**Métis Artist and Indigenous Activist**

**Dylan Miner**

Interview by America Meredith

**Born in Rural Michigan,**

Dylan Miner is an educator, writer, historian, and curator, as well as an artist working in multiple media. Currently, he is an Associate Professor in the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University, coordinates MSU’s new Indigenous Contemporary Arts Initiative, and is an adjunct curator for Indigenous arts at the university’s museum. A widely published scholar, Miner is also a member of Justseeds, a graphic arts collective. He earned his PhD from the University of New Mexico and currently lives in East Lansing, Michigan with his wife, Dr. Estrella Torrez, and their two daughters.

In your solo exhibit *Waasawaabaamina* (Prophecies), you examined the teachings of prophets, including Tenskwatawa (Shawnee) and Louis Riel (Métis). What do you think these men have to communicate to us today? What artworks did you create based on their teachings?

That body of work was for an exhibition at Gallery 101 in Ottawa, Canada. For *Waasawaabaamin* I wanted to interrogate the teachings of our elders, both from my community and from other Indigenous nations. I chose the notion of “prophecies” for a variety of reasons, but primarily as a way to think about traditional knowledge and its ongoing implications today. The word *waasawaabaamina* is an Anishinaabemowin verb that means “to see far.” The meaning of *waasawaabaamina* is conceptually quite different than a Western definition of a prophecy. To some degree the name itself was playing with these two competing worldviews and the tension between them.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines prophecy as “that which is done or spoken by a prophet; the action or practice of revealing or expressing the will or thought of God or of a god; divinely inspired utterance or discourse.” My application of the term is Indigenous in orientation, yet recognizes the way that non-Native people commonly fetishize Indigenous prophecies. Regardless of the historical traumas that it has perpetrated, settler society commonly maintains an ongoing fascination with Indigenous prophets.

All of the work in *Waasawaabaamin* was created in 2012, an ideal time to re-interrogate Indigenous prophecy from an anti-colonial and Indigenist perspective. Last year was marked by the supposed end-of-days prophecies of the Maya and Hopi alongside the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812, a conflict between the United States and England-Canada that was precipitated by the pan-Indigenous prophecies of Tenskwatawa, a Shawnee leader known as “The Prophet,” and Tecumseh.

For the exhibition, I turned to these historic antecedents, among others, as points of entry into Indigenous resistance and the prophetic visions of our ancestors. Instead of seeing prophecies as truth-telling and seeing into the future, I loosely conceptualized *Waasawaabaamin* as ongoing teachings that enable us to directly confront globalization, colonialism, and capitalism. The exhibition hung at the exact time that the Idle No More movement grew across Canada. Although planned for over a year, I think that *Waasawaabaamin* speaks to the way that indigenous activists use these teaching to move our communities into the future.

The Saginaw Chippewa’s Ziibiwing Center for Anishinabe Lifeways and Culture is the best example I can think of a museum based on an Indigenous perspective, since their exhibits are based on the Seven Grandfather Teachings. Have you used these teachings in your artwork?

Ziibiwing Center is an amazing museum. It is one of the premier Indigenous cultural spaces on Turtle Island. I have worked with Ziibiwing on a few projects and sit on the board of the Michigan Indian Education Council with Judy Pamp, Assistant Director of Ziibiwing. I have wanted to exhibit there for some time. Through Judy and Shannon Martin, Director of Ziibiwing, the museum became interested in my project *Anishnaabensag Biimskoweshkigewag (Native Kids Ride Bikes),* an ongoing collaboration with Native youth.

*Anishnaabensag*
Biimskowebshkigewag is a socially engaged art project that uses bicycles, especially lowrider bikes, as the point of entry into thinking about migration stories, traditional modes of transportation, and health for contemporary Indigenous youth. Initially it was funded through the National Museum of the American Indian. I spent two weeks in the NMAI archives in Maryland looking into Métis, Anishinaabeg, and Nēhiyawēwin [Plains Cree] forms of transportation: canoes, footwear, dog sleds, Red River carts, snowshoes, etc. What became especially clear during my research was the interrelationships between all of our communities, especially because our community members and families constantly migrated across the continent and built new kin relationships.

