

Artist Kent Monkman counters Canada's 150th celebrations with exhibit about the history of indigenous people



ERIC VOLMERS, CALGARY HERALD

[More from Eric Volmers, Calgary Herald](#)

Published on: June 21, 2017 | Last Updated: June 21, 2017 5:30 AM MDT

SHARE ADJUST COMMENT PRINT

The stoic Mountie has never looked so malevolent.

In Kent Monkman's painting *The Scream*, there are seven RCMP officers in formal red serge and Stetsons looking disturbingly clone-like. Aided by a few priests and nuns, they are pulling terrified indigenous children from their horrified parents.

The work is bright, colourful and life-size, made all the more unsettling by the use of the Canuck iconography that usually represents unconditional patriotism. The children, some clinging to their parents and others fleeing into the field, are wearing modern clothes.

It's part of Monkman's ambitious new exhibit on display at the Glenbow Museum. In nine "chapters," *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience* traces what the past 150 years have meant for Canada's indigenous population beginning with the period of New France and continuing to present day.



The Scream is part of the section on residential schools. Monkman, a Toronto-based Cree artist, dedicates the exhibit to his grandmother, Elizabeth, who went to a residential school in Brandon, Man.

“A lot of these things I’m painting in this exhibition have never been painted before, one of them being the removal of children,” says Monkman, in a phone interview from his studio in Toronto. “It’s been one of the most popular works in the exhibition because it describes something visually that many Canadians know happened but there lacks imagery to support it.”



Monkman is one of the country's most celebrated artists. And one of the most provocative. Three years ago, University of Toronto Art Museum curator Barbara Fischer commissioned Monkman to create an exhibition as a response to what was sure to be a widespread celebratory and patriotic sentiments to mark Canada's 150th birthday.

Monkman makes no qualms about it, the exhibit is meant to be critical and to push Canadians towards a broader understanding of their history and its impact of the country's indigenous people.

The travelling exhibit, which will be on display in Calgary until Sept. 10, combines Monkman's work with artifacts and art from 12 partner museums from across Canada, including the Glenbow. There are a few mixed-media installations, but the core of the exhibit is painting.

Monkman says he was deeply moved by Antonio Gisbert's 1888 painting the Execution of Torrijos and his Companions on the Beaches of Malaga, which he came across five years ago at the Prado Museum in Madrid. It's a political painting that shows patriots who are about to be executed by a firing squad.

"What it said to me was that painting could still have the power to communicate a powerful moment or a powerful message like this," Monkman says. "Over the course of modern art, painting got reduced in its capacity to hold narratives, to have the weight that a painting like that could have. I wanted to approach

indigenous history in North America with an approach to the medium that could convey that same importance to these events.”

The large-scaled paintings are accompanied by “didactic panels” for each historical chapter, told in the voice of Monkman’s alter ego Miss Eagle Chief Testickle, a gender-bending trickster that often appears in the artist’s paintings, film and performance art.

She appears in paintings in this exhibit as well, including the Daddies. That’s a take on Robert Harris’ famous 1884 painting The Fathers of Confederation and finds a naked Miss Eagle in the foreground before the iconic group portrait of the delegates of the Charlottetown conference.

She appears again in The Subjugation of Truth, which depicts indigenous chiefs in shackles as white officials cluelessly negotiate on their behalf. Miss Eagle Chief appears in a portrait in the background dressed as Queen Victoria. That’s her again in the installation Scent of a Beaver, perched on a swing between two men, one British and one French.

These historic images mix with modern depictions of indigenous life. The most harrowing may be Le Petite déjeuner sur l’herbe, which features nude female figures based on Picasso’s cubist style sprawled in front of a rundown hotel in modern Winnipeg.

“(Picasso) was known for his butchering of the female nude,” Monkman says. “So I used this as a kind of allegorical way to talk about violence against women and the misunderstanding of European cultures not understanding the femininity and feminine spirit that was present and revered in indigenous cultures.”

That painting borrows its name from another modern artist’s work, Edouard Manet’s Le déjeuner sur l’herbe.

In fact, Monkman says while the work in Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience is obviously focused on the impact of colonialism on indigenous people, he was also interested in commenting on the evolution of Modern Art, which also emerged 150 years ago. Monkman has long been interested in aspects of modern art, including Primitivism, which found European artists being influenced by African and Oceanic cultures.

“I used those components of Modern Art as this allegorical way or metaphorical way to talk about the compression, the flattening of indigenous cultures,” Monkman says. ” About how indigenous people now reside on .02 per cent of