

ANCESTORS KNOW WHO WE ARE

INTERVIEW WITH MONICA RICKERT-BOLTER

Audio Description: The speaker sits in an art studio.

Interviewer: Tell us about yourself.

Monica Rickert-Bolter: I'm Monica Rickert-Bolter. I am Prairie Band Potawatomi, Black, and German. I grew up in Michigan and didn't have the best time. I moved to Chicago and came here for school and also didn't have the best time, [laughs] but it kept me here. I did fall in love with the city. Michigan raised me, but Chicago shaped me.

Interviewer: How does your background influence your art?

Monica Rickert-Bolter: A lot of my artwork is about identity, and usually what I focus on in any sort of character development is usually unique characters or people that you don't always hear [their] stories. So I really like to give attention, bring light—light and life—to those characters and their storylines. And my other elements, I like to incorporate certain patterns, stuff I saw my mom drawing when I was growing up. She's Black. She never considers herself an artist but whenever she was on the phone, she would always doodle. That's really neat. How does she come up with those? [laughs] So I sometimes mimic some of that. My brother also is an artist. He would do something with the faces where you just kind of leave out certain facial features, and that always stuck with me because it really got more to the essence and core of who these people are as individuals. Kind of bringing up the soul. So kind of give a little nod to him. And my Native side, I mean, there's just so much beautiful beadwork that when I do my dry pastels I kind of try to mimic, because I don't bead at all. I'm like, no, no, I don't have patience. And last time I beaded, the beads went everywhere, so you don't want that. [laughs] But I love the floral patterns and I love the appliqué and try to incorporate that into a lot of my artwork. Of course, you're going to see turtles everywhere. [laughs] I love turtles so much. They're wonderful.

Interviewer: Who inspires you?

Monica Rickert-Bolter: A lot of my inspiration actually comes from my mom. I love her to death. We don't always agree on everything [laughs] and that's okay and we come to terms with that, but she has been the one who has always believed in me and really just pushed me. "If that's how you're going to express yourself, I want you to keep doing that." Even when I was in college and I was starting to have some doubts or things weren't going as well as I thought they should be, she's like, "Well, you have to do something with art because that's just part of you." So she has been definitely one of my biggest supporters, and just that love I try to convey in the artwork, especially with the *Mothers Uplifting Daughters*.

Audio Description: A painting with a purple and white abstract background. Zig zagging across the painting are four female figures in purple. Each has squiggles of red, yellow and blue emitting from their hands as they support the next woman above them.

Monica Rickert-Bolter: That just made me think of my family line, just as far back as my great-great-grandma, who had a pretty interesting background. She definitely is African American, but she was about my skin tone, maybe a little darker, so it wasn't necessarily clear what happened, if that was something that happened during slavery or if she did get with a Native man—a Choctaw man. That side of the family would like to believe, but we don't have actual documentation so we can't say that officially. But, anyway, it was just her still going and keeping up the lineage and making sure that her daughter could do what she wanted to do and be her own person. It was just that support and love you just see that they keep pushing forward, so that's what I like to convey in, again, *Mothers Uplifting Daughters*.

Interviewer: Describe one of the artworks in the exhibition.

Monica Rickert-Bolter: So if you notice, there is kind of like a turtle shape with the heads rotating around and it kind of focuses on four distinct areas in my life.

Audio Description: Hair Stories. A round mandala style digital drawing with Native and African patterns in orange, red, purple, yellow and green. Silhouetted heads of Monica at different ages in each of the concentric circles. Near the center, as a bald toddler, then as a child with double pony tails. Then, older with long curly hair. Finally, older with short wavy hair.

Monica Rickert-Bolter: When I was a baby, all my hair on the top of my [head] fell off. [laughs] I was pretty bald on the sides and my mom was like, "Oh god." So she prayed for good hair, and I got a lot of hair after that. Then the next stage, I'm young, youngish, like four or five or whatever, and I wanted to have a lot of the same hairstyles as my cousins but because their hair was a whole different texture, sometimes my hairstyles didn't always work out and I didn't always feel like I necessarily fit in; however, my cousins are always like, "Oh, we love your hair. You have the best hair in the world," and I'm like, "You have the best hair. You get to style it and do all this fun stuff." And then when I got older, I kept just keeping it very long and have aunties fighting over it. "Don't cut it. Keep it long. Keep it natural. Don't do anything weird to it." I just didn't really know what to do with my hair until I got a little older. There is a Native tradition that somebody very close to you passes away that you honor them by cutting your hair, and that is something that I really liked. So I've done that at least seven times now over my adulthood and, unfortunately, that means a lot of people have passed away on to the other side. So *Hair Stories* has an element of just—I don't know—morbidity, but I just still want to acknowledge that they're still very much tied to my life and their influence and how I present myself. So it's my way of kind of paying tribute to them.

Interviewer: What is your favorite medium and why?

