



MACKENZIE ART GALLERY
MUSÉE D'ART MACKENZIE

MACKENZIE ART GALLERY SCHOOL TOURS

TEACHER'S RESOURCE GUIDE

CHRISTI BELCOURT & ISAAC MURDOCH —

UPRISING: THE POWER OF MOTHER EARTH

18 NOVEMBER 2019 TO 27 MARCH 2020



Introduction & Tour Outcomes	1
<hr/>	
About the Artists	4
<hr/>	
Other Resources	6
<hr/>	
Pre-Tour Activity	6
<hr/>	
Post-Tour Activity	7
<hr/>	
Curricular Outcomes	9



INTRODUCTION

CHRISTI BELCOURT & ISAAC MURDOCH — *UPRISING: THE POWER OF MOTHER EARTH*

Christi Belcourt, *This Painting is a Mirror* (detail), 2012, acrylic on canvas. Collection of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada. Photo: Lawrence Cook.



INTRODUCTION

CHRISTI BELCOURT & ISAAC MURDOCH — *UPRISING: THE POWER OF MOTHER EARTH*

Since the beginning of her career, Michif artist Christi Belcourt has consistently addressed the cyclical relationship between human life and the natural world in her art. From representations of maps and flora, to portraits and waterways, her works have beautifully shown the delicate ecological balance of life and have addressed the need to observe our impact on the Earth. These works are grounded within an Indigenous cosmology that acknowledges the interdependence of all life forms.

For example, drawing on the floral beadwork designs of Métis women from the early 1800s, Belcourt describes her painting practice as one that “has now developed to where entire floral patterns are created in ‘dots’ by dipping the end of a paintbrush or knitting needle into the paint and pressing it onto canvas.” More than a simple replication of nineteenth-century beadwork designs though, Belcourt’s often large-scale paintings depict the living world of Indigenous plant medicines and waterways that make up the interrelated ecosystems in the natural and urban environment. In amidst the many flower blossoms, tendrils and root systems depicted in her work, the wild life that is shown living in tandem with the sacred and healing plants such as blueberries, tobacco and sweetgrass commonly found across North America.

The concept of interconnectedness—the acknowledgement of the relationships between all living things—is one that has long resonated within both traditional and contemporary Indigenous art. Contemporary movements, such as the Woodland School of Art popularized by artists such as Norval Morrisseau, Carl Ray and Roy Thomas during the 1960s and 1970s, often incorporated concepts of holistic life forces in their painting practice. However the imagery depicted in the beadwork-style of painting not only pays homage to the tradition of the Métis, but also is thematically linked to the Woodland-style. Much like the emanating power lines illustrated throughout in the work of Morrisseau, the network of dots function to create a sense of kinetic energy, sacredness and inclusivity.

More recently, her practice has taken a more pointed political stand. Working collaboratively with traditional teacher and fellow Onaman Collective member Isaac Murdoch, works such as “Buffalo Robe” (2016) seeks to show how imagery is depicted “symbolically as medicine in her work through the act of painting [where] she aims to take action in an effort to restore balance as a human being amongst many living beings.” The collaborative practice has also resulted in the now iconic image of the *Thunder Bird Woman*, which has gone



INTRODUCTION

CHRISTI BELCOURT & ISAAC MURDOCH — *UPRISING: THE POWER OF MOTHER EARTH*

on to visually unify protest movements against the development of pipelines, most notably at Standing Rock, North Dakota.

Informed by traditional Indigenous knowledge, Belcourt's portrayal of plant life and waterways, combined with the practice of Métis beadwork in contemporary painting presents an infinitesimal examination of the natural world. Mino-bimaadiziwin: Christi Belcourt is a mid-career retrospective that includes 20-25 of Christi Belcourt's paintings as well as her collaborative practice with grassroots activist Isaac Murdoch that indelibly connects our delicate relationship with nature.

TOUR OUTCOMES

Students will learn about the contemporary artwork of Michif artist Christi Belcourt and Ojibway artist Issac Murdoch.

Students will explore their relationships with and responsibility for the land.

Students will learn about the concept of interconnectedness — the acknowledgement of the relationships between all living things — that has long resonated within both traditional and contemporary Indigenous art.



