

In Conversation with Christi Belcourt

Discussant: Charlene K. Lau

Logline

Charlene K. Lau, an art historian, critic, and curator, discusses the panel In Conversation with Christi Belcourt featuring Christi Belcourt's talk with Riley Kucheran and Sage Paul. She focuses on Christi's work with camp Nimkii Aazhibikong, designing with brands like Valentino, and her collaborations with independent Indigenous designers.

Reclaiming Indigenous material cultures, sustainability, and collaboration serve as formative points in this conversation with Métis visual artist Christi Belcourt led by fashion scholar Riley Kucheran (Biigtigong Nishnaabeg) and Indigenous Fashion Arts Executive and Artistic Director Sage Paul (Denesuliné). Belcourt speaks to the importance of long-term, land-based cultural reclamation and on the acquisition and mastering of Indigenous skills and techniques to “carry foundational traditional arts forward.”¹ Kucheran mentions the necessity of working alongside the seasons according to Indigenous understanding (i.e. climate) rather than the constructed idea of seasonality in the fashion week system and its calendars. By allowing the real seasons to guide practices such as moose hunting, fishing, and hide tanning, Indigenous creation works with nature, instead of against it, founded upon the deep appreciation for what Mother Earth provides. In this way, the interconnectedness of Indigenous life to nature and land stewardship — taking care of and treating other living things such as animals, plant life, and other natural elements as kin — supports true sustainability.

What does respect for the land look like? Traditional Indigenous arts practices such as fish skin tanning, beadwork, and quill basketry all generate a holistic understanding of craft from gathering materials to creating the final piece. Belcourt describes how a moose might be shared across many families with no parts wasted. From using its bones for tools, hides for clothing and accessories, and its meat for food, a circular system of respect and waste reduction is inherent to Indigenous everyday life across nations on Turtle Island. Today, this Indigenous philosophy

actively resists colonialist and capitalist industrialization, which has mercilessly exploited humans and natural resources, irreparably causing harm to the earth and its inhabitants. Beyond this, conscious and ethical sourcing of materials: where they come from, how they are gleaned and who has supplied them, remains tantamount to maintaining Indigenous fashion sovereignty. Belcourt provides the example of “rip-off” printed fabrics that have the appearance of Indigenous beadwork and are sold to Indigenous creators for ribbon dresses and regalia through commercial channels. The designer of these patterns is, in fact, a white woman residing in the midwestern United States, appropriating these culturally specific and important forms for profit without the benefit to the Indigenous communities from which the designs have been thieved. To ensure Indigenous authorship in such cases, awareness is integral at every step of the process leading to production and distribution.

Throughout the conversation, Belcourt insists upon the usefulness of technology — in both its conventional definition as the application of inventions or knowledge in daily life, but also in its contemporary understanding as digital innovation. Quoting the words of Métis historian Sherry Farrell-Racette, she reminds the audience that while techniques used in making Indigenous dress have been historicized, Métis fashions were always on the cutting edge of technology.

Contemporary Indigenous fashion designers now have new, digital technologies to manufacture their work independently, especially with on-demand, custom digital printing with websites like Spoonflower. Belcourt uses this online service to produce small batches of her

¹ Christi Belcourt. “In Conversation with Christi Belcourt,” led by Riley Kucheran and Sage Paul, Indigenous Fashion Arts, November 20, 2020, video, 58:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJeAyBDBx84>.

designs with less waste, and to sell her fabrics directly to makers. She also discusses the complexities of sustainable production, in which designers must balance the ethics of sourcing materials such as organic cotton abroad — which may poison local waterways — as compared to more ethically printed and locally produced non-biodegradable textiles. In all this, the artist can take back their power through regaining agency in the manufacturing and distribution of their work.

Much emphasis has been placed on Belcourt's collaboration with the Italian luxury designer Valentino in which her large-scale painting *Water Song* (2010–2011) was used as inspiration for floral embroidery and prints for the fashion house's Resort 2016 Collection. Coming full circle, Belcourt notes that her "...art comes from a tradition of fashion, it comes from a tradition of clothing. It's just been transferred to canvas and now it's been transferred back to fashion."² She highlights the idea of giving back to the community in her decision to donate the proceeds of the Valentino partnership to the Onaman Collective, her non-profit organization for youth that promotes Indigenous knowledge sharing through arts and language revitalization.

But despite the high-profile nature of her work with Valentino, she encourages smaller scale collaborations between Indigenous designers. In the current fashion climate of multinational conglomerates, where powerhouse co-branding collaborations proliferate (Balenciaga x Gucci is one example), Belcourt's call to action to support grassroots initiatives resists capitalist and Western individualism. More than ever, intra-Indigenous collaboration sustains Indigenous arts

and culture, maintaining and expanding various inherited knowledges and skills as a result. This type of interconnectedness between one another pervades other ways of making work. As Paul suggests, labels like "artist," "artisan," "designer," or "hobbyist" turn into siloed categories that prevent organic cross-pollination between so-called fine arts, craft, and design. A definition of the creative self must be multifaceted and must not box oneself into one way of working. Rather, cultural production must remain as fluid, plural, and heterogeneous as the ideas that inspire it, therefore pushing against borders determined by Euro-centric categories.

Throughout the discussion, it prevails that Indigenous fashion design and arts have always integrated new technologies and sustainability, while adapting to seasonal availability. Fashion, then, must take on true seasonality and a holistic approach to cultivate and maintain Indigenous creative production and livelihood. A sustainable fashion system for Indigenous designers reaffirms the re-Indigenization of these lands, working with Mother Earth as a guide by recentering matrilineal nature over capitalist patriarchy. As a form of sharing, intergenerational and Indigenous-led collaboration elevates ancestral knowledges and returns to the roots of colonized lands across global cultures. Furthermore, the amplification of Indigenous worldviews is vital not only to fashion, but also for the greater good. Understanding the interconnectedness of land and its people as relatives reclaims Indigenous material and visual cultures. Working respectfully in these ways will further ensure Indigenous fashion sovereignty today, and in the future, generating new pathways while preserving long-held traditions.

² Belcourt, "In Conversation with Christi Belcourt."

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Belcourt, Christi. "In Conversation with Christi Belcourt," Conversation with Riley Kucheran and Sage Paul, Indigenous Fashion Arts, November 20, 2020. Video, 58:33. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJeAyBDBx84>.



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Her research interests include the historical and contemporary avant-garde in art and fashion, the Gesamtkunstwerk, time-based media, and transgression. She has held fellowships at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity; Parsons School of Design, The New School; and Performa Biennial, and has taught at Parsons School of Design, OCAD University, Toronto Metropolitan University, Western University, and York University. Her scholarly work has been published in the anthologies *The Routledge Companion to Fashion Studies* (2021), *Visual Typologies from the Early Modern to the Contemporary: Local Contexts and Global Practices* (Routledge, 2018), and the journals *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*, *Fashion Theory*, and the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*. She has written art criticism for *Artforum*, *TheAtlantic.com*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Canadian Art*, and *frieze*, among others.

DISCUSSANT CITATION

Lau, Charlene K. "Discussant: In Conversation with Christi Belcourt." *Fashioning Resurgence*, special issue of *Fashion Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2022, pp. 1-6, <https://www.fashion-studies.ca/discussant-in-conversation-with-christi-belcourt>, <https://doi.org/10.38055/FR010109>.

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ISSN 2371-3453

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