

Kent Monkman Paints Clashing Cultures in “Failure of Modernity”

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“The search for immigrant identity is much different than the search for indigenous identity,” said the Native American writer Sherman Alexie. “So I suppose if you’re indigenous to a place and you’re still searching for your identity, that’s pretty ironic.”



Kent Monkman
The Human Zoo, 2015
Peters Projects

The Santa Fe gallery Peters Projects, in a new, year-long program entitled “Outside In/Reclaiming Place,” explores this distinction in the search for identity, and, more particularly, the influences of Native American cultures on 20th century art. The program’s inaugural exhibition is “Kent Monkman: Failure of Modernity.” The title isn’t subtle, and neither is Monkman (b. 1965), a Canadian First Nations artist of Cree and Irish ancestry. He approaches his subjects with a clear viewpoint—and the works, whether acrylic on canvas or digitally presented on framed HD monitors, convey a sense of disarray and unrest, a mixed-up world with the nightmarish sense that all is not well.



Kent Monkman
Bête Noire, 2014
Peters Projects



Kent Monkman
Love, 2014
Peters Projects



Kent Monkman
Seeing Red, 2014
Peters Projects

There’s a lot going on in *Seeing Red* (2014), for instance, and most of it is disturbing. The painting shows a chaotic suburban street scene. At the center in the foreground, a matador in Louboutins holding a Hudson Bay blanket as a muleta faces off with a bloodied bull disintegrating into Picasso-like contortions—meanwhile, two buffalo calmly approach. Behind the matador are two young Native American men in modern clothes, one shirtless in jeans and holding a feather, the other delicately tending the head of a third, pale white man with reddish hair lying on the pavement (perhaps injured, possibly even dead). The fallen man is dressed in colonial-looking garb including white stockings and shoes with a buckle. A burning car next to a dual telephone-totem poll sends thick smoke into the air behind them, and a war party in buffalo masks dances in the distance. Floating high above this hectic, lawless scene is a pair of shoes tossed over power lines, a helicopter, and a naked Hermes straight out of an 18th-century painting.



Kent Monkman
The Transfiguration, 2015
Peters Projects



Kent Monkman
The Immoral Woman, 2015
Peters Projects

As in all of Monkman’s works, the details practically ooze symbolism. It’s no mistake that most of the Native American figures often appear to be coming to lend a hand or help, nor that Hermes appears in the idealized form of a white, blonde European male. The feather is a loaded symbol, too, one that’s surrounded by misunderstanding and controversy; indigenous groups argue that football teams and the machine of mainstream American pop culture misappropriate it. This kind of uninformed theft of symbols (and so directly) is what “Failure of Modernity” is all about: Monkman talks directly about the “missing narratives and perspectives of Aboriginal peoples,” and the ways that the West co-opts indigenous methods, images, and perspectives.



Kent Monkman
The Symposium, 2015
Peters Projects

The artist explores these issues with a devastating, unsubtle critique, but also with a macabre sense of humor: Monkman inserts Native American characters into canonically European scenes with titles like *The Transfiguration* and *The Symposium* (both 2015). The composition of *The Human Zoo* (2015) is one of the show’s simplest and most poignant: a Native American figure, dressed in an elaborate hybrid of traditional costume, is a tourist attraction in a placeless, European city. She’s a subject to be applauded or painted, like the architecture behind her, not a “real” woman—her fanciful appearance is a diversion, a passing entertainment for passersby. It’s at once a prototypically “beautiful” image and a searing commentary on the commodification of Native American culture in a modern world.

—Bridget Gleeson