I took my research back to Lansing’s urban Native community and collaborated with youth to build a series of lowrider bicycles using Niizhwaaswi G’mishomisinaanig, our Seven Grandfather Teachings. We created bicycles based on each of the seven teachings. I brought in language teachers, elders, young Native professionals, two different Native youth programs, university students, and two other Indigenous artists. The logistics were quite extensive, but the final outcome was worth it.

The seven teachings represented in the bikes include niwaaakaawin (wisdom), zaagi’idiwin (love), minaadendamowin (respect), aakwa’ode’ewin (bravery), debwewin (truth), dibaadendiziwin (humility), and gwekwaadiziwin (honesty). The youth collaborators, which included elementary, middle, and high school students, selected which teaching their bikes would represent. They have been exhibited at Ziibiwing, Tamástslikt Cultural Institute (Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla museum in Oregon), University of Iowa Museum of Art, Great Lakes Folk Festival, and Michigan State University. Since Anishnaabensag Biimskowebshkigewag is an ongoing collaboration, new bicycles were also created for an exhibition at Fort Lewis College and Turtle Island Aboriginal Educational Centre in Ontario, as well as for the traveling exhibition Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop, and Aboriginal Culture. This summer I built more bikes at the Santa Fe Art Institute and MoCNA during Indian Market 2013. I would love to continue working with both reservation and urban Native communities to help youth create
their own bikes based on their communities’ knowledge, language, and visuality.

“Contemporary art” has changed the geography of artistic practice, reconfiguring the relationship between an artist and her or his audience. Since the late 1960s, artists have gone beyond so-called modernist and postmodernist aesthetic choices, becoming progressively interested in artworks that collaborate with communities, as opposed to solely making art for communities. Many Indigenous artists are working in this way. This artistic practice is known as “socially engaged art,” “participatory art,” or “collaborative art” and views the social relationships between collaborators as central to the success of an artwork. Sometimes the artwork is the collaboration itself, as opposed to being the final product. The artworks I make as part of Anishnaabensag Biimskowebskhigewag are the social relationships made between myself and the collaborators.

In this way, Anishnaabensag Biimskowebskhigewag addresses the need within the urban Native community to revitalize and maintain Indigenous history and language by engaging with contemporary youth culture. The final outcome of these long-term collaborations are ridable bicycles which signify traditional teachings, propose alternative Indigenous histories and subjectivities, and provoke us to think about sustainable modes of transportation. Drawing on the importance of hip hop within the urban Native community, the lowrider bicycle serves as an ideal site of investigation since it allows youth collaborators to bring pre-existing knowledge to an intergenerational collaboration.

For me, this project evokes the bicycle as a contemporary evocation of the Red River cart (li michif sharey), a common and important marker of Métis identity and communal livelihood. For the Métis nation, li michif sharey symbolizes the way that Indigenous communities have commonly migrated from one location to another, frequently crossing illegitimate national borders in the process.

**Anishinaabemowin and Michif languages figure prominently in your art practice. For those of less familiar with Métis culture, could you explain what Michif is?**

Both Anishinaabemowin and Michif, as well as Nahuatl to a lesser extent, play significantly into my practice. It is critical to continue to employ Indigenous languages on a daily basis. As a non-fluent speaker, someone who knows only the most basic elements of either Anishinaabemowin or Michif, the use of these languages serves as a decolonizing maneuver in my work. Anishinaabemowin is the language of the Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi). Michif is a common language of the Métis or Michif, my community; although our ancestors would have also spoken Anishinaabemowin, Nēhiyawēwin, or Nakawêmowin [Western Ojibwe]. Many people know us as the Métis or more pejoratively, as halfbreeds. As a non-speaker, I employ these languages in my art as a way to communicate directly with the ancestors.

