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Kent Monkman: Our Shame, Our Prejudice, Their Resilience

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I have just experienced Kent Monkman’s show at the University of Toronto Art Museum, a series of paintings, textual passages and installations proposing something quite ambitious. As he observed in the Foreword (in a little brochure I picked up as I entered the exhibit):

“I could not think of any history paintings that conveyed or authorized Indigenous experience into the canon of art history. Where were the paintings from the nineteenth century that recounted, with passion and empathy, the dispossession, starvation, incarceration and genocide of Indigenous people here on Turtle Island?”

Coincidentally I read something on social media today, [Jesse Wente’s call](#) to make Canada’s 150th Anniversary meaningful, by including the stories of Indigenous peoples and not just the European conquerors.

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Kent Monkman Death of The Virgin (After Caravaggio) 2016. Acrylic on canvas. 183 X 130cm.

Reality is made from a series of assumptions. What if your reality requires you to deny truths that, were we to face them, might leave us unhinged? Richard Wagner famously suggested that anyone seeing a good performance of his *Tristan und Isolde* should leave the theatre mad. As I walked around in this overpowering show, listening to at least one person say they couldn't take it anymore, I wondered. Are we – that is, the descendants of Europeans—lying to ourselves, denying what really happened? These paintings should be upsetting, should strip away the false pretense.

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It's as though you're up on a bridge and suddenly walking on a glass floor, seeing how far you might fall, that maybe there's really nothing under you.

I went to this show with a quaint idea. I'd seen [Kanatha/Canada: First Encounters](#) earlier in February, David Fallis's marvelous collaboration between western & indigenous musicians re-creating an intercultural peace conference from over 300 years ago: when the Europeans had not yet subjugated local populations, when a dignified relationship was still possible. Tonight it's his partner's turn as Alison Mackay premieres her latest multi-media concert with Tafelmusik, namely [Visions & Voyages: Canada 1663- 1763](#). I wanted to insert something edgy into the mix, knowing that Monkman's art pulls no punches. Since November 2016 I have an endless appetite for political art & commentary: or so I thought.

But I have no handy analogy or conceptual pigeonhole for Monkman's art. A sensitive person should be squirming, disturbed, upset. This is a reminder of a holocaust, yet we walk about in the midst of their Auschwitzes (to make a crude analogy), blindly ignoring their traumas or paying lip service at best. I mentioned Wagner because this show left me feeling unhinged from reality. I was reminded a little bit of the catharsis I felt at the end of *Go Home Star*, the ballet from Royal Winnipeg Ballet that [I saw about a year ago](#) when they set fire to the residential school. And I am now recalling that they had counselors present for those who might be traumatized by the work. Of course as a Canadian with a European background, I was intrigued but had no trauma.

Or maybe I've been sleep-walking.

In Monkman's show there's a painting –one of the most tranquil and even utopian—titled “Reincarceration” (2013). It's several things at once. In the furthest background I am pretty sure there's a residential school, given that it's the same shape of building we saw on the ballet stage. Figures emerge from the distance, who cross the water in the foreground, and join a dance circle.

Monkman's project is no delicate dance however. Prepare to encounter the history of his peoples as seen in juxtaposition with our collective unconscious, the inherited storehouse of images from western art, parodied and turned on their head. I like his sense of humour although I didn't laugh once. Speaking as someone who has spent a lot of time in church, I feel as though I'm more in touch with reality after seeing this show.

There are several huge canvases, including one room that is overpowering in its imagery.

The title of the show is “Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience”. While it's true that the residential schools induced shame in the inmates, the shame I speak of is mine, ours as Canadians. We may have had the TRC, but our truth isn't yet faced, the reconciliation is barely begun. I'm grateful to Monkman aka Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, for offering the occasional laugh along the way.

“Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience” runs just until March 5th. For a Sesquicentennial that is truthful, don't miss this [show](#).

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Here's the show's [brochure](#).

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