

Envisioning an Enchanted World:  
On Christi Belcourt's *The Wisdom of the Universe*, 2014

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**Abstract:**

This paper focuses on Michif artist Christi Belcourt's beadwork-inspired paintings. My research goal is to shed light on how Belcourt's paintings make visible the notion of an interconnected world which stands in opposition to a dominant Western scientific worldview that is closely linked to settler-colonial and extractive capitalist goals. I claim that traditional Indigenous artwork, or that which is inspired by it, like that of Christi Belcourt, interrupts colonial ways of looking at the natural world in favor of ones that are grounded in cultural and place-based knowledge and memory. Using enchantment as a key theoretical framework, I argue that Christi Belcourt's large, vibrant, beadwork-inspired paintings of plants, animals, and insects conjure an enchanted vision of the natural world, acting as a counter-imagining against colonial traditions of landscape painting and botanical illustration. As we are increasingly bombarded with images of catastrophes and destruction - both natural and human-made - Belcourt's work reminds us of what else is still here - beautiful and worth respect and admiration. Belcourt's work not only shows us the beauty of the world but reminds us how to be in the world, juxtaposing an Indigenous perspective on the sacredness of land with the colonial viewpoint of land as an economic resource.

Keywords: Indigenous ethnobotany, colonial botany, settler-colonialism, enchantment

## Introduction

The Western extractive capitalist worldview has become a dominant force in the cultural imagination of what is commonly referred to as North America. It is more pressing than ever to confront these forces in the face of ever-increasing climate change and ecological disasters. Traditional Indigenous artwork, or that which is inspired by it, like that of Christi Belcourt, interrupts colonial ways of looking at the natural world through its groundings in cultural and place-based knowledge and memory and its visualization of an enchanted, abundant, and interconnected world.

Christi Belcourt is a community organizer, land protector, and advocate for Indigenous people across Turtle Island. Belcourt is a Michif (Métis) artist with ancestral ties to Manitou Sakahigan (Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta), and was born in Scarborough, Ontario, on Anishinaabe land. Her ancestry also includes Cree, Mohawk, English, French, and Acadian. Her father, Tony Belcourt is a Métis rights activist and community leader. Christi Belcourt continues in his activist legacy, often through art practices. Her poster series created with Isaac Murdoch (Ojibwe) have become a common sight amongst land protection efforts in recent years, particularly around the construction of the Line 3 pipeline through Anishinaabe Land. In considering these posters alongside other open access art created around the time, Billy Anania writes:

Line 3 breaks with the 1855 Treaty with the Chippewa that reduced Anishinaabe land to a small fraction of northern Minnesota. This territory has since become a site of construction and upheaval, leading Indigenous artists to portray the wildlife at risk. Ojibwe and Michif artists Isaac Murdoch and Christi Belcourt incorporate buffalo, bears, fish, and birds with glowing hearts into posters demanding

protection. Red eagles spread their wings, which are dripping blood, while images of winged tribal mothers honor the shared maternal instinct among species.<sup>1</sup>

In 2012, Belcourt co-directed the *Walking With Our Sisters* project which commemorates the lives of the thousands of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-spirit people (often referred to as MMIWG2S, or just MMIW) with a display of thousands of decorated moccasin tops. This project developed into a seven-year memorial and included the work of over 1500 Indigenous artists.



“Water is Life” Poster by Isaac Murdoch (left). 2017 exhibition view of *Walking with Our Sisters* (right)

Belcourt has become well-known outside of activist communities and within the ‘fine’ art world as well. In 2014, Belcourt was named the Aboriginal Arts Laureate by the Ontario Art Council. Her work is in the collections of galleries across so-called Canada, including but not limited to The National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the Indian and Inuit Art Collection. Perhaps her most well-known and most celebrated work is her beadwork-style

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<sup>1</sup> Billy Anania. “A Coalition of Artists Promote Indigenous and Environmental Struggles through Open Access Art.” *Hyperallergic*, 3 Dec. 2021, <https://hyperallergic.com/694205/artists-promote-indigenous-and-environmental-struggles-through-open-access-art/>

paintings, many of which were showcased in her 2019 nationally touring retrospective with Isaace Murdoch, *UPRISING: THE POWER OF MOTHER EARTH*.