In the United States, the terms Métis and Michif are less familiar than they are north of the border. In Canada we are identified as one of three aboriginal people (First Nation, Inuit, and Métis). The term Métis is similar to the Spanish word mestizo, meaning a person of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry. However, unlike its application in Latin America, the term Métis generally defines a specific Indigenous people of who have historically lived from the Great Lakes watershed, across the northern plains, and into the Canadian subarctic. With the arrival of francophone and English-speaking fur traders, a new Indigenous culture emerged, one that maintained kinship ties with Anishinaabeg, Nēhiyawēwin (Plains Cree) Omaškēkowak (Swampy Cree) and Nahkawiniwin (Saulteaux), but existed as its own culture. The common story is that French, English, and Scottish fur traders married, in the “manner of the country,” Indigenous women and started families. Over the course of many generations, their halfbreed, fur-trading children intermarried with other Métis children, creating a uniquely Michif culture. Personally, I descend from the Miner, Brissette, L’Hirondelle, and Kennedy Métis families.

This, of course, is a gross generalization of Michif history, and one that I attempt to work against. What is important to understand is that because of the fur trade, as an economic system, Indigenous people were brought into the wage economy. This included my family.

Once that happened, many of them crisscrossed the continent, using their Indigenous knowledge as wage laborers. In response to increased migrations due to the fur trade, Michif communities emerged throughout the Great Lakes and across the plains.

What is interesting is how the Canadian and US governments responded differently to the demands of the Michif, as Indigenous people. While I do not believe in the need for government recognition to exist as an Indigenous people, it is important that Métis people have Status in Canada and not in the United States. There are many historic communities in Michigan, Montana, and Minnesota, yet these cousins have few Indigenous rights. Inversely, Canada recognizes Métis Status, while the United States ignores us. My family was in Michigan before treaties were signed, although
these ancestors then fought against the United States and relocated to Canada, as did many resistant Métis and Anishinaabeg. Manitoba, for instance, was brought into confederation by the struggles of the Michif and Nēhiyawēwin. We were subsequently stripped of our rights during the 20th century.

This past March, however, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the Canadian government failed on their obligation to the Michif and our landbase of over 1.4 million acres. Two months previously, the federal court in Canada ruled that the Canadian government has the fiduciary duty to treat Métis people as “Indians,” as defined under the Indian Act. These recent decisions will have huge implications on contemporary Indigenous issues in Canada and hopefully this will trickle-down into the United States.

Your family is Métis and Chicano, and your art draws heavily from Latino elements. How has Latino art inspired you, and why is crossing boundaries so fundamental to your work?

My father’s family are Michif people from both sides of the Canada-US border. My mother’s family were Scandinavian migrants who relocated to the Great Lakes. I was raised within and married into a Xicano or Mexican-American migrant farmworker community in rural Michigan. From an early age, I saw the similarities between the earth-based ways of my Michif relations and my Indigenous migrant Xicano relations. For both Xicanos and Michif, we have similarly suffered at the hands of colonial regimes, which have stripped from us our Indigenous status and tried to deny us our language, culture, and ability to self-govern.

Moreover, Xicanos and Michif, alongside our First Nations and American Indian cousins, suffered directly from shifting US, Mexican, and Canadian borders. My family fought against the Americans in the War of 1812, yet was forced to leave Drummond Island following the Treaty of Ghent and migrate, with other Michif and Anishinaabeg, across Lake Huron into the Georgian Bay. Because two settler-colonial governments, Canada and the United States, created a fictitious border that zigzagged between St. Joseph Island (Canada), Drummond Island (United States) and Cockburn Island (Canada), my family was forced to migrate to Penetanguishene and eventually to Parry Sound, both in Ontario. The border violently prevented my family from living where we wanted to live. Of course, there is documentation of this happening all along the Canada-US border, where traditional
harvesting territories were eventually taken away. The same can be said about the Mexico-US border.

Xicano activists have for some time argued that “We didn’t cross the border; the border crossed us!” My wife’s family are Hispanicized Indians, people who were known as genizaros. They have been in Texas and New Mexico since time immemorial, yet their identity was changed because of shifting Spanish, Texan, Mexican, and then US American hegemony. The border literally changed who they were.