INTRODUCTION

CHRISTI BELCOURT & ISAAC MURDOCH — *UPRISING: THE POWER OF MOTHER EARTH*

ABOUT CHRISTI BELCOURT

Christi Belcourt is a Michif (Métis) visual artist with a deep respect for Mother Earth, the traditions and the knowledge of her people. In addition to her paintings she is also known as a community based artist, environmentalist and advocate for the lands, waters and Indigenous peoples. She is currently a lead organizer for the Onaman Collective which focuses on resurgence of language and land based practices. She is also the lead coordinator for Walking With Our Sisters, a community-driven project that honours murdered or missing Indigenous women. Her work Giniigaaniimenaaning (Looking Ahead) commemorates residential school survivors, their families and communities to mark the Prime Minister's historic Apology in 2008 and is installed at Centre Block on Parliament Hill commissioned by the Government of Canada. She was named the Aboriginal Arts Laureate by the Ontario Arts Council in 2015. In 2016 she won a Governor General's Innovation Award and was named the winner of the 2016

Premier's Awards in the Arts. Author of *Medicines To Help Us* (Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2007) and *Beadwork* (Ningwakwe Learning Press, 2010). Christi's work is found within the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, Gabriel Dumont Institute, the Indian and Inuit Art Collection, Parliament Hill, the Thunder Bay Art Gallery and Canadian Museum of Civilization, First People's Hall.



Christi Belcourt, *Resilience of the Flower Beadwork People*, 1999, acrylic on canvas. Collection of Amanda Greener and Shane Belcourt. Photographer: Justin Wonnacott.

INTRODUCTION

CHRISTI BELCOURT & ISAAC MURDOCH — *UPRISING: THE POWER OF MOTHER EARTH*

ABOUT ISAAC MURDOCH

Isaac Murdoch, whose Ojibway name is Manzinapkinegego'anaabe / Bombgiizhik is from the fish clan and is from Serpent River First Nation. Isaac grew up in the traditional setting of hunting, fishing and trapping. Many of these years were spent learning from Elders in the northern regions of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Isaac is well respected as a storyteller and traditional knowledge holder. For many years he has led various workshops and cultural camps that focuses on the transfer of knowledge to youth. Other areas of expertise include: traditional ojibway paint, imagery/symbolism, harvesting, medicine walks, & ceremonial knowledge, cultural camps, Anishinaabeg oral history, birch bark canoe making, birch bark scrolls, Youth & Elders workshops, etc. He has committed his life to the preservation of Anishinaabe cultural practices and has spent years learning directly from Elders.

OTHER RESOURCES

Christi Belcourt's website
christibelcourt.com

The Onaman Collective website
onamancollective.com/who-we-are



Christi Belcourt, *Resilience of the Flower Beadwork People* (detail), 1999, acrylic on canvas. Collection of Amanda Greener and Shane Belcourt. Photographer: Justin Wonnacott.

INTRODUCTION

CHRISTI BELCOURT & ISAAC MURDOCH — *UPRISING: THE POWER OF MOTHER EARTH*

PRE-TOUR ACTIVITY

Understanding Activism (All Ages)

As a class, research the Onaman Collective and begin to discuss the concepts of activism.

OBJECTIVE

Students will learn about the contemporary artwork of Michif artist Christi Belcourt and Ojibway artist Issac Murdoch. Students will begin to explore their responsibilities for the land and the concept of activism.

MATERIALS

Computers

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1 Begin to discuss the concepts of activism with your class: What is activism? What does it mean to be an activist? What are the various forms of activism? What are ways you can become an activist in your own community? Why is activism important? You can also brainstorm ways you can create change within the classrooms.
- 2 Get your class to research the Onaman Collective, an activist group made of three artists; Christi Belcourt, Isaac Murdoch, and Erin Konsmo. Discuss how these artists are activists and how they are contributing in giving back to their communities. Show examples of these artists' works and discuss as a class the issues they are advocating for and the importance of protecting the environment.

ADAPTATIONS

Younger students may focus more on the brainstorming portion of the exercise, and teachers can provide further age-appropriate resources to help them answer questions regarding activism.