In an *Artforum* review of a 2020 Belcourt exhibition at the Art Gallery of Guelph, Georgia Phillips-Amos writes the following about Belcourt's paintings:

In immense paintings drawn from studies of life and Indigenous beadwork patterns, Belcourt celebrates nature's profusion in detail. Articulated in thousands of dots...her paintings are so intricate they might be mistaken for tapestries. A dab of paint, like a stitch of thread, could be subsumed by the whole...but Belcourt's touch insists we see the vibrancy of the ruby-red feathers at a hummingbird's throat or the fine veins of an oak leaf. Leaving the gallery, my eyes feel keen to see the city differently. Scanning for abundance, my gaze settles on a nearby staghorn sumac, whose crimson berry clusters are as opulent as wet paint.<sup>2</sup>

In their review, Phillips-Amos points to the potential powerful impact of Belcourt's paintings, in which the viewer becomes enchanted by the work and carries this out beyond the gallery walls.

### **Enchantment and the Dangers of Disenchantment**

Enchantment is characterized by wonder that is in located in the body and soul, a wonder that goes beyond theorizing, conceptualizing, or critiquing. To be enchanted is to become spellbound and to feel a "temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement."<sup>3</sup> It is a way of approaching the world where one is reminded of *the marvelous specificity of things*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Georgia Phillips-Amos, "Christi Belcourt at Art Gallery of Guelph." *The Online Edition of Artforum International Magazine*, 14 Sept. 2020, <https://www.artforum.com/picks/christi-belcourt-83914>.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Bennett. *The Enchantment of Modern Life : Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Bennett. 4

Enchantment requires “a cultivated form of perception, a discerning and meticulous attentiveness to the to the singular specificity of things.”<sup>5</sup> Jane Bennett further defines enchantment in this way:

The mood I’m calling enchantment involves, in the first instance, a surprising encounter, a meeting with something that you did not expect and are not fully prepared to engage. Contained within this surprise state are (1) a pleasurable feeling of being charmed by the novel and as yet unprocessed encounter and (2) a more *unheimlich* (uncanny) feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one’s default sensory-psychic-intellectual disposition. The overall effect of enchantment is a mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a sense of having had one’s nerves or circulation or concentration powers tuned up or recharged—a shot in the arm, a fleeting return to childlike excitement about life. Historians Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park note that, in early modern Europe, the terms for wonder and wonders—*admiratio*, *mirabilia*, *miracula*—“seem to have their roots in an Indo-European word for ‘smile.’ ”

Enchantment allows us to become attuned to the world around us. As we are enchanted, we are put under a spell of the world and are reminded that we are inextricably and joyfully bound to nature, physically and spiritually.

Western knowledge traditions are characterized by a mechanical worldview As Vine Deloria Jr. (Lakota) explains:

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 37

The mechanistic worldview continues to be applied to many of the physical sciences and biology and... very quickly results in a methodology that is essentially dissective in character. Proponents of this “popular mechanics” view of the world in the biological and physical sciences share an optimistic faith in the belief that once the instruments and tools (technology) are developed that will allow us to observe and measure the smallest pieces of the world, that is, genetic codes and subatomic particles, we will be able to understand the world.<sup>6</sup>

Morris Berman in *The Reenchantment of the World*, first published in 1981, also evaluates how the supremacy of Western scientific and mechanistic thought has led to the prevalence of the worldview in the West of a disconnected, compartmentalized, and fully knowable world with repercussions for the environment as well as for the human spirit. Calling for a substantial change in Western views towards nature, Berman writes:

For more than 99 percent of human history, the world was enchanted and man saw himself as an integral part of it. The complete reversal of this perception in a mere 400 years or so has destroyed the continuity of the human experience and the integrity of the human psyche. It has very nearly wrecked the planet as well.

The only hope, or so it seems to me, lies in a reenchantment of the world.<sup>7</sup>

However, I do not believe that the view of an enchanted world is of the past. Humans and more-than-humans remain in close relation for many Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, in his

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<sup>6</sup>Vine Deloria Jr. and Daniel R Wildcat. *Power and Place : Indian Education in America*. Golden, Colo.: Fulcrum Pub, 2001. 11-12

<sup>7</sup> Morris Berman. *The Reenchantment of the World*. Cornell University, Ithaca, 1996. 23

argument, he often remarks that in rejecting disenchantment, the West cannot return to a “naïve animism.” Animism, or the belief that many beings beyond just humans and animals are imbued with soul, is a characteristic of many Indigenous belief systems. I find Berman’s dismissal of animism as a glaring oversight in his work.

