

The Violent History of Kent Monkman

by [Hrag Vartanian](#) on June 14, 2014 0



Detail of Kent Monkman, "The Deposition" (2014), acrylic on canvas, 84 x 126 inches (all images by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

In Kent Monkman's first New York solo show, which closes this weekend at [Sargent's Daughters](#), art history commingles with cultural mythology in a passion play about masculinity and belonging. The paintings, and one diorama, use just enough camp to make the works feel self-aware, like the moment in a dream where you realize where you are, wake up, and reflect on the madness.

At the center of "The Deposition" (2014) is a Christ-like arrangement focusing on Monkman — the artist figures in much of his own work (often as his drag alter-ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle). The artist's avatar cradles a woman from Picasso's "[Guernica](#)" (1937), while young First Nations men surround him as he collapses. Off to the left, refugees from Francis Bacon paintings emerge from a shadowy doorway, and the North End neighborhood of Winnipeg, known for its large First Nations community, acts as the backdrop. The figures, with the exception of one coyote that barks at a Bacon-esque dog, appear emotionless.

Ravens collect valuable trinkets on an awning, historic pictographs appear on a wall, and baroque clouds linger overhead. Any sense of history is obscured, incomplete, and remixed, though the artist's sensibility is closer to the stiffness of [18th-century history painting](#) than the cold and eerie postmodern pastiche of [Mark Tansey](#).



Kent Monkman, "Bête Noire" (2014), painted backdrop (acrylic on canvas), sculptural installation (mixed media), 192 x 192 x 120 inches

In decoding these paintings, it's easy to fixate on Kent Monkman's Cree heritage — he is also Irish — and the troubled history of First Nations people in Canada, but the works are

also noticeably queer, and in dialogue with Canadian and modern art history. The compositions bring order to characters who appear to be acting out roles they seem predetermined to play. It as if they wandered into the frame or were lured in from elsewhere.

His ability to make the overarching theme of displacement strangely familiar is one of Monkman's strengths. These are modern and contemporary figures in migration, adapting to the present without blinking an eye. If there is a critique in Monkman's work, then it is about the reductive myths of modernity that create convenient stories of victors and losers, decline and ascent. In conventional Western history, First Nations people are often portrayed as a dwindling civilization, but Monkman focuses on their agency and resilience, not to mention their ability to adapt.



Detail of Picassoesque women in Kent Monkman's "Le Petit déjeuner sur l'herbe" (2014), acrylic on canvas, 84 x 126 inches

In "Le Petit déjeuner sur l'herbe" (2014), Monkman transports women from Picasso's paintings onto the sidewalk in front of a cheap hotel. Some of the figures appear so ill-suited to the conventions of pictorial realism that they seem incapable of even standing up. Two blond angels cart away a [Henry Moore reclining nude](#) sculpture, while two other angelic forms evangelize to the faceted women who largely ignore them.



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

There are clear sex-based divisions in Monkman's world, as female forms from Western art history share a stage with shadowy male figures from Bacon paintings, youthful First Nations men, and radiating and masculine angels. The artist's avatar, which clearly appears in three of the five works, including "The Chase" (2014) and "Bête Noire" (2014), is the only figure who blurs gender norms and bridges the two worlds.

Both "The Chase" (2014) and "Bête Noire" (2014) also include images of Picassoesque bulls riddled with arrows. In another, "Death of the Female" (2014), a bull drives away in a muscle car after violating a female figure in the street. Monkman is notably absent in this composition, while two older [Paul Kane](#)-inspired male figures survey the scene close by.



Installation view of "Urban Res" at Sargent's Daughters (via Sargent's Daughters)

The bull has many meanings, but here it becomes a father-like figure that is both remote and endangered. Picasso often portrayed himself as a bull in scenes with women in his life. A symbol of virility, here they are noticeably unheroic, and often bleeding.

At the back of the gallery is the large "Bête Noire" installation. Resembling a history museum exhibit, a genderqueer Monkman sits atop a motorcycle, that powerful symbol of freedom and defiance, while yet another Picassoesque bull is flattened like a cartoon figure in the foreground. The romantic mythology of the North American plains is captured in the painted backdrop, which has all the pomp of a 19th-century [Albert Bierstadt](#) painting. There is a sense of victory in the scene, but the triumph is absurd. History is noticeably absent from this tableau, just as it is from any historical museum recreation.



Detail of Monkman's "The Chase" (2014), acrylic on canvas, 84 x 126 inches



Detail of an angel in Monkman's "Le Petit déjeuner sur l'herbe" (2014), acrylic on canvas, 84 x 126 inches

Monkman began his artistic life in the throes of Abstract Expressionism, but he eventually rejected what he considered a very personal vocabulary in favor of a more widely legible

representational lexicon derived from Old Masters. When he injects figures from modern art into his work, he is deliberately flattening pictorial space, and bringing up the shortcomings of these figures that look crippled and violated outside their usual context. For the artist, that flattening of pictorial space is a metaphor of how indigenous cultures have been flattened aggressively over the last few centuries, but also how women have been violated in modern art as they are exploited by male artists who butchered their bodies for art.

The dangers of cultural amnesia are around every corner in these scenes, as characters fumble into frame they shed their origins and find themselves in unfamiliar places. The art aggressively questions the language of modernism and its flaws. The paintings also reveal characters who feel trapped in cycles of violence and alienation. The artist doesn't liberate these characters, but tells their story through allegory and disruption. It is through the brutality of his juxtapositions that the drama unfolds. What is absent from these works is a sense of home, or a place that feels safe from the outside world. The violence of contemporary life permeates everything.



Detail of Monkman's "Death of the Female" (2014), acrylic on canvas, 84 x 126 inches



Francis Bacon detail of Kent Monkman's "The Deposition" (2014), acrylic on canvas, 84 x 126 inches

Kent Monkman's [The Urban Res](#) continues at Sargent's Daughters gallery (179 East Broadway, Lower East Side, Manhattan) until June 14.

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