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Monday, 20 February 2017

THE SCREAM AND THE SWING, SUBJUGATION AND STRENGTH: SHAME AND PREJUDICE: A STORY OF RESILIENCE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO ART MUSEUM

EXHIBITION REVIEW

BY: SADIE MACDONALD

Emily Welsh mentioned The University of Toronto Art Museum's latest exhibit *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience* in a January "What's Happening Wednesday" column, so here I am to tell you just what is happening in this exhibition, and to convince you to see it if you haven't already... because really, you ought to see it.

Kent Monkman, a Canadian artist of Cree and Irish heritage and a member of the Fish River band of Northern Manitoba, is the mastermind behind this exhibition. Created as a "Canada 150" project, *Shame and Prejudice* portrays Indigenous experiences of the past 150 years. These stories of devastation and deliberate destruction by the Canadian state, and the "resiliency and strength" of the Indigenous people who withstood it, are influenced by Monkman's personal experiences and told in memoir format by Miss Chief Eagle Testickle.



Miss Chief Eagle Testickle in front of the Fathers of Confederation. *The Daddies*, Kent Monkman, 2016. Collection of Christine Armstrong and Irfhan Rawji. Photo Credit: Sadie MacDonald

Miss Chief is an alter-ego created by Monkman, and he has often dressed as her and depicted her in his paintings. With her flamboyant poses, high heels, and, often, a whip in hand, she uses sexuality and campy humour to make a point. Miss Chief is a symbol of Monkman's Two-Spirit identity and a representation of Indigenous empowerment against colonial control. As Monkman puts it, Miss Chief "embodies the flawed and playful trickster spirit, teasing out the truths behind false histories and cruel experiences." In this exhibition, she is the narrator and frequently a subject as she recalls Indigenous experiences of Canada.

The exhibition is organized by sections according to themes such as "STARVATION," "INCARCERATION," and "URBAN REZ," though those themes are not numbered in chronological order. Works include installations and acrylic paintings by Monkman as well as



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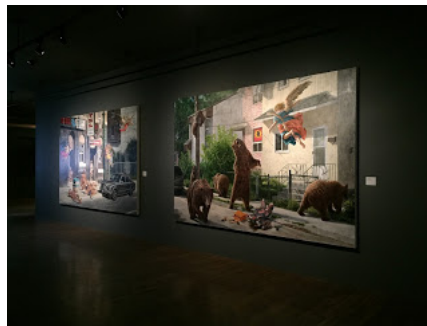


historical paintings, documents, and other objects, which create a sense of reiteration and juxtaposition. For example, one room has historical works such as period paintings of John A. Macdonald and Wilfrid Laurier, a reproduction of Treaty 7, and Pihtokahanapiwiyin's moccasins, which are situated alongside Monkman's paintings *The Subjugation of Truth* and *A Country Wife*. The historical and modern styles appear to blend seamlessly at first glance, but a closer look at *The Subjugation of Truth* reveals anachronistic participants from the government, clergy, and RCMP forcing a grim-faced Pihtokahanapiwiyin and Mistahimaskwa to sign a treaty; in *A Country Wife*, mascara runs from the eyes of Macdonald's wife.



A wall in the "WARDS OF THE STATE / THE INDIAN PROBLEM" section of the exhibition. Kent Monkman's *The Subjugation of Truth*, 2016, is shown in the middle. Photo Credit: Sadie MacDonald.

Monkman's paintings are large, making close inspection necessary. Viewers are able to get close to the art, and the details are then slowly yet startlingly revealed. Monkman's immense landscapes are evocative of the romantic ideal of the sublime and pastoral scenes in nineteenth-century European art. He employs the characteristics of Western art as well as direct references to specific works, such as *The Swing* by Jean-Honoré Fragonard. These trappings are ultimately subverted by the details within.



Left: *Le Petit déjeuner sur l'herbe*, Kent Monkman, 2014. Right: *Bad Medicine*, Kent Monkman, 2014. Photo Credit: Sadie MacDonald.

Bad Medicine, the painting with the bears shown above to the right, has some disturbing details upon closer glance.



Detail, *Bad Medicine*, Kent Monkman, 2014. Photo Credit: Sadie MacDonald.

Here is a close-up of one such detail. A Picasso-esque woman is sprawled on the ground as a bear towers over her, the contents of her purse spilling onto the sidewalk. Among the contents are bear repellent, a container of pills, and a bottle of alcohol.



Starvation Plates, Kent Monkman, 2017. Photo Credit: Sadie MacDonald

Monkman bluntly explores the uncomfortable and unjust history of Canadian colonization. This table is in one of the last rooms of the exhibition. Under glass is a setting of European fine dining on top of commemorative plates, while the end of the table is uncovered and littered with animal bones. Here, plates created by Monkman depict photographs of the mass killing of buffalo. This installation shows that the spoils of colonialism created a feast for white Canadian colonizers, while their extermination of the plains buffalo left Indigenous people with scraps – and no seat at the table.

In a series of raw and painful remembrances, I found the most heartbreaking segment to be “FORCIBLE TRANSFER OF CHILDREN”, which focuses on the removal of Indigenous children under the residential school system. This section has its own room within the gallery. Dominating the room is a large painting entitled *The Scream*, which depicts Indigenous children being taken away by members of the clergy and the RCMP while their mothers resist and desperately fight to hold onto their children. Historical cradleboard baby carriers line the wall on either side of the painting, though some spaces on the wall are taken up by industrial-looking skeletons of baby carriers, or chalk outlines in place of a carrier. Even Miss Chief’s interpretive panel can’t bear to go into detail here: “The pain is too deep.”



The Scream, Kent Monkman, 2016. Photo Credit: Sadie MacDonald.

Yet through such pain, Indigenous strength shines through in the exhibition. Reminders of the determined courage and endurance of Indigenous people create a narrative thread throughout Miss Chief Eagle Testickle’s memoirs. She herself appears often as a symbol of reclamation and a rallying cry to her people. As she puts it: “The others cannot see our magic, they try to tell us it is not there, but they do not understand the power of Miss Chief and they sorely underestimate the resilience of our people.”

Shame and Prejudice is uninhibited, unsettling, and utterly remarkable. Monkman’s art provides a voice that is very much needed during our Canada 150 celebrations this year. *Shame and Prejudice* will be at the University of Toronto Art Museum until March 4 and will then go on tour around Canada (including to my home province at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia!). If you get the chance to see it, please do.

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