Natasha Myers, a professor of Anthropology and researcher of plant sensing and communication, also speaks of the dangers of disenchantment, but with more focus on the sentience of the more-than-human world:

I think of mechanism as some of the most violent forms of anthropomorphism we can have. Because by turning the living world into a machine, we've actually set it up to work for us. By turning the world into a machine, we've created a context in which we can deploy plants and organisms, molecules and other things in our service. We can run them like machines...And so I think we can challenge anthropomorphism in really powerful ways by participating actively in the work of refusing to disenchant the living world...it could really radically change our relationship to plants as we expand our sensibilities for their forms of sentience, their intelligences, their knowledge, their know how their ways of being.<sup>8</sup>

Myers calls for her audience to “refuse to disenchant” the world. Jane Bennett considers how one can develop their sense of enchantment “One of those strategies might be to give greater expression to the sense of play, another to hone sensory receptivity to the marvelous specificity of things. Yet another way to enhance the enchantment effect is to resist the story of the

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<sup>8</sup> Ayana Young and Natasha Myers. “Growing the Planthropocene, Natasha Myers in conversation with Ayana Young.” *For the Wild Podcast*, October 2020.

disenchantment of modernity.”<sup>9</sup> A 2019 book by Sylvia Federici continues with this idea of “re-enchanting” to reject hegemonic views of the world that have led to the capitalist, extractive, and otherwise violent attitudes that we see prevalent in the world today. While some of these scholars have used the term *re-enchantment*, I am choosing to use *enchantment* based on my belief that the world itself never was disenchanting, just the relationship between some humans and the natural world. While Western scientific thought is dominant in mainstream American thought, Indigenous science and close relationships to nature have never been fully erased, despite efforts to do so.

### **An Introduction to *Wisdom of the Universe* and Metis Beadwork**

Christi Belcourt’s most well-known beadwork painting is mural-scaled *The Wisdom of the Universe*, 2014 sized at 171 × 282 cm (67 x 111 in). This work was originally commissioned by the Art Gallery of Ontario. More recently, it was exhibited at *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* exhibition at the Minneapolis Institute of Art and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2020. A close look at Belcourt’s *The Wisdom of the Universe* reveals thousands<sup>10</sup> of individually painted dots, slightly raised off the canvas, and resembling beads.

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<sup>9</sup> Bennett. 4.

<sup>10</sup> In describing her painting *My Heart is Beautiful*, a painting of similar size and content, Belcourt notes that the work is made up of around 250, 000 dots.



Christi Belcourt. *The Wisdom of the Universe*, 2014. Acrylic on canvas, 171 × 282 cm. © Christi Belcourt

The beadwork that Belcourt emulates is characteristic of Métis<sup>11</sup> communities, so much so that they are referred to as the flower beadwork people by other Native relatives. Quillwork is the other major practice of Indigenous textile embellishment that was in practice for hundreds of years before European contact. It is like embroidery and beading in that designs are created with hollow porcupine quills and sinew thread. Seed beads were introduced later. As Dion has explained “Beading tells the story of colonialism: beads were used for trade, introducing questions about the economic relationship between Indigenous people and fur traders”<sup>12</sup> The beads proved to be a labor-saving material in comparison to the quills, where one has to hunt a porcupine and process it - plucking, softening, dyeing - to embroider with their quills. Embroidery thread was also a European trade good, and with it came foreign designs marked by a shift from geometric

<sup>11</sup> Métis communities themselves are spawn nations of Anishinaabe and European unions.

<sup>12</sup> Susan D. Dion *Braided Learning : Illuminating Indigenous Presence through Art and Story*. Vancouver, British Columbia: Purich Books, 2022. 114

to more representational design. The influx of new material and the freeing up of time allowed for the development of new techniques such as raised beadwork and the incorporation of a wider variety of colors, including metallic beads. While partially inspired by European craft and materials, Native beadwork is its own unique art form, one that is characteristic of many Native communities around the Great Lakes, often seen on regalia, cradleboards, moccasins, blankets, jackets, and earrings.

Belcourt explains how her process has developed over time and what it takes to create her own patterns of beadwork in conversation with Bonnie Devine and Sarah Milroy at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in November 2020. She says: “You not only have to know how to do beadwork, but you also have to know what the plants are saying and how the plants grow and how everything is interconnected... you have to spend a lot of time with the plants, learning from the plants, and the earth becomes your teacher.”<sup>13</sup> Further, Belcourt writes that she chooses to use Métis beadwork patterns:

to provide a proliferation of all things Métis. My voice is joined with others in the nation who work to raise awareness and to strengthen our collective voice so that we may be heard. I use beadwork to infer a sense of history and to celebrate the beauty within our culture. I use beadwork to make the statement that Métis culture is not fossilized but alive. I use beadwork as a tribute to my ancestors, as a way of saying, “You don’t have to worry anymore. Our struggle is not as dire. We have survived, and we are celebrating ourselves even if Canada is not.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Christi Belcourt. “Christi Belcourt & Bonnie Devine in conversation with Sarah Milroy.” McMichael Canadian Art Collection, filmed November 2, 2020. Video of lecture.

