Along the Carlton Trail

David Garneau

Artist Statement

Exhibition at the Godfrey Dean Art Gallery
September 25 - October 31, 2008

The Carlton Trail is the Settler name for the thoroughfare between the Red River Settlement (Winnipeg) and (Fort) Edmonton. It was originally part of an extensive First Nations pathway system. In the 19th century, the "Great Highway" was the primary land trading route on the Prairies. It was named after Fort Carlton, the mid-way Hudson's Bay trading post founded in 1805 near Duck Lake, SK. In the 20th century, the Yellow Head highway, part of which roughly follows the original trail, was paved. It was named for an Iroquois/Métis guide, Pierre Hastination, nick-named Tète Jaune (for his yellow hair) by French voyagers.

The Trail has historical significance for the Métis. Not only was it an important carting route, but it was also the exodus road for many who fled Red River after the failed resistance (1869). There are numerous historic and continuing Métis settlements along the way. While it is nearly invisible today, a few short sections are maintained, especially at Batoche and Fort Carlton, and wheel ruts can still be found in farmers' fields.

My ancestors were among those who left Red River at that time. My great, great grandfather, Laurent Garneau, re-settled on the banks of the South Saskatchewan, across from Fort Edmonton–now called the Garneau district. I retrace his path, though in a speeding car (!), several times a year. Some trips are for business or pleasure; some are to look for traces of Métis history and living reality. This exhibition is inspired by these journeys, past and present, along (and off) the Carlton Trail.

The three "beaded" map paintings represent Edmonton in the 1880s, Red River in the 1870s and Ste. Madeline currently. The Métis settled Red River, Edmonton, Baotche and other sites according to the French river lot system. These long ribbons of land insured that everyone has access to the river and to their neighbours. In large measure, the Métis resistances were responses to the imposition of the English/Canadian square lot grids over the established system. I made these paintings to remind us that these cities began as Métis settlements.

Drive-By (Garneau) is based on a photograph taken while driving through Laurent's farm–now part of inner-city Edmonton. The "beading" reminds that the site was once Métis' land. The several markers dedicated to Laurent Garneau list him as one of the city founders, but none acknowledges that he was Métis.

Ste. Madeline was a large Métis settlement near Yorkton (on the Manitoba side). In the 1930s, the area's Settlers decided that they wanted the land the Métis occupied and the families gone. The land was appropriated for a community pasture, the residences destroyed and the people driven off. All that remains is the large graveyard, which former residents and descendants visit each year in pilgrimage. *They Are Standing, Still* represents the poplar trees that ring the graveyard. They remind us of those who came before and the new generations that followed. Poplars propagate from the roots of a mother tree. All the trees in a grove share the same roots. All are united under the soil.

Empty (Near LeBret) is a painting of the interior of a disused barn on a Métis community farm. This could be a mournful painting suggestive of the failure of some Métis communities, government and church settlement projects. Given the lightness of the image, perhaps it means to be a visual memory. It looks like a Prairie cathedral, hinting that the spiritual and the mundane are not so far apart.

Most of my work is about death and memory. The specific death that haunts my landscape belongs to Neil Stonechild. I never met him. My thoughts are not of him personally, so much as how he stands for other Aboriginal people who have gone missing, met violence and whose bodies have been found out-of-doors. *Evidence* is a painting from Neil Stonechild's autopsy. It shows the marks on his nose thought to correspond to his being hit by handcuffs. *Covered* shows the 17-year-old boy, frozen to death, in the snow-covered field on the outskirts of Saskatoon, where city police are said to have dropped him off in 1990. I listened as the police and media called him a man and a drunk. I felt that those images were displacing real and positive ones. I also felt that these verbal pictures were efforts to diminish the tragic violence that lead to his death. The images I used are available on the internet but I felt that I needed to paint them to reinsert this hard reality into the landscape of our imagination.

While driving the prairie highways, I compulsively take photographs of road-kill—not horrible wrecks but strangely attractive ruins. These are not gory pictures meant to disgust; nor are they images of cute dead animals designed to elicit only pathos. They are realistic representations of fauna composed to create a tension between beauty and the grotesque, pleasure and pain, resemblance and abstraction. They are attractive images that discover beauty in an unconventional source. They have us wonder about the ethics of our pleasure and progress and encourage us to contemplate our short time in the world.

These paintings and drawings are scenes of aestheticized death. Without the smell, the putrefying physicality, or the prohibition regarding taking pleasure in dead and ruined bodies, these paintings encourage the viewer reflect on mortality, including their own. They are in the memento mori (remembrance of death) still life art tradition. Most still life paintings are about domestic spaces and bounty, food ready to eat, or fresh flowers that are simply about beautiful formal arrangements. But they are also often symbols for the fragility of life. *Road Kill* plays with and goes against this tradition. These paintings are both stilled lives and landscape. I hunt for the animals in the margins between culture and nature. While I do not kill the animals I collect, as a driver, I am implicated in their deaths. They were once wild and beautiful, and then they were destroyed and abject. Now, as art, they are revived as something

new, an aesthetic experience that encourages us to contemplate the effect of our colonization of nature. These paintings may also engender an existential reflection on mortality in some and a sense of self that exceeds the flesh in others.

Road Kill seems unrelated to my more literal Métis inspired work, *Cowboys and Indians (and Métis?)*. However, when I consider my compulsive travel back and forth between Winnipeg and Edmonton, trips that retrace the trail my ancestors took (in their flight from Red River) and retook (as carters), I see a strong metaphoric connection. I travel this road like a trap line! I capture these animals, make pelts and try to sell them.

About an hour's drive north-west of Edmonton, *Lac Ste. Anne* was a sacred site long before contact. Cree people call the lake "Manito Skahigan" (Spirit Lake). There has been a Catholic mission there since 1889 and thousands of First Nations and Métis people come to pilgrimage every year. It is a place of healing and renewal that combines Indigenous and Western spiritual traditions. One of the practices is for families to bathe in the waters. You wade out into the lake and feel around for a special rock. It is said that if you stand on that rock your prayers will be answered. This picture celebrates life and family.

A Vision is a painting of the top of a tipi. It was next to the lodge where I went for my first sweat. I didn't think it would be right to paint the holy building, but the elder there said I could take a picture of the tipi for a painting. Then his assistant told me I was going to sweat with them. I did. The beaded image came to my mind there. I had painted the beaded maps and was going to abandon the tedious dots but in the sweat, they took on a new dimension.

The dots have numerous meanings depending on their arrangement and the context. They derive from the beading Métis, the flower bead people, are famous for. I want to combine this tradition with contemporary picture making for a new hybrid. The dots remind many people of Seurat's pointillism, Op art's optical buzz, and Lichtenstein's exaggerated comic book, Ben-day dots. Others see Australian Aboriginal influences. I did not see that at first, but having gone there this Spring, I was surprised to learn that many of the Papunya Tula dot paintings are maps! My first maps were consciously influenced by Alex Janvier's maps. Perhaps I was unconsciously influenced by the Papunya Tula dot paintings. Interestingly, their acrylic on canvas paintings are a contemporary innovation (1971) of an ancient tradition. I have not quite gotten over this resonance. I often use dots as a screen that allows us only a partial vision. It is as if to say, 'you shouldn't look at this,' or, 'you can't fully see this.' I want to both reveal and conceal. I like how the paintings change in the light. From some angles, the picture disappears and the image becomes a design. These particle fields remind me of the limitations of pictures, that representations are constructed, that every thing is made up of little floating bits, molecules and atoms. In a few instances, the dots assemble into the beginnings of mandala patterns, perhaps to suggest a nascent or forming spirituality.

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