EXTENSIONS

If you are wanting to do further research, your class can begin to do research about the pipelines, an issue the Onaman Collective advocates for, and the differing arguments surrounding the continuation of building the pipelines.



INTRODUCTION

CHRISTI BELCOURT & ISAAC MURDOCH — *UPRISING: THE POWER OF MOTHER EARTH*

POST-TOUR ACTIVITY

Exploring Activism
Through Photography
(All Ages)

Students will explore the concept
of creating social change through
the practice of photography.

MATERIALS

Cameras (can use cell phones)

Editing software (optional)

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1 Explore how photography is another medium used by artists to portray certain messages. Discuss how the subject matter of a photo can tell a story, and how other details such as the composition of the photo can help convey a message. Some artists' edit their photos by enhancing certain aspects or use filters such as black and white to portray a certain mood. Photography is also a very important aspect in contemporary activism, as social media relies on photos to tell stories to millions of people.
- 2 Explore photography by artists such as Dana Claxton, Edward Burtynsky, Sarah Anne Johnson, and Rebecca Belmore (note- this multidisciplinary artist's work may contain mature content, review photographs to be used first). Discuss what aspects in their artwork help portray a message, and how students can use these techniques in their own photos.
- 3 As a class, brainstorm a topic you would like to advocate for and have students think about how they could represent this topic in a photo. Students can take multiple photos (they can also experiment with various ideas) and choose their favourite one. Whether the students edit their photo is optional. Some free resources for editing photos include Darktable, GIMP, or for cellphones, the free version of Adobe Lightroom.
- 4 After everyone has chosen their photograph, have a small art critique within the classroom to showcase everyone's work. Discuss the techniques students used, what imagery they chose to represent their activist topic, and what makes their artwork successful.



INTRODUCTION

CHRISTI BELCOURT & ISAAC MURDOCH — *UPRISING: THE POWER OF MOTHER EARTH*

POST-TOUR ACTIVITY (CONT)

ADAPTATIONS

For very young students, focus more on the framing and including specific elements to represent your causes, rather than worrying about editing. Using iPad's is a good option for young students to better see what will be included in their photo, if you have access to them.

EXTENSIONS

Students can design posters using their images and display them in the school. They can also turn their images into a multi-media project by painting or collaging to add another layer of interest and meaning.



Christi Belcourt, *Revolution of Love*, 2018, acrylic on canvas. Collection of the Artist. Photographer: Justin Wonnacott.

INTRODUCTION

CHRISTI BELCOURT & ISAAC MURDOCH — *UPRISING: THE POWER OF MOTHER EARTH*

ARTS EDUCATION

KINDERGARTEN

CHK.2 Recognize a wide variety of arts expressions as creations of First Nations and Métis peoples. Students will learn about contemporary Indigenous artists Christi Belcourt and Isaac Murdoch, and learn about the connections between these artists' activist artwork and their traditional beliefs. Students will learn about how Christi Belcourt engages in further discussions about environmental activism using social media communication tools, and respond by creating hashtags or logos for issues that concern them.

GRADE 1

CR1.2 Investigate and describe various reasons for creating arts expressions. Students will learn about how Christi Belcourt uses her artwork as a form of activism. She encourages us to think about environmental and social issues. In the studio, students will investigate these environmental and social issues by creating their own

artwork, practicing ways to make others think about a topic they are passionate about.

It should also be noted that this exhibition contains excellent examples of symmetry, and formal and informal patterns that can be discovered while viewing artworks.

GRADE 2

CP2.8 Create art works using a variety of visual art concepts (e.g., secondary colours), forms (e.g., collage, drawing, painting, sculpture, mobile, traditional art), and media (e.g., paper, found objects, paint, crayons).

In the studio, students will create mixed-media banners about activism topics that they care about using materials such as paint, vellum, and stencils.





INTRODUCTION

CHRISTI BELCOURT & ISAAC MURDOCH — *UPRISING: THE POWER OF MOTHER EARTH*

GRADE 3

CR3.2 Respond to arts expressions that use the environment (natural, constructed, imagined) as inspiration. Students will view and discuss artworks by Christi Belcourt, an artist whose work draws heavily on imagery from nature and discusses environmental activism. They will respond through discussions using the MacKenzie Method, by observing artwork and drawing their own responses in the gallery, and by discussing and exploring activism in social media such as the use of logos or hashtags.