<sup>14</sup> Christi Belcourt. “Purpose in Art, Métis Identity, and Moving Beyond the Self.” *Native Studies Review* 17 no. 2, 2008. 147.

Métis and Anishinaabe beadwork is defined by its representation of what is immediately around the artist's location. It is not only decorative but exists as a mapping of the natural world.

### The Protection of All Beings

Belcourt's botanical, aviary, and insectile imagery reveals a specific tie to place and a deeper understanding of the relationships within that place. This painting was originally commissioned and acquired by the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, on Anishinaabe land. In her artist statement, Belcourt writes that, in fact, many of the beings that are depicted in her painting are not just local to Toronto but also designated as extinct, threatened, or endangered in Ontario, such as the spring blue-eyed Mary, the dwarf lake iris, the eastern prairie fringed orchid, the Karner blue butterfly, the West Virginia white butterfly, and the cerulean warbler. Although, there are others like the Acadian flycatcher, the robin, and the mourning dove whose populations are stable.



Details from *The Wisdom of the Universe*

The representations of the endangered beings in this visually Indigenous context, remind the viewer that they are threatened due to the effects of settler-colonialism and extractive capitalism. Habitats are in danger and being destroyed due to residential or other land development, the introduction of invasive species, forestry, rampant deforestation, and misguided wildfire suppression efforts.

Belcourt's focus on endangered beings also reminds me of another artist's work who has considered this as well, but through physical beadwork: Tammy Rahr's (Cayuga) powerful piece *Endangered Species*, ca. 1991. Rahr work is in the form of a beaded cradleboard, a traditional protective baby-carrier in many Indigenous communities in Turtle Island. In *Knowing Native Arts*, Mithlo refers to this work. She writes that "environmental degradation, military combat, and tribal sovereignty are all potent references encased in the careful construction of this sacred vessel for protecting newborn children" (105). The work features "endangered plants from the Cayuga Nation's territories, including wild strawberries, wild grapes, and trillium" (107), similar to Belcourt's inclusion of endangered plants of Ontario in *Wisdom of the Universe*. Mithlo continues: "Rahr was aware of the wildfires in New York State and acid rain that resulted in berries that were dry and inedible. She cites the history of her region's steel mills and major pharmaceutical manufacturing plants as causes of increased water pollution." Again, through this representation of endangered plants, the audience is brought to consider the reasons why they are endangered.



Tammy Rahr, *Endangered Species*, ca. 1991. Wood, fabric, beads, 34" x 14". Courtesy

Of course, one also can also think of infants too as the “endangered species.” When life-sustaining plants die off, hunger grows and the sustaining of Native lifeways are severed. Native children are at risk due to the similar reasons the plants are: settler-colonialism<sup>15</sup> and extractive capitalism. However, Rahr’s concern is not only for Native children, but for all children and infants. She created this in this work in the early 1990’s while “the Gulf War and Operation Desert Storm were being televised,” Mithlo tells the reader. “Her concern for the children and infants who were dying in a military combat zone. The cradleboard serves not only as a symbol of protection but also a metaphor for sustaining life. Rahr summarizes ‘If our planet is dying, our children are endangered.’”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s. *Not "a Nation of Immigrants" : Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and a History of Erasure and Exclusion* for a deep consideration of settler colonialism in the so-called United States.

<sup>16</sup> Nancy Marie Mithlo. *Knowing Native Arts*. University of Nebraska Press, 2020.



*So Much Depends on Who Holds the Shovel*, 2008 Acrylic on Canvas, 48" x 96". Indian and Inuit Art Collection

In another of Belcourt's paintings, *So Much Depends on Who Holds the Shovel*, 2008, Belcourt also considers the futurity of Native nations, children, and other living beings. Similar to *The Wisdom of the Universe*, the work depicts a large variety of brightly colored plants, although just a few birds this time. Once again, endangered species are included: yellow pond lily, the arrowhead water plant, wild strawberry and grapes, purple beebalm, oak, chock cherry, skunk cabbage, and Kirtland's warblers. The beings are not as literally connected as in the *Wisdom*, yet they also appear to be interacting with one another and living in close relation to one another. Another difference is the inclusion of water puddles at the bottom, the red stripes<sup>17</sup>, and the images of shovels at each end. These shovels invoke the various processes of digging—planting, cultivation, as well as extraction.

<sup>17</sup> In *Before and After the Horizon: Anishinaabe Artists of the Great Lakes*, Belcourt's *So Much Depends Upon the Shovel* is presented alongside an image of beaded 'Chippewa' leggings created circa 1885-1900 which also bear red stripes on black velvet.



