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Métis artist Justine Proulx with one of her murals at Louis Riel Arts and Technology Centre. Proulx has completed more than 16 large paintings across several schools and has three more murals in the works.

Métis artist brings Indigenous culture to school walls

Murals make art of healing

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LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

BLANK school walls and human skin are common canvases for Métis artist Justine Proulx.

When the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily closed her tattoo studio, the Winnipeg creative found herself searching for distractions to idle away time.

Little did the tattooist know in 2020, after accepting an offer to paint a mural for her mother's empty Indigenous studies classroom, she had stumbled into a new line of work.

Proulx's talents for mural design and execution quickly spread through word of mouth among school leaders and their communities. She has since completed 15 large paintings between Collège Miles Macdonell Collegiate, École Provencher and other locations — and has a wait-list for her work.

"It's definitely been a little overwhelming, but in a good sense," said the artist, who finds inspiration in her Métis, Cree and Ojibwa ancestry. "It's surreal, for someone to just give me money and a whole wall and just be like: 'Here you go.'"

Growing demand for her paintings recently prompted the 26-year-old to leave a full-time job at a popular downtown tattoo shop so she can better balance her tattooing and mural-making careers.

Proulx uses bright colours, bold outlines and natural subjects in her murals, but she considers her work to be more simplistic and literal than textbook examples of Woodland art. She often features animals and flowers that resemble traditional Métis floral beadwork patterns.

Proulx recently unveiled her latest creation in honour of the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, a painting decorated on a roughly 10-foot by 14-foot stretch of wall inside a local vocational high school.

It was a deeply emotional project, she said, adding she felt "the weight of (the subject)" from start to finish; it usually takes Proulx two days to come up with a first draft, but she spent three weeks brainstorming her concept.

The final artwork depicts a woman who is releasing black birds into the wind (a symbol of letting go of trauma), and a child holding a white bird beside her. There are colourful feathers, many of them orange, scattered throughout the sky. "Every Child Matters" is written in all capital letters in the bottom right corner.

Overall, the colour palette nods to the Orange Shirt Day movement created by



Proulx has painted 12 murals in Louis Riel Arts and Technology Centre.

Phyllis Webstad, who was stripped of a new orange shirt her grandmother had given her for her first day at residential school.

Proulx said she chose to paint the child in red-coloured clothing to both acknowledge the belief that Indigenous spirits can only see that hue and the ongoing Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls crisis.

"I want to bring Indigenous culture to places where it (once) wasn't a thing, wasn't allowed... Indigenous identity, especially in residential schools, was stripped from these children. They weren't allowed to bring anything from home — like their clothes, toys, even books, anything. For a lot of Indigenous people that have been in schools, schools are traumatic," she said.

"By putting that culture back into schools, it's doing a lot of healing."

Proulx said she wants to invoke reflection from passersby, in addition to creating beautiful artwork that brightens spaces and serves as physical representations of Indigenous creativity.

Not long after finishing her first mural for the Louis Riel Arts and Technology Centre, she started receiving feedback from Indigenous students who said they had never seen anything like it.

Principal Brian Cameron said Proulx, a 2015 graduate of the school's hairstyling program, was the perfect person to take on a mission to make the building, which is named after a Métis leader, more welcoming last year.

With mental health and well-being top of mind following the height of the pandemic, Cameron and his colleagues began discussing how they could make improvements to the school environment — which he said felt "sterile," due to its nearly universal white walls.

"There's a different feel of the building because of the paintings and that's what we were looking for," Cameron said, adding he believes the graduate's artistry is one of the best things that has ever happened to the building.

The high school is home to 12 of Proulx's murals, located in hallways,



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Proulx recently unveiled her latest mural in honour of the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.

offices and the basement, and the principal said he continues to search for funding opportunities so more can be installed.

The price tag of a mural varies, depending on factors including the size and surface of a wall, and the hours spent on it.

Over the summer, Proulx spent more than 70 hours working on a painting that encompasses all of the Seven Sacred Teachings on a brick canvas that was wrapped around two staircases at Collège Béliveau. She used 10 litres of paint and climbed countless steps as she worked.

Despite how sore her body is after completing a piece, Proulx said she feels immense gratitude to be able to make a living as an artist. She credits her dad for always encouraging her to draw.

The up-and-coming artist has three murals in the queue, with a school-related project scheduled to start at École Howden next month.

"I sometimes can't believe that it's happening to me," she said, "because I never thought that someone would care this much (about my art)."

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