GRADE 4

CR4.1 Analyze how dance, drama, music, and visual art works represent unique ideas and perspectives. Students will explore and analyze the unique painting style of Christi Belcourt and reflect on how her artwork brings to our attention environmental and social issues that greatly affect our societies and lives today.

GRADE 5

CR5.2 Respond critically and creatively to a variety of pop culture expressions. While Christi Belcourt's work does not fall under the pop art movement, it is contemporary and addresses current social issues. Students will learn about how Christi Belcourt engages in further discussions about environmental activism using social media communication tools, and respond by creating hashtags or logos for issues that concern them.

GRADE 6

CH6.2 Identify ways that First Nations, Métis, and Inuit artists express cultural identity in contemporary work. Students will be exploring the artwork of contemporary Métis artists Christi Belcourt and Isaac Murdoch. While the themes of their artwork are focused around activism, their work does connect to their Indigenous identity. This includes ideas of returning to the Earth to find healing that are specific to their Indigenous background.



INTRODUCTION

CHRISTI BELCOURT & ISAAC MURDOCH — *UPRISING: THE POWER OF MOTHER EARTH*

GRADE 7

CH7.2 Investigate how Indigenous artists from around the world reflect the importance of place (e.g., relationship to the land, geology, region, urban/rural environments). Students will view and discuss artworks by Christi Belcourt, an artist whose work draws heavily on imagery from nature and discusses both traditional Indigenous environmental relationships and modern activism.

GRADE 8

CR8.2 Investigate and identify ways that today's arts expressions often reflect concern for social issues. Students will learn about contemporary Indigenous artists Christi Belcourt and Isaac Murdoch, and how these artists address social and environmental issues in their work. They will learn about the Onaman Collective, an organization these artists started to preserve traditional knowledge and arts in order to have them passed down to younger generations.

GRADE 9

CP9.10 Create visual art works to express perspectives and raise awareness about a topic of concern to youth. In response to Christi Belcourt's activist artwork, in the studio students will create mixed-media banners about activism topics that they care about using materials such as paint, vellum, and stencils.

VISUAL ART 10-20-30

CH10.2 Investigate the impact of visual culture on students' lives and human condition. Students will explore how visual culture can affect a society by learning how Christi Belcourt and Isaac Murdoch's artworks influence their viewers to talk about environmental and social activism. In the gallery and studio, they will participate in activities that encourage them to think about using effective imagery and words as part of activism.

INTRODUCTION

CHRISTI BELCOURT & ISAAC MURDOCH — *UPRISING: THE POWER OF MOTHER EARTH*

CH20.2 Investigate how artists from around the world manipulate media, form and content in interdisciplinary work. Students will view and discuss work by artist Christi Belcourt, who both paints, uses writing, and social media as part of the larger goals of her work. Students will listen to a poem that Belcourt wrote to accompany the painting *Water is Life*, and will participate in activities exploring activism in social media such as the use of logos or hashtags.

CP30.4 Use inquiry to create a work of art inspired by the work of current Canadian artists whose work responds to socially relevant topics (e.g., sustainability, social justice, diversity and inclusion). In the gallery, students will learn about how Christi Belcourt and Isaac Murdoch use their artwork as a form of activism. They encourage us to think about environmental and social issues, and students will participate in activities that encourage them to practice their own perspectives on these issues. In the studio, students will create mixed-media banners about activism topics that they care about using materials such as paint, vellum, and stencils.





Christi Belcourt, *What the Sturgeon Told Me*, 2007, acrylic on canvas. Collection of the Artist. Photographer: Justin Wonnacott.

CONTACT

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GALLERY HOURS

Monday - Saturday
10 AM - 5:30 PM
Thursday 10 AM - 9 PM
Sunday 12 - 5:30 PM

CRAFT SERVICES CAFÉ HOURS

Monday Closed
Tuesday, Wednesday 8 AM - 4 PM
Thursday 8 AM - 8:30 PM
Saturday 10 AM - 4 PM
Sunday 12 - 4 PM



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