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Kent Monkman fills in the blanks in Canadian history

One of Canada's most acclaimed First Nations artists reads between the lines of our national mythology in Toronto show, in time for its 150th birthday.



At the Art Museum at U of T, Kent Monkman sits with his painting *The Scream*, about the removal of indigenous children from their families by the state, to be taken residential schools. On the walls are the decorated cradleboards, used for infants on reserve, and left behind when they were taken. Monkman's epic new exhibition is aimed at shedding light on dark corners of Canada's historical relationship with First Nations peoples. (MARCUS OLENIUK / TORONTO STAR) | [ORDER THIS PHOTO](#)

By **MURRAY WHYTE** Visual arts
Sun., Jan. 22, 2017

If you're at all acquainted with the work of Kent Monkman, who is Cree and one of Canada's best-known artists, you'd have little choice but to be just as familiar with Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, his drag-warrior avatar.

With her campy good humour, Miss Chief has always been Monkman's spoonful of sugar to help his vital medicine, of inserting First Nations stories into the narrow, politely official version of Canada, go down. Never has she been lost for words — until, that is, here and now.

About halfway into *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*, Monkman's epic revision of the history we upright colonials have hewed to as a nation of virtue, you arrive in a small gallery, walls painted black.

Nearby, a collection of cradleboards — rough-hewn wooden infant carriers, made for children while on reserve and left behind when they were taken away to residential school — sit in stony silence, ghostly emblems of how much was lost.

On the wall, two metres tall and almost three and a half wide, the dark history they evoke comes to vividly painted life: red-coated Mounties and robe-clad nuns and priests wrest native children of all ages from the desperate arms of their terrorized parents; black clouds gather above a prefab house. In the background, more children run for the woods, as though for their lives. Its title: *The Scream*, and there's nothing remotely funny about it.

Miss Chief, the narrator of the full sweep of Monkman's epic, had waxed naughtily poetic on the various disasters visited on her people by the interlopers: the decimation of the buffalo, the epidemic of urban violence. But here, she demurs. "This is the one I cannot talk about," reads the brief text, posted on a nearby wall. "The pain is too deep. We were never the same."

Just over a year ago, the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report on residential schools](#) tore open a seam in the fabric of our polite national mythology, just in time for its 150th anniversary.

Intentionally or not, the commission may have set the stage for a very different kind of anniversary, and for Monkman the moment is opportune. "It's a turning point for the country," he says. "All of this was whitewashed and it left generations of Canadians in the dark. How do we move forward as a society when the whole founding mythology is false, exclusive, one-sided?"

In 2014, Barbara Fischer, the Art Museum at the University of Toronto's director, contacted him to gauge his interest in a Canada 150 project. "There just wasn't anyone else, I thought, who had the capacity for tackling history the way Kent does," she said. "For me, it had to be his project."

Monkman, who has made a career of defying the privileged myopia of official histories, took to it without pause.

"When Barbara approached me, I said, 'This is what has to happen: it has to be a counter-narrative to all the celebration,'" said Monkman. "The polished image of the Canadian Mountie needed to be tarnished a little bit."

For the past three years, he's devoted almost all of his time to that cause. It's a national endeavour, spending the next three years traveling the country from sea to sea. But this week, it debuts here at home in Toronto, and preparations are complex and many.

One recent morning, Monkman stepped gingerly around the various crates and artifacts and sheafs of plastic wrap scattered throughout the multiple galleries where *Shame and Prejudice* was being installed. He arrived in a small, square space painted a deep hunter green. It was going to be red, Monkman explains, but the author and philosopher John Ralston Saul, who is writing an essay for the exhibition catalogue, told him that green was the colour of autocratic government here. "So I just said, 'Thank you!' and here we are," laughed Monkman, his good humour as intact as ever.

For maybe the first time, though, Monkman's wit is deployed sparingly, as counterweight, not at the fore. A little humour was needed to leaven the intensity, he allows — "at a certain point, you need to give the audience a break" — but *Shame and Prejudice*, above all, is a deadly serious endeavour.

The show unfolds in nine chapters, each told by Miss Chief, each conflating artifacts and history with his grand, sweeping paintings of revisions to the canon.

His absurdist view drifts in and out. In the chapter on Confederation, a naked Miss Chief arrives in the midst of Robert Harris's famously staid 1867 portrait *Fathers of Confederation*, demanding — naked and with champagne — her seat at the table as her ancestral land is carved into pieces.