Stills from Wayne Peltier's *So Much Depends Upon Who Holds the Shovel*

Belcourt's process of crafting this painting and slowly painting dots on her canvas was the subject of a documentary by Wayne Peltier. Belcourt process begins with painting over her white canvas with black paint. Not only does this mirror the black velvet fabric typically used in beadwork, but it is also a deliberate choice to paint over the white canvas, a rejection of contemporary art's love of the white cube and idea of the color white as a neutral space.

Belcourt then draws her beadwork pattern onto half of the canvas, traces it, then copies it to the other side so that the work is symmetrical. Then, Belcourt begins the painting process, in which she slowly adds thousands of dots to the canvas. This takes months, a process repeated day after day, becoming a ritual for the artist.

### **Time and Abundance**

In her artist's statement, Belcourt writes that "Over the years my work has begun to transform as the dots have come to represent more than beads. Their circular shapes indicative of the cycle of life have become a means to express the unknown – from molecules to universes – in essence, the expanse and mystery of life."<sup>18</sup> The circles also reflect the circular nature of the beadwork process that Belcourt emulates:

Beading, as an act, provides an experiential understanding of relationship with time – with every stitch you reinforce, simultaneously reflecting back and projecting forward over and over and over again in a cycle...Multiple lessons can be learned through beading: patience, self-regulation, problem-solving, relationship with yourself; a beautiful picture on top is secondary to the craftwork/skill of strong, resilient, thoughtful, intentional stitching underneath.<sup>19</sup>

This abundance of dots is assembled to represent full living beings. *The Wisdom of the Universe's* pictorial plane is full and alive. Belcourt includes classic motifs of indigenous plants, medicines, and animals: like strawberries, blueberries, and hummingbirds. All plant parts are included – leaves, buds, flowers, tendrils, roots. As typical in beadwork, the background is a single color - the typical black in this painting which is reminiscent of the black velvet Métis beadworkers traditionally work with. The rest of the image is rendered in a variety of colors - green leaves and birds, blue roots and stems, purple, orange, yellow, and red flowers and fruits, and gray and white birds and butterflies. There are three groupings of blue roots at the bottom, connected to the blue branches and stems that extend across the entire plane, outward from the

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<sup>18</sup>Christi Belcourt. "Artist's Statement: Christi Belcourt on the Wisdom of the Universe." *Art Gallery of Ontario*, 7 Aug. 2014, <https://ago.ca/agoinsider/artists-statement-christi-belcourt>

<sup>19</sup> Dion, 2022. 114-5

center. At the center, there is a single dove, which many of the plants converge around, including bright red leaves of the Sumac plant that draw the viewer's attention. The dove has its wings open, in flight.

As typical in beadwork patterns, the 'beaded' imagery is nearly symmetrical, with the plants and birds on one side mirrored on the other. This symmetry implies a sense of balance and harmony that can be found in a healthy and thriving ecosystem. The symmetry and central composition are grounding, although the eye does not know where to begin and end its journey across the work. I found myself following branches in different directions and then jumping around to images that catch my peripheral attention. This is analogous to how I experience and look at 'nature' out in the world. This also leads me to think about Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome, defined by a quality of creating order by itself and creating infinite connections. The rhizome is neither singular nor a multitude, but more of a system. They write "a rhizome has no beginnings or end, it is always in the middle" and that it "pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight."<sup>20</sup> This work by Belcourt carries these same qualities –the viewer can enter into the painting from multiple points – and allows for close attention to detail, but also a consideration of the whole and how the micro turns into the macro.

Belcourt's paintings are also characterized by an aesthetic of abundance. I take the phrase "an aesthetic of abundance" from an essay in the *Hearts of Our People* exhibition catalog, where Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips write that "an aesthetic of abundance – in expenditures of time, materials, and generosity to others – has characterized Native women's arts

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<sup>20</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari Félix. "Introduction: Rhizome." *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2014, 21

across the generations,”<sup>21</sup> offering examples of extravagantly crafted gifts, like beaded garments or cradleboards using floral patterns. This aesthetic of abundance is a contrast to a capitalist society that relies on the myth of ‘scarcity’ to sustain itself.



