

# Modern mashups: artwork by Kent Monkman

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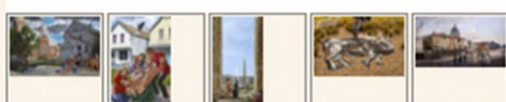
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Kent Monkman: *Death of the Female*, 2014, acrylic on canvas



## Michael Abatemarco

Visitors to SITE Santa Fe during the contemporary art space's last biennial, *Unsettled Landscapes*, may recall Cree Nation artist Kent Monkman's *Bête Noire*, a full-scale diorama depicting an Indian chief wearing a headdress, sitting astride a motorcycle beside a flattened, Cubist depiction of a slaