Relinquishing Freedom (Willingly) to the White Man

A mother screams as her baby is wrenched from her arms; a sex fest featuring Canada's founding fathers and various forest animals; and Miss Chief – a powerful, sexy, transgender indigenous figure in traditional attire, beads, and feathers. Liora Belford visits "Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience," the travelling exhibition of the work of artist Kent Monkman, who wonders where are the painters who have documented the hunger, the poverty, the pain, and the annihilation of a whole culture.

Essay / Liora Belford May 30, 2018

I have been planning for a while to write about Canadian artist Kent Monkman's exhibition "Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience," which is currently travelling among museums throughout Canada. I caught it last winter at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto and haven't been able to let go of it ever since. The exhibition attracted so many visitors that often, even mid-week, long lines formed outside the museum. Many made special trips from neighboring towns to see the show, and many returned again and again. Most stayed there for three hours or more. I must decipher the spell that Monkman casts upon his viewers.

Monkman is a painter, but his paintings are often a result, or a continuation, of works in other media, such as performance, sculpture, installation, and film. He belongs to one of the largest groups of indigenous people in North America, the Cree. In his works he looks at the way the governments of Canada has mistreated indigenous people over many decades. Monkman's work is sensual, theatrical, and humorous, all of which find expression in the queer character of Miss Chief, who is usually at the center of his works: a powerful, sexy transgender in traditional attire, beads and feathers. The mischievous Miss Chief is Monkman's alter-ego. Her face is his face and her body his own, and he celebrates her in huge oil paintings, as well as larger-than-life performances, installations, films, and sculptures.

In "Shame and Prejudice," Monkman examines the colonial history of Canada, a country that has just started out, as it celebrates its 150th anniversary, to come to terms with the horrible crimes inflicted until recently on its indigenous population. Those crimes included removal of children from their homes on the reservations and their placement in residential schools, where they were reeducated in the spirit of Christianity (many of the children suffered neglect, or died); eradication of indigenous culture and language; theft of their property and land; destruction of nature and resources, and more. Monkman's exhibition clearly shows that indigenous people have been living on the land thousands of years before the arrival of the new settlers and that the 150 years that have passed since the foundation of Canada mean different things to different people within its population. However, unlike the many projects that deal with indigenous history in Canada, it seems that Monkman's exhibition does not settle on representing the indigenous population as victims. While he does not minimize the past and present crimes of Canadian governments, and while he does support affirmative action regarding indigenous peoples' welfare, language, and culture, his show does not reduce Indigenous people to the role of the disadvantaged victims under the ongoing control of the White Man.

unnamed (1).jpg



[1]Installation view of “Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience” at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.
Image credit: Toni Hafkenscheid

Left: various cradleboards from the Glenbow Museum collection. Right: Kent Monkman, The Scream, 2016, Acrylic on canvas.
Private collection

In "Shame and Prejudice," Monkman reexamines the visual representations of colonial Canada. With his characteristic wisdom, seductiveness, and sensuality, he casts doubt on the historical, the factual, and what is considered “common knowledge.” He does this by positioning his paintings next to canonical nineteenth-century paintings that document indigenous people in Canada, painted by the era's most well-known painters, such as Albert Bierstadt, Paul Kane, and Cornelius Krieghoff—painters who followed the Old Masters tradition they were familiar with. Monkman travels backward in time and plants his paintings next to the older ones—borrowed from national collections from museums throughout the country—in order to challenge the visual narrative of Canada's national museums: that is, of putting on display White Man’s great achievement. The classical-contemporary style that Monkman's adopts allowed his paintings to blend in with the nineteenth-century ones while suggesting a different narrative. The painting *Subjugation of Truth* is a good example. In it, Monkman shows Chief Poundmaker in chains, relinquishing his liberty (willingly) to the White Man, to keep his people safe. In an accompanying text, Monkman wonders where the painters are who have documented the hunger, the poverty, the agony, and the annihilation of a whole culture. He emphasizes that the representation of indigenous peoples in the visual history of Canada is not at all related to their language, their culture, or their lives, and if those representations could teach us anything it would be about the lives of the painters themselves.

Another one of Monkman's strategies is to display the objects depicted in his paintings in the exhibition space. This move animates the paintings, taking them out of the frame and into the

museum. Chief Poundmaker's green-beaded shoes are an example of such an object.

unnamed (6).jpg **[2]**



[3]Kent Monkman, The Subjugation of Truth, 2016
Acrylic on canvas

Collection of Donald R. Sobey

The presence of the shoes in the room turns the chief from a mythic figure into a real, specific person who has lost his liberty and dignity. Similarly, traditional baby carriers, common among the indigenous peoples of North America, are displayed on the wall on both sides of a heartbreaking painting, *The Scream*, in which a mother screams as her baby is being wrenched from her arms. The objects reinforce the sense that Monkman's paintings are authentic, like documents that present a moment of historical truth. Ironically, the installation of his works alongside paintings from the days of Canada's foundation—in an exhibition that honours the country's 150th anniversary—turns both cases into narratives that are funded by the state and serve its interests. It is a brilliant move that releases Monkman from the responsibility to represent any "historical truth," and enables him to create a fantastical series of paintings around the iconic image of the founding fathers (more on this later).