Throughout, the absurd gives way to a different kind of outrage. In the chapter titled "Wards of the State/The Indian Problem" — the room painted authoritarian green — Monkman paints indigenous chiefs Big Bear and Poundmaker in chains in a government chamber, signing a treaty with founding prime minister John A. Macdonald. Reason (and leg irons) suggests a deal to which they could never have freely agreed. Here Monkman leaves no doubt: he titles the work *Subjugation of the Truth*.

Next to it, an authoritative official portrait of Macdonald hangs in the suddenly muddled context. Fiction bleeds deeper into fact: nearby, the artist has placed Poundmaker's actual moccasins, borrowed from the Museum of History in Ottawa. The obvious question, about whose stories they are to tell — and why — is the spectre that haunts the entire affair.

The artist is well-acquainted with such ghosts. Growing up in Winnipeg in the '70s, Monkman, 50, who is half English-Canadian and half-Cree from the Fish River band in northern Manitoba, found himself caught between two worlds. In "The Urban Rez," another chapter, Monkman's *Le Petit déjeuner sur l'herbe*, a dun-grey urban scene shows a seedy hotel on Winnipeg's Main St., littered with broken indigenous female forms rendered in deliberate Picasso-esque cubism.

It's stylized — Monkman's complaint with Modern art, and a good one, is its eagerness to erase history, particularly the ravages of colonialism — but also personal.

"I remember, as a kid, going to the Manitoba Museum and looking at tidy dioramas of Indians and then we would step outside and see *this*," he says, gesturing at the painting. "All the other kids in the class would just look at me and think, 'What is wrong with your people?' And I couldn't say, because I just didn't know."

A long, slow trickle has brought us closer to the truth: generations of a people raised in abuse, and without parents, can hardly be expected to build healthy communities, and *Shame and Prejudice* means to speed the trickle to a flood.

For Fischer, Monkman's canny juxtapositions do more than wobble the official histories he engages. "Think about the stories our museums tell: they tell a Christian narrative, a European narrative, that doesn't really take into account the last 200 years," she says. "What I think Kent is doing here is building the foundation for a new kind of museum."

Shame and Prejudice includes several installations. In one, a nativity scene Monkman calls it, a beleaguered native couple tend to the birth of Miss Chief — in the universe of *Shame and Prejudice*, the saviour of the piece — in her ramshackle manger; in another, an eerie, seven-metre-long dining table is decadently set with commemorative china celebrating the colonial triumph at one end and gradually devolving to squalor and bones — aboriginal people, left with the scraps — at the other.

But ultimately, *Shame and Prejudice* is a show about painting and how, over the centuries, it has captured and preserved an indelible, heroically official version of the sweep of human progress. In 2013, Monkman painted a grand landscape of a shimmering lake beneath a snowy mountain peak, Miss

Chief at an easel surrounded by naked, lissome young white men. A satirical queer-culture reversal of the European fetishization of the indigenous people they found here, the title is telling: [History Is Painted by the Victors](#). *History Is Painted by the Victors*.

It has been a highly selective view: artists employed by the powerful, from monarchs to prime ministers to presidents to chiefs of industry, to tell their stories as they wanted them to be told. However subjective, they resonate with authority. They don't call them history paintings for no reason — see: Velazquez and David, Delacroix and Caravaggio and so many others —and their service to the powerful, naturally, left large swaths of inconvenient truth on the cutting-room floor.

That's as true of colonial Canada as anywhere else and, for Monkman, *Shame and Prejudice* became a matter of not only annotating those heroic tales, but meeting them toe to toe.

"History is a narrative; it's a collection of stories sanctioned by the ruling power, and reinforced through words and images that suit them," he says. "That was the whole point of taking on history painting: to authorize these moments that have been swept under the rug for generations."

In each chapter, his paintings are outfitted with gilded frames, the better to both mock the grandiosity of history paintings' presumptive exclusions and to meet it on its own terms. It's a bleak and affecting reversal. There is nothing grandiose about Monkman's scenes: *Death of a Virgin (After Caravaggio)*, in the exhibition's opening chapter, a young indigenous woman lies dying in a hospital bed, attended to by her family burning sweetgrass and enacting ceremony; in *Struggle for Balance*, an SUV billows thick black smoke as it burns in the street in front of an ill-tended house, as indigenous youth do battle with police.

These, too, are our history and our present, Monkman says, and there is no heroism here. But there is resilience, a persistence, to go on. And finally, it's time for those stories to be woven into the national fabric for good.

"You look at history paintings and they've been shown for hundreds of years," Monkman says. "And they'll be shown 150 years from now. The question for me is, what will they be shown with? This is part of our history. And it needs to endure."

Shame and Prejudice opens Thursday, Jan. 26 at the Art Museum, 15 King's College Circle, University of Toronto, and continues to March 4.