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## 'Shame and Prejudice' explores historical treatment of Canada's indigenous peoples



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Cree artist Kent Monkman poses for a photograph at his new exhibition "Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience" in Toronto on Wednesday, January 18, 2017. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Nathan Denette

**TORONTO — With celebrations underway for Canada's sesquicentennial, Kent Monkman is focusing a critical lens on the country's treatment of indigenous peoples over the last 150 years.**

Monkman, who is of Cree ancestry, was approached more than two years ago by University of Toronto Art Centre director Barbara Fisher to create an exhibition reflective of the indigenous

experience during that period.

The Winnipeg-raised artist realized that that stretch of time extended back to the mid-19th century and ran parallel to the modern art period. Monkman looked to explore the representation — or lack thereof — of Canada's indigenous peoples and their stories in museums.

"I grew up going to museums like the Manitoba Museum, and some of my work reflects on how museums represent indigenous people as static cultures with dioramas kind of frozen in time."

"Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience" opens Wednesday at the Art Museum of the University of Toronto before embarking on a three-year tour of galleries across Canada. The title is a play on Jane Austen's classic novel "Pride and Prejudice," with Monkman's time-travelling alter ego, Miss Chief, acting as narrator.

"I sort of saw her in this period of our history as being like the Bennet sisters in the Austen novel who are trying to marry well or improve their lot in life," said Monkman. "Miss Chief narrates this entire exhibition through her voice as if she's trying to improve not only her life but the lives of her community.

"The last 150 years have been very harsh to indigenous people," he added. "I wanted to have a strong title that Canadians could reflect on as they're celebrating the birthday of this country, (that) they're really thinking about what happened to indigenous people in this last 150 years."

Several works are also drawn from Monkman's "Urban Res" series that speak to the experience of indigenous people living in cities, where a large percentage now reside.

"Modernity was a period of fracturing off from traditional approaches and various traditions, and when those values of rejecting tradition applied to indigenous people in North America, they had a decimating effect," said Monkman.

"Indigenous people weren't looking to lose their traditions or languages, but yet this is what happened through various policies of the Canadian government, residential schools and so forth. So, the fact that I'm showing indigenous people living in cities, it's to refute this idea that indigenous people don't exist in the present."

Monkman serves as both creative force and curator of "Shame and Prejudice," and visited museums across Canada for inspiration and to gather vital artifacts.

In his journey, key themes emerged as Monkman focused on significant events and Canadian government policies and examined their lasting impact on indigenous peoples.

A striking installation at the entryway of "Shame and Prejudice" reminiscent of the nativity scene is

based on a Northern Renaissance painting by Petrus Christus. Monkman said the large-scale piece speaks to the poor housing and developing-world conditions on many reserves, and serves to foreshadow the removal of children represented elsewhere in the exhibition.

Monkman also makes a point of using his own head on all figure sculptures in his installations to comment on what he sees as the "reductive nature" of how indigenous people are represented in North American museums.

"A lot of my work over the last 20 years has been dealing with the themes of colonization, the impact of the church and the state on indigenous peoples," said Monkman. "To have an opportunity to create a body of work to bring together these themes and many of these events that affected indigenous people in one umbrella exhibition was a very powerful thing.

"As an artist, I work instinctively, and I follow my heart and my mind, and I bring the two together hopefully to create work that can transcend some of these painful episodes.

"I think that's what art is here for ... that we use our creative abilities to move people with artworks that transcend and create understanding."

"Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience" will be on display at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto until March 4, and will travel to the Glenbow Museum in Calgary in June.

In 2018, the exhibition will visit the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ont., the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in Halifax and the Confederation Art Centre in Charlottetown. Stops are slated in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Montreal and Owen Sound, Ont., through to 2020.

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