Monica Rickert-Bolter: Well, originally it was charcoals. I love the feel. I love the texture, just the smoothness, and you can really build that form and really bring somebody alive. I remember one of my art teachers saying, "You should look into sculpting because you really got an idea for that feeling." I still haven't done it yet, but maybe I will this year. But recently I've been really into Adobe Illustrator and doing vector drawing. It's been wonderful. Once I learned how to use that pen tool, ha! I use it so much. It's beautiful what you can bring out with these characters. And then if you want repeating patterns or

just, you know, play around with ... okay, I got to lay this out because now I'm starting to learn how to work on bigger scales, because I really love dry pastels, so that was the closest I could get to charcoals but still have some color. I love working off of black artboard or black paper, as you could see.

Audio Description: She points to a large piece of black paper attached to the wall behind her.

Monica Rickert-Bolter: That's going to get filled with whatever. I'm not quite sure yet. It really makes you kind of focus on the highlights as opposed to the shadows, and that's why I really like working off of the dark, dark paper and then also amplifying those colors. They really pop that way.

Interviewer: Why do you create art?

Monica Rickert-Bolter: It's actually the easiest way for me to communicate. I am socially antisocial, [laughs] and I feel like I can express a lot more via my art. That being said, I also will touch on some pretty heavy matters. There is a commission I did recently about missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and two spirit. I have to be careful not to cry all over it because of the subject matter being so heavy; however, it came out to be something that was really vibrant and beautiful and really tried to showcase who these people are. They could be anybody. They could be all sorts of mixed identities, age groups. I really want to show the resiliency of these women that have experienced domestic violence. Unfortunately, I am among that statistic. Four out of five Indigenous women will have experienced some sort [of domestic violence], and I'm just grateful that I'm still here. I am able to create art. I did not let any of that break me or define who I am. I kept going. There is so much I guess you'd say darkness or just not necessarily great things that the world pushes out of you. So I'm always trying to bring in something that's a little bit more light, make it brighter, make it really find the goodness, even despite all of that darkness or when you feel alone or you feel like you need to come out and emerge from, whatever, inner cave or something. That is my idea of how I make my art and why I develop these characters and these storylines and you'll see a lot of smiles.

Interviewer: What memorable responses have you had to your work?

Monica Rickert-Bolter: I've seen a lot of people start crying, which I'm always I hope that's a good thing. But, generally, it definitely shows that it's hit them on another level or something that I wasn't necessarily intending. That was the emotional response that came across, and I'm hoping that my artwork affects people in different ways and helps them to feel inspired to know that despite any sort of heartache or other uncomfortable feelings you may feel or you may have to endure, that there is another way that it can be expressed. There's another way that we can move forward and just get a different perspective. That's just some of the things I kind of think about, and I'm hoping that more people are getting that from my art. I also just love making them smile, even when I get into certain messages that may be a little bit more difficult. I also like to do art that's just going to be fun. It can be fan art or things that will bring smiles to their faces. I love to read. I love illustrating characters and also doing something that even little kids of all ages can enjoy.

Interviewer: What does it mean to be Black and Native or Afro-Indigenous?

Monica Rickert-Bolter: It means a lot of things. Unfortunately, a lot of people are like oh, you're not Black or oh no, you're not Native enough or you have all these different experiences and it's not quite the narrative that other people think you should have or should not. But, regardless, I'm making my way through all of this and just being Monica and the best part of me, best version of me, and a lot of that is

just getting my artwork out there and telling my stories. I know I'm not that unique with my background, as there's a lot of BIPOC artists that actually got to be part of the show, and I'm just thrilled to be part of that.

Interviewer: What role can art play in society?

Monica Rickert-Bolter: I think that can help inspire and influence people in ways that they just don't necessarily ... because they're like oh, actually yeah, I did kind of make that decision because I did see something like that or that actually brightened my day and oh, the world is not as bleak as I thought it was going to be. So I think art has just always had that influence of how cultures move forward, how we can assess, "Oh, is this okay? Should we be looking at that?" or helps you question and process things. So whether that's through visual representation or music or dance, whatever art form it takes, it's something that can help and speak to a lot of different people in a lot of different ways, because there's not always just one way to communicate. Sometimes you need to have another representation and then that actually will cut through and speak to people. So I'm hoping that, especially during the pandemic, more people will see the need and the necessity for artists and the fact that people haven't been able to go out to concerts, hear things, hear that music and just be in that presence. I'm hoping that cities across the country are really going to start helping fund and support artists. We're already seeing some good things happen here in Chicago, so I'd like to see that continue.

Interviewer: What brings you joy?

Monica Rickert-Bolter: I went to animation school, so I'm a big nerd. We would watch cartoons a lot and I'm like, oh, I'm researching. You know, see how people would do these animations and everything. I love comic books and all of that, so you'll see a lot of that influence, as you can see. [laughs]

Audio Description: She shows off the image on her t-shirt. A drawing of bats hanging from a branch under a full moon.

Monica Rickert-Bolter: That is definitely something that brings me a lot of joy, and when I see even more diversity and representation in those realms, it's like, "Huh!" That just makes me very excited. So one day I would love to do an animation, even if that's bringing Freckles alive or working on a video game or something. That is something that inspires me and keeps me going and always just puts a smile right on my face. It's like, yes! And of course, turtles. [laughs]

Audio Description: Logo: National Museum of the American Indian. Smithsonian.