So I was raised seeing Xicano or Mexican-Americans as Indigenous people, just as I saw myself and my Michif relations as Indigenous. I came of age within the second-generation of the Chicano Movement and have seen the kin and familial relationships that exist between Great Lakes Native peoples and Xicanos. Artistically, I began working as a printmaker inspired by the long printmaking tradition in Xicano and Mexican communities. The Taller de Gráfica Popular and Carlos Cortéz Koyokuikatl were crucial to my early growth as a relief printer. I then began working in serigraphy, a form that was significant for Xicano artists during the 1960s. This led me to work with Justseeds, an activist poster collective.

Native artists face ongoing pressure to be apolitical, especially here in New Mexico. Why would anyone expect Native artists to not make political statements? What can artists do about this situation?

I come to my work as an artist from my position as an activist. I am unapologetic about making my work political. I recently read a quote from Ryan Red Corn (Osage) who stated that “We’re Indian... we’re political by default.” This idea resonated with me, and possibly with a whole generation of younger Native artists who grew up in the 1990s and 2000s. As a Michif artist, I operate for the most part outside the capitalist art market, making work that cannot be turned into a commodity.

My work comes from my specific position of being an activist and a socially engaged artist. My personal activist orientation has a multiple roots, one being my parents’ union activism, as well as my identity as a Native person. Our Nêhiyawêwin (Cree) cousins have a few ways to describe who we are as Michif people. This includes terms like Apitaw’kosisan and Otipemisiwak. The latter means “the people without bosses.” This has to do with our horizontal and egalitarian Michif social relations. Michif people have also been in multiple anti-colonial resurrections in both the United States and Canada. From Riel’s insurrections on the Canadian prairies to the Mica Bay Uprising in the Great Lakes to more contemporary Red Power movements, Michif people have always resisted outside control.

I take my identity as Otipemisiwak quite seriously. To be Otipemisiwak means that I must act in a certain activist and political manner. It isn’t coincidental that anarchist intellectual George Woodcock wrote an impressive biography of Michif guerrilla fighter Gabriel Dumont or that non-Native activists look toward the Northwest Rebellion as a significant anti-colonial uprising.

The last year has shown that Indigenous activism isn’t dead. Idle No More, a movement begun by four women in Saskatchewan, has become a global movement by and for Indigenous people. It shows that even a “non-political” round dance is a radical event. I would argue that Indigenous art, by its very existence, is political art. Whether our work is overtly political, as is much of my
work, or the political sentiments exist solely through articulations of “survivance,” Indigenous artists are all political.

**What new art and writing projects are you currently working on?**

I am in residence at the Santa Fe Art Institute and at MoCNA, working on new bicycles. I continue to do workshops. I recently made two mobile printing presses with Native and Latino youth on both sides of the Canada-US border. This project called *Dismantling the Illegitimate Border* looks at the violent history of the Canada-US border on Indigenous communities.

My most exciting project is *Michif–Michin*, an investigation of traditional medicinal practices in the Great Lakes. I am exhibiting an installation and artist’s publication for the Flint Public Art Project. Next summer, I will also be in residence at the Klondike Institute of Art and Culture and have a solo exhibition of this project. *Michif–Michin* includes the harvesting and collecting of medicines. I will travel and visit with knowledge-keepers, as well as make drawings, prints, video, installation, and various publications. This project is a form of decolonial knowledge-making, as my great-grandmother was known for her ability as a healer.

I am also doing a project looking at the Great Michigan Fire and Great Thumb Fire, two massive forest fires that swept across Michigan in 1881 and 1871, respectively. Caused by poor forest management and logging, these fire burned 2.5 million and 1 million acres each. They are indicative of the intimate relationship between ecological destruction, capitalism, and colonialism. I am doing a series of large-scale relief prints from old-growth timbers that were harvested during this period. I will also include time-based or performance practices, as well as creating drawings from the charcoal of the burnt timbers. Most of my new work is about the history and culture of Anishinaabewaki, the Indigenous Great Lakes region.

Finally, I have two book projects. One is on Indigenous perspectives in Xicano art and another interrogates Indigenous Aesthetics. Hopefully you will see those in print in the next year or two. Otherwise, I will just continue teaching, raising my daughters, visiting with elders, making art, being healthy, and trying to dismantle colonialism. In other words, living.

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