersections — being disabled, being queer, being Indigenous — are ever-present. It’s like a concert, and they’re working beautifully together right now. They’re making a beautiful sound that other people can hear,” says Dumont, who recently wrapped up his first [solo exhibition at aceartinc., in Winnipeg](#), sold two paintings to St. Michael’s Hospital, began a residency with Toronto Metropolitan University in Allan Gardens

called [Indigenous Artist in the Park](#), and has work on display at [Tangled Art + Disability](#) in Toronto until July 22.



Dumont's finished Regalia Bear was shown at his first solo exhibition at aceartinc. in Winnipeg last month. (Courtesy of Michel Dumont)

That Dumont could make it as an artist is a “feeling that’s been happening over the last few weeks, and it’s becoming more real, that there might be some stability in this art-career thing,” he says. Because of his packed schedule, Dumont says, he has been relying heavily on friends and family to help him manage his career. In the future, “the goal is to be self-sufficient,” says Dumont, who would like to own his own studio and be able to pay staff.

In the past, Dumont has marked Indigenous Peoples Day by attending events such as the annual powwow on Fort William First Nation and embracing community and connection. It’s a day to meet up “with friends and family you haven’t seen in a long time, or you’re meeting for the first time,” he says. “It’s reconnecting with my roots.” *Ontario Hubs are made possible by the Barry and Laurie Green Family Charitable Trust & Goldie Feldman.*