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Kent Monkman

Using a virtuoso style partly based on the 19th century American Hudson River School painters, Kent Monkman's work slyly, and often humourously, critiques the way Canadians have treated and depicted Indigenous peoples.



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Kent Monkman, artist, filmmaker (born 13 November 1965 in St Marys, ON). Often addressing issues pertaining to both gay and Indigenous history, Kent Monkman is among the most skilled and successful artists of his generation.

Early Life and Education

Kent Monkman is a member of the Fish River Band in northern Manitoba. Of Swampy Cree, English and Irish descent, he was born in Ontario and raised in Manitoba, primarily in Winnipeg, as well as on various reserves in northern Manitoba. He was drawn to artmaking at an early age, and at 17 began to study illustration through a commercial art program at Sheridan College of Applied Arts in Brampton, ON. He subsequently

attended various other Canadian and US institutions, including the Banff Centre, the Sundance Institute in Los Angeles and the Canadian Screen Training Institute. Later, he worked as a set and costume designer for theatrical productions in Toronto, eventually turning exclusively to artmaking. Working with traditional painting technique, along with performance, film and installation, Monkman explores aspects of his Indigenous heritage. Through appropriations of conventional Canadian history painting, flavoured with overt, often saucy homoerotic imagery, Monkman's paintings create a critique of the traditional way that this country's history has been recorded.

Influences

As a child growing up in Manitoba, Monkman was strongly affected by a sense of alienation from his Indigenous cultural traditions and by the general feelings of dispossession that are shared by Indigenous peoples living in larger Canadian urban environments. For his art, he found himself drawn to nineteenth century, romantic depictions of North American landscape painting by artists such as Edward Church, Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt. In particular, he was interested in the way that early Canadian artists such as Cornelius Krieghoff, Paul Kane and Peter Rindisbacher romanticized and idealized their depictions of Indigenous life and culture, while at the same time presenting the post-contact inhabitants of Canada as exotic specimens of a dwindling species.

A major early influence was the American painter and journalist George Caitlin, who made a career of painting beautiful, often very sympathetic portraits of Aboriginal Americans, but who, like most Europeans, saw the original inhabitants of North, Central and South America as a disappearing race in need of scientific study and as subjects for visual record. In addition to painting his subjects, Caitlin collected Aboriginal artefacts for display in his "Indian Gallery" in Philadelphia, and would even bring Aboriginal men and women to his exhibitions to stage dance performances, ostensibly in order to showcase what were presented as authentic demonstrations of their dying heritage.

Mature Work

Monkman has continued to mine the conventions of the romantic art of nineteenth century America, but although he makes direct appropriation of historical Canadian landscape and narrative imagery, his art is not an assimilation or development of that earlier tradition. Rather, the artist uses close re-creation of earlier artworks as an opportunity for ironic, often humorous representation of historical attitudes towards Indigenous culture, attitudes that persist today. With his art, he assumes a traditional Indigenous persona, that of the trickster, to subvert the viewer's expectations, creating visually lush, often mural-sized paintings that present oddly inverted narratives of Aboriginal/white interactions.

Of particular interest for Monkman is the depiction of homosexuality, which he sees as something accepted, even valued, in First Nations culture, but which he believes was pushed into the shadows by white prudery and the oppressive effect of Judeo-Christian beliefs. Depictions of Aboriginal and white males interacting in elaborate tableaux are designed to first shock, and then gently nudge the viewer into an awareness of the humorous irony of white expectations of cultural dominance. In his 2010 touring exhibition, *The Triumph of Mischief*, for example, Monkman combined large-scale, faux history-paintings depicting scenes of amorous

encounters between “cowboys and Indians,” with film,

photography and theatrical performance and featuring the starring character a “gay, crossdresser, two-spirited fan of Louis Vuitton,” that he had puningly named Miss Chief Eagle Testicle. Miss Chief assumed the role of ringmaster of an elaborate and flamboyantly whirling circus that lambasts conventional myths of Aboriginal and white cultural contact.

Kent Monkman has achieved international recognition for his colourful and richly detailed combining of disparate genre conventions and also for his clever recasting of historical narratives. What is notable about Monkman’s approach to his art is his tendency to rely on humour in his paintings and installations in order to get his message across, without preaching or scolding. The effectiveness of his method is evident in his wide acceptance.

Kent Monkman’s works have been shown extensively throughout Canada, the US and in Europe. He has been featured in numerous group exhibitions and in solo exhibitions at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts , the Winnipeg Art Gallery , the Art Gallery of Hamilton, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection , and the Royal Ontario Museum . His film and video works have been presented at the 2007 and 2008 Berlinales in Berlin, and at the Toronto International Film Festival (2007). He is represented in numerous Canadian and international public collections, including those of the National Gallery of Canada , the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the Glenbow Museum , the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art in Calgary, the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. (See also Indigenous Art and Contemporary Trends in Canadian Art .

Canada 150

On January 26, 2017, *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*, Kent Monkman’s attempt as both a curator and artist to address the past 150 years of Canadian history before Confederation, opened at the University of Toronto Art Centre. The exhibit’s historically significant objects and works of art, including paintings by Robert Harris and Paul Kane, as well as large scale, realistic paintings by Monkman depicting, and more often than not critiquing, real or imagined events in Canada from the present back 150 years and more. One of the exhibits centerpieces, *The Daddies* (2016), a version of Robert Harris’ legendary *Fathers of Confederation* (1884), which was destroyed in the fire that consumed the Parliament Building in 1916, but this time the participants in the Charlottetown Conference are arranged in a semi-circle around a naked Indigenous man in high heels, none other than Monkman’s performance alter-ego Miss Chief Eagle Testicle. The exhibit will tour Canada until 2020, with stops in Kingston, Charlottetown, Halifax, Montréal, Winnipeg and Vancouver.