Details from *The Wisdom of the Universe*

### Interconnection

*The Wisdom of the Universe* reminds the viewer of the interconnected nature of all life on the planet. In her artist statement on the work, Belcourt proclaims:

All species, the lands, the waters are one beating organism that pulses like a heart. We are all a part of a whole. The animals and plants, lands and waters, are our relatives each with as much right to exist as we have. When we see ourselves as separate from each other and think of other species, the waters and the planet itself as objects that can be owned, dominated or subjugated, we lose connection with our humanity and we create imbalance on the earth.<sup>22</sup>

Nearly everything is interconnected in the world of Belcourt’s painting, with most of the plants and medicines sharing the same roots, branches, and stems. The plants, animals, and insects

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<sup>21</sup> Yohe, Ahlberg Jill, et al. “‘Encircles Everything’ A Transformative History of Native Women's Arts.” *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists*, Minneapolis Institute of Art in Association with the University of Washington Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2020, 60

<sup>22</sup> Belcourt, 2014

interact. Take, for example, the cocoon hanging from a branch or the hummingbirds drinking from the flowers. She depicts a dove, robins, hummingbirds, moths, caterpillars, cocoons, butterflies, oak leaves and acorns, irises, and warblers. There is a further multitude of flowering and non-flowering plants that I do not recognize. They are intricately crafted – care is given to each tiny bud, thorn, and tendril – each one distinctly its own specific species as made clear through the choices in shape, number, color, size, and location in the image, Belcourt writes, “I...use my paintings to assert that life is beautiful. There is an incomprehensible complexity found in a simple, single blossom, stem, or bud. I am infatuated with plants because they have taught me so much about life, about myself, and about the soul.”<sup>23</sup>

In thinking about the interconnectedness of life as informed by Belcourt’s painting, the viewer is also implicated. The scale of the world is so large and full of life, that one can almost sense they are in the same space. Enchanted by the painting, the viewer feels connected to this ecosystem they are viewing, but also to their experiences of nature outside the gallery space. In her conversation with Bonnie Devine and Sarah Milroy, Belcourt proclaimed that “I think the reason why people feel emotional responses to my some of my work is, within them, there is a longing and a yearning for a connection with the earth.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Disconnection: On Botanical Colonialism and Botanical Illustration**

Colonialism, Western science, and cultivation are intimately entangled and foundational to understanding the histories of one another. Botany exists at the intersection, as a field that is dependent upon extraction and erasure while also providing support for the expansion of

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<sup>23</sup> Christi Belcourt, 2008. 150.

<sup>24</sup> Christi Belcourt, 2020. “Christi Belcourt & Bonnie Devine in conversation with Sarah Milroy.” Video of lecture.

European empires. Botany emerged as a field as a result of the colonial project and the exploratory voyages around the world in search of new specimens to be collected, hybridized, and turned into profit through the processing or selling of raw materials. Often these plants would be grown in the plantation system, dependent upon the clearing of land for monoculture and the forced labor of enslaved African peoples. The movement of plants on ships throughout the world went alongside the movement of bodies, that is, the slave trade.

This discipline also is centered around classification and taxonomy, systems that attempt to order, name, and differentiate species by visual markers - a feature that has resonance with the development of scientific racism and the creation of categories of race and sexuality. Moreover, Native plants were renamed in Latin or after white botanists. Local names were erased as local knowledge was extracted, and with it, the destruction of worldviews in service of the colonial project. In tracing the history of colonial botany, Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan write in their introduction that “the story of colonial botany is as much a story of transplanting nature as it is one of transforming knowledge.”<sup>25</sup> They also note the role of visualization writing:

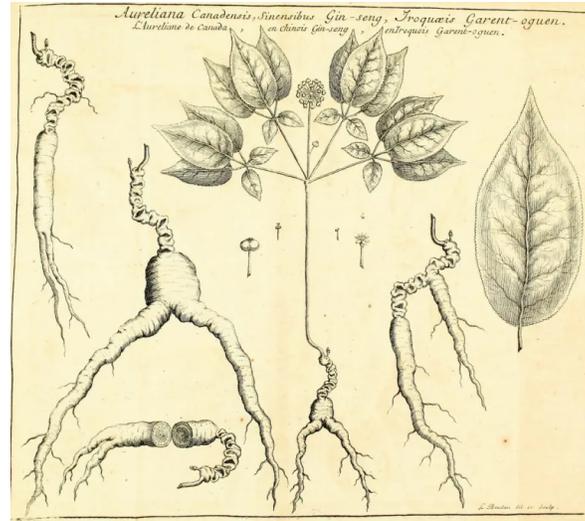
pictorial and written accounts of new natural histories were generally integral to efforts to assimilate them—or, at least, to understand them. Visual representation was a long-standing means of accounting for new experiences of the plant world. In many cases, voyagers were accompanied by artists or made images themselves to record specimens as they encountered them.<sup>26</sup>

The accumulation of specimens was accompanied by a substantial visual record as well.

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<sup>25</sup>Londa L Schiebinger, and Claudia Swan, editors. *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World*. First paperback ed., University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Schiebinger and Swan.



