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Kent Monkman Confronts History

by Paul Gessell

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Kent Monkman, "The Daddies," 2016 acrylic on canvas, 60" x 112.5"

Miss Chief Eagle Testickle usually struts across Kent Monkman's canvases in her spike heels fearlessly battling – and ravishing – cowboys, settlers and Mounties. Monkman's campy, cross-dressing alter ego has been given additional duties for the Toronto artist's travelling exhibition, *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*, on view at Calgary's Glenbow Museum until Sept. 10. Miss Chief is

the exhibition narrator and snippets from her “memoirs” are posted on gallery walls.

“I am the light, the two-spirited gentle man and fierce woman,” Miss Chief tells viewers rather immodestly.

Miss Chief still stars in some paintings, notably *The Daddies*, wearing only heels as she boldly confronts the Fathers of Confederation, demanding a seat at the table during their 1864 talks in Charlottetown. But later in the exhibition, another issue halts and silences the audacious Miss Chief – residential schools.



Kent Monkman, "The Scream," 2017 acrylic on canvas, 84" x 132"

Monkman tells the story in anguished paintings of priests, nuns and Mounties prying frightened youngsters from the arms of their distraught parents. Miss Chief is nowhere to be seen in those paintings.

“This is the one I cannot talk about,” Miss Chief says. “The pain is too deep. We were never the same.”

Humour has always played a big role in Monkman’s oeuvre, whether in paintings, video or installation. That is often accomplished through the antics of the flamboyant Miss Chief – a stark contrast to Monkman’s own serious public persona.



Kent Monkman, "The Massacre of the Innocents," 2015 acrylic on canvas, 72" X 102"

In the exhibition *Shame and Prejudice*, many grim paintings deal with the starvation, incarceration and murder of indigenous people since the arrival of Europeans. Monkman tries to balance "the darker side" with the text panels quoting the irreverent memoirs of Miss Chief. But Monkman has found there is a line his humour – Miss Chief's humour – cannot cross.

"I'm pretty careful about where the humour appears," Monkman said in an interview prior to the Glenbow opening. "There is obviously a time and place for it."

Of Cree and Irish ancestry, Monkman was raised in Winnipeg. He did not attend a residential school, but lived with a grandmother who did. And she, like Miss Chief, did not talk about it.

Monkman divided his exhibition into what he calls nine chapters. "The chapter on the removal of children – there is no humour there and there is no need for that. That is the one chapter Miss Chief is at a loss for words."

The paintings in *Shame and Prejudice* were created following an invitation by the Art Museum at the University of Toronto to produce an exhibition marking Canada's 150th birthday. The resulting paintings reveal how European

settlement harmed indigenous people. For them, Canada's sesquicentennial is nothing to celebrate.

Shame and Prejudice is timely, coming on the heels of the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on residential schools and national hearings about missing and murdered indigenous women. The exhibition is one of the most dramatic and accessible bodies of work ever to recount indigenous history and sorrows. The show has so enthralled the art world that galleries have been clamouring for it, resulting in a three-year tour to Calgary, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Montreal, Charlottetown, Halifax and the Ontario cities of Toronto, Owen Sound and Kingston.

The inspiration for the show came, in part, during a 2011 visit to the Prado Museum in Madrid where Monkman saw the painting *Execution of Torrijos and his Companions on the Beach at Málaga* (1887-1888) by Antonio Gisbert. Sorrowful rebels stand on a beach awaiting execution.

"I was humbled by the effect this deeply political work of art had on me, and felt a new urgency to undertake a serious subject with similar gravitas," Monkman writes in a brochure accompanying the show.

The history paintings of Western art do not tell the real stories of indigenous people, says Monkman. So, he decided to try. He borrowed liberally from Old Masters and Picasso to create an aesthetic that was part classical and part contemporary. Consider *Le Petit déjeuner sur l'herbe*, a famous 1863 painting of picnickers by Edouard Manet. Monkman appropriates the title for his own painting of nude women drunkenly falling on a street in front of a Winnipeg beer parlour. The women resemble the prostitutes in Picasso's cubist *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Or there's *Death of the Virgin (After Caravaggio)* in which Monkman replicates Caravaggio's painting of the same name with indigenous figures to commemorate murdered and missing women.

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Kent Monkman, "Le Petit déjeuner sur l'herbe," 2014 acrylic on canvas, 84" x 126"



Miss Chief manages to thrust herself into this mix. In *Seeing Red*, Miss Chief becomes a confident matador facing a Picasso-like cubist bull on a contemporary Winnipeg street. Chaos abounds. Miss Chief reminds us that indigenous people were on this land before there was a Winnipeg, and that they are still there and can be heard above the cacophony of modern life. Remember, the subtitle of the exhibition: *A Story of Resilience*. Miss Chief is definitely, defiantly resilient.

“Naked, I am at my strongest,” Miss Chief tells exhibition visitors. “I did not get where I am today by being a wallflower.”