

Flowers for the People – The work of Melanie Monique Rose in *The Flower People*

Flowers are ubiquitous the world over, both in their presence in most ecosystems across the globe and in their importance to humanity. Métis artist Christi Belcourt, in discussion with late Elder Max Assinewe, affirms the crucial role of plants, which Max describes as “‘first family’ because all life forms depend on the plant world for survival” (3). Accordingly, pollination ecologist Stephen Buchmann states that “[f]lowers accompany us from cradle to grave” (ix). Flowers, Buchmann continues, “feed and clothes us. Their fruits and seeds keep the world’s 7.2 billion people from starvation” (ix). As part of the animal kingdom, humans are deeply reliant on these intricate ecological dances that keep us and other plants and animals alive and well. Among the many other ways helpless humans are dependent on the various plants, animals, and elemental beings and natural forces, we starve without flowers. We starve from lack of nourishment, we starve from lack of sustenance, beauty, creativity, food, all of which are important parts of living with some measure of wholeness, of spiritual and social wellness.

One of the first times I met Rose in person she casually mentioned that she was Métis and Ukrainian. I shared that I was also Ukrainian and Métis, and we discussed briefly our mutual observations that both cultures seemed to share a certain reverence for plants, and especially flowers, which figure prominently on much of the traditional clothing and material culture of these respective peoples. Rose notes that the traditional dance outfit she wore as a child when enrolled in Ukrainian dance classes included floral motifs and often the *vinok*, or floral crown, worn by women that continues to play an important role in contemporary Ukrainian culture (Satenstein). In Métis understanding, the flowers represented in the famous floral beadwork patterns served a number of purposes. They were meant to both claim/identify the maker’s friends and family as such, offer prayers of protection for the wearer, as well as providing often elaborate decoration. Additionally, Métis elder Rose Richardson notes that, prior to widespread literacy among Métis peoples “stories or knowledge were beaded or embroidered into clothing and on items of everyday use”(8). The Métis tradition of storytelling through decorative imagery on material culture items is alive and well in Rose’s exhibition *The Flower People*.

Each of the works in *The Flower People* reveals people, places and events of personal import to Rose, either through familial or cultural connections. Rose makes use of the floral motifs common in Métis material culture, although her preferred method of adornment is through felting rather than beading or embroidery. Using old wool blankets that are either thrifted or given to her, Rose creates highly adorned wall works and Capotes (a style of jacket from the fur-trade era that was typically made using wool blankets) that hold stories in her choices of textures, colours and design. Rose’s interest in textiles stems at least partially for a growing concern for the state of the environment, and re-using or “upcycling” vintage blankets into a sort of canvas for her work, in combination with the relatively low environmental impact of small-scale, needle-felting, is a creative way to continue a creative practice that considers the impacts on the environment that plants, and, therefore, people, rely so heavily upon.

Some work, such as *The Road Allowance People*, acknowledges the lack of access to a land base that has historically faced many Métis people and saw entire communities living in what were

essentially the ditches (i.e. the “road allowance”) in certain parts of Saskatchewan after the 1885 Métis resistance at Batoche. Considering this history in light of Western concepts of ownership and property, Rose asks, “Where can I go as a landless Métis person?” (Rose). Cleverly using the differently coloured solid lines that can be found on many old wool blankets, Rose strategically positions them to represent rivers and roads, alongside which flowers would grow, such as in *River Woman*. Rose’s view of family is expansive and inclusive, as Métis family structures tend to be, making room for her Ukrainian ancestors, but also for her Palestinian relatives by marriage. The re-worked vintage Hudson Bay coat that is the piece entitled *Coalesce* is an acknowledgement and celebration of her Ukrainian and Métis parents union. *The Flower People* salmon explores the ongoing tangled processes of colonization and imperialism at home and abroad, by linking them to her own experience of spending time in Nelson, BC and observing the ongoing, active erasure of the Sinixt peoples from the area, as well as considering the sudden, recent passing of her dear friend and Palestinian activist Suha Jarrar.

As a Métis person who actively engages with the layered questions of land rights and responsibilities, Rose is keenly aware of the violence of erasure of Indigenous presence from Indigenous lands, through words and actions, and sometimes inaction. The flower demonstrates our interconnections as humans, both with each other and the many beings with whom we share the planet. Diverse cultural understandings of the roles and symbolism of flowers are, perhaps, what distinguishes one group of people’s specific interactions with plants from the next, and whatever we may think of them, they have, so far, continued to provide for us. Let us not lose sight of the fact that, despite their resilience and persistence in the face of much environmental adversity, we must take care to rekindle our respect for all that flowers do for people.

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Satenstein, Linda. "In Ukraine, That Flower Crown Means More Than You Think." *Vogue*, 2016, <https://www.vogue.com/article/ukraine-flower-crown-vinok-trend>.