“L’aureliana de Canada, en chinois gin-seng, en iroquois garent-oguen,” from *Mémoire...concernant la précieuse plante du gin-seng* (left) and detail from *Wisdom of the Universe* (right)

Christopher Parsons has detailed some of the early practices of European botany, specifically French, in what is frequently referred to as Canada. This project examines the ideas of French colonists that were promoted to justify their own colonization efforts and paternalistic treatment of Native people. Parsons explains how the French conceived of the land as in need of

cultivation so that it could exist as an ecological extension of France, predicated on the erasure of Indigenous claims to and knowledge of the land. Parson writes:

the American wilderness was perceived through a lens that favoured extractive enterprise and the transformation of botanical resources into commodities, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century texts from French North America suggest that colonists and missionaries also looked at North American flora with an eye to transplanting European ecological relationships into new soils. More than a mercantilist gaze, this was an understanding of botanical identity that saw latent or potential utility as a constitutive facet of a plant's identity.<sup>27</sup>

In comparison Belcourt has stated that “Indigenous nations have known for a long time - forever - that you must keep things in balance by giving, not just taking. The concepts of capitalism and taking what they deem as resources is really in opposition to Indigenous thought and belief in terms of what we do for the coming generations.”<sup>28</sup>

Parsons devotes a chapter to ginseng, explaining how a French missionary and ethnologist named Joseph-François Lafitau claimed he had ‘discovered’ ginseng, close to the mission of Kahnawake in the early 18th century. Of course, this plant was already well-known to the Iroquois living there. The illustration of the ginseng plant by Lafitau stood out to me in Parson’s book. Compared to the depictions of plant life in Belcourt’s paintings, this depiction of a single root renders it lifeless. The root looks as though it was dissected. The individual parts of the plants are all there, but they are separated and individualized. Belcourt does not see roots as

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<sup>27</sup> Christopher M Parsons, *A Not-So-New World: Empire and Environment in French Colonial North America*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 45.

<sup>28</sup> Christi Belcourt, 2020.

individual, but quite the opposite. Belcourt writes in her artist statement that in her painting, “the roots are exposed to signify that all life needs nurturing from the earth to survive and represent the idea that there is more to life than what is seen on the surface. Additionally, it represents the great influence our heritage has on us as individuals.”<sup>29</sup>

It is important to consider not just what is pictured, but what is omitted in Lafitau’s illustration. There is no sense as to how this plant exists in the ground or how it interacts with other life. If one were to encounter this ginseng out in the world, it would most likely be intact and grounded in the earth. The roots would not be visible until they were dug up. The rendering of the ginseng image appears more ‘realistic,’ that is, it follows the conventions of Western realist art where shading and perspective are key. But how ‘realistic’ a representation is it?

Western botany aims to dissect, divide and disconnect. As Kimmerer writes, while reflecting on her study of botany in college, “My natural inclination was to see relationships, to seek the threads that connect the world, to join instead of divide. But science is rigorous in separating the observer from the observed, and the observed from the observer.”<sup>30</sup> This separation and disconnection between observer and observed is present not only in Western science, but in Western art as well.

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<sup>29</sup> Christi Belcourt, “Metis Artist Christi Belcourt Discusses Painting "My Heart is Beautiful".mov” Christi Belcourt. May 5, 2012. Artist’s video.

<sup>30</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer. *Braiding Sweetgrass : Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions, 2013. 42.

## Perspective and the Landscape



Exhibition view from 2019 Exhibition: UPRISING: THE POWER OF MOTHER EARTH —Christi Belcourt—A  
Retrospective with Isaac Murdoch

Due to the size, horizontal orientation, and content, Belcourt’s beadwork paintings exist in conversation with Euro-American landscape painting. Her work disrupts colonial discourse on the landscape, notions of the sublime, and the exaltation of the disembodied, or disconnected, eye.

Belcourt’s work is “flat” in terms of perspective, with the effect of equalizing the visual field where nothing is foregrounded or sent to the background - except maybe the variably sized glowing yellow dots, perhaps representative of stars or spirits. Again, this is how beadwork patterns appear, in two dimensions. It is also reminiscent of Woodland style art. On the other hand, the Western tradition of landscape painting abides by Cartesian perspectivalism which depicts the world three-dimensionally through the gaze of the eye. This perspective, to quote Marin Jay, “privilege[s] an ahistorical, disinterested, disembodied subject outside of the world it

claims to know only from afar.”<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, Jay writes “Cartesian perspectivalism was thus in league with a scientific worldview that no longer hermeneutically read the world as a divine text, but rather saw it as situated in a mathematically regular spatio-temporal order.”<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, the flatness of Belcourt’s painting is also a flattening or condensing of time and space that interrupts this idea of “mathematically regular spatio-temporal order.” All these plants and animals could exist in a single area, but they might not be present or close together at all times. One would have to look, listen, and feel closely and slowly to notice all of these different organisms.