unnamed (2).jpg **[4]**



[5]Installation view of “Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience” at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto
Image credit: Toni Hafkenscheid

Poundmaker's moccasins, 1875-1890, Glass beads, painted rawhide from parfleche container, smoked brain-tanned buffalo hide.
Collected by Walter Gouin from Chief Poundmaker, c.1875-1880.
Canadian Museum of History

unnamed (5).jpg **[6]**



[7]Kent Monkman, The Scream, 2017
Acrylic on canvas. 84” x 132”

Collection of the Denver Art Museum
Native Arts acquisition fund

The exhibition, which Monkman created and curated, occupied nine rooms that simulate nine chapters from Miss Chief's memoir. The memories are organized chronologically, and the rooms are numbered accordingly. In the center of the first room, which represents the early days of Canada's statehood, among drawings, paintings, and documents, Monkman has placed a life-size kinetic sculpture of Miss Chief wearing a dress from the nineteenth century, with two settlers (an Englishman and a Frenchman) swinging her between them. Indigenous people played a vital role in the lives of the early settlers: they taught them how to survive in the severe climate, how to fish, hunt, and farm according to traditional techniques; they shared their extensive knowledge about local medicinal plants and, most importantly, were a significant and crucial part of the fur-trade economy.

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[9]Installation view of “Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience” at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.
Image credit: Toni Hafkenscheid

Left top: Queen Victoria (1819-1901, reigned 1837-1901), 1887, Lithograph on paper. Collection of the Confederation Centre Art Gallery. Left bottom: John Wycliffe Lowes Forester, Portrait of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, oil on canvas. Collection of Glenbow Museum. Middle: Kent Monkman, the Subjugation of Truth, 2016, acrylic on canvas. Private collection. Right: Robert Harris, The Rt. Hon. Sir John A. Macdonald, c.1890, oil on linen. Collection of the Confederation Centre Art Gallery

In the second room, which focuses on the Fathers of Confederation, the lights are low and the walls are painted a deep wine color. In the center of the room is Monkman's *The Daddies*, a large oil painting based on an iconic painting that depicts an early meeting of the *Fathers of Confederation*. In the painting, naked Miss Chief is looking for her place among the Fathers seated around the conference table, or perhaps she is modelling for them, sitting on a colorful woolen blanket of the kind that has become a symbol of Colonialism in North America (these blankets were often bartered with the indigenous people for pelts).

In the same room, in another vast painting—*The Bears of the Confederation*—men who look surprisingly like the founding fathers, some naked and some dressed in black Latex outfits, are engaged in a sex fest with various forest animals. Miss Chief oversees the orgy, holding a black whip and wearing only a sheer scarf and red high-heeled boots. The large dimensions of the painting, which mainly celebrates the beauty of Canada's nature, render the tiny figures of Miss Chief and the men insignificant. Elsewhere in the room, another series, painted on what appears to be pages from an ancient book, shows Miss Chief in a number of scenes in which she is saving or killing figures from the *Fathers of the Confederation* photograph (which is visible nearby). Another wall displays reproductions of the original photograph and the painting it inspired, as well as a detailed list of the

Fathers. These combined elements invite the visitor to participate in a guessing game: which of the Daddies will win Miss Chief's favor, and with whom will she even the score?

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[11]Kent Monkman, The Bears of Confederation, 2016
Acrylic on canvas. 190 X 345cm

Collection of Michelle Bilodeau and Matt Kingston

unnamed (4).jpg **[12]**



[13]Kent Monkman, The Daddies, 2016
Acrylic on canvas

Collection of Christine Armstrong and Irfhan Rawji

Like many other visitors, I could not tear myself away from this room. The scale, the lushness, the precision, the love evident in Monkman's paintings of Canada's breathtaking landscapes are gripping and exhilarating. His humor and mischief, as he encourages the viewers to figure out which of the Fathers is making love with a bear, or whose severed head is on a platter, are very effective. Surprisingly, the Canadian visitors were not offended, upset, or enraged, or none felt the need to protest the indigenous artist's demeaning representation of the founding fathers. To me, the visitors at the show seemed to experience catharsis. The show was like a confessional in which visitors could face the country's past crimes, up to the point where, in their judgment, they were free of them. It’s hard to imagine a similar scenario in today's Israel.

The exhibition "Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience [14]" was presented at the Museum of Art of the University of Toronto from January 26 to March 5, 2017. It will travel to museums throughout Canada until October 2018.

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