Belcourt’s work rejects the ocularcentrism of Cartesian perspective in other ways beyond the visual flatness of her painting. A multisensory tour of this painting was created in tandem with the initial exhibition in Toronto. In this video, the speaker instructs the viewer to imagine themselves in a forest, the birds singing, and the life all around.

The multisensory tour added auditory and imagined sensations. Moreover, in the physical experience of the painting, Belcourt encourages people to touch her paintings and feel the textures of the thousands of dots. Touch emphasizes sensuous relationship between object and viewer “and because the phenomenon of touch is necessarily reciprocal — what we touch also touches — the viewer is also transformed, no longer able to remain at a distance, unengaged.”<sup>33</sup> As the viewer becomes a part of the experience of the painting, they are also reminded about their role in the ecosystem at large. Not only are plants and insects reliant upon one another, but so are humans. We also have a place in the world amongst and in community with these more-than-human beings.

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<sup>31</sup> Martin Jay. “Scopic Regimes of Modernity” in *Vision and Visuality*. Edited by Hal Foster. *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, Number 2. Seattle: Bay Press, 1988. 10.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 9

<sup>33</sup> Valoma, Deborah. *Scrape the Willow until It Sings*. Berkeley, California: Heyday, 2013. 124

### Colonialism's Present Legacies

Presently, we continue to see the legacies of colonialism in practice in the sciences, even in fields of seemingly benevolent environmentalism, which is still predicated upon access to Indigenous land. In their 2021 book *Pollution Is Colonialism* Max Liboiron explains how even while working towards benevolent goals, non-Native researchers rely upon access to land and research methods informed by colonial worldviews, particularly when projects are centered around pollution. For example, they write:

I find that many people understand colonialism as a monolithic structure with roots exclusively in historical bad action, rather than as a set of contemporary and evolving land relations that can be maintained by good intentions and even good deeds. The call for more recycling, for example, still assumes access to Indigenous Land for recycling centres and their pollution.<sup>34</sup>

Liboiron particularly focuses on alternative anticolonial methods that are currently being practiced and are prefaced upon Métis notions of land relations and “do not reproduce settler and colonial entitlement to Land and Indigenous cultures, concepts, knowledges (including Traditional Knowledge), and lifeworlds.”<sup>35</sup> Much of mainstream environmentalism posits the idea that ‘nature’ needs to be protected from humans. But Indigenous worldviews remind us that humans are part of nature and assert that maintaining good relations with all beings is key to environmental harmony. We are all part of the same ecological systems and must take responsibility for our place in it with a nuanced understanding of Indigenous land relations.

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<sup>34</sup> Max Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*. (Duke University Press, 2021), 17

<sup>35</sup> Liboiron, 2021, 27.

## Conclusion

As we are increasingly bombarded with images of catastrophes and destruction - floods, wildfires, oil spills - Belcourt's work reminds us of what else is still here - beautiful and worth respecting and admiring. Her work encourages enchantment in those who experience her work, through which close connection between humans and nature can be fostered. Her painting *The Wisdom of the Universe* depicts a world of more-than-human life characterized by an aesthetic of abundance. The numerous and various plants are vibrantly colored and crafted through a slow process of painting individual dots that mimic the art of Métis beadworkers. While translating beadwork patterns into a painted format, Belcourt retains the sensibilities of the beadwork that she is inspired by. Her work also reminds the viewer of how interconnected all life is, including ourselves. Nature is not static or separated. It is changeable and always in flux. It is not necessarily a whole made of parts but is rather a system. The notion of the rhizome - an ever-changing system - can be a frame to consider interactions in ecosystems, ecosystems that we as humans are a part of. Finally, Belcourt's work depicts a beautiful and enchanted world - a world that refuses to be disenchanting, to be mechanized and separated as enforced through Western scientific processes and worldviews. Looking at a historical example of a botanical illustration of the ginseng roots, I argue that this type of visualization is both a violent and not wholly accurate one. This collection of botanical knowledge is further dependent upon the extraction of knowledge held by Indigenous people. At the same time that this knowledge is extracted, the source - the naming - is erased and replaced with colonial naming systems.

Belcourt states that she intends to “offer a counter-balance to the overwhelming negative forces of destruction, despair, violence, and death to which we are exposed on a daily basis. I want to offer respite for tired eyes and weary minds.” Juxtaposing the colonial viewpoint of land

as an economic resource with an Indigenous perspective on land, Belcourt's work not only shows us the beauty of the world but reminds us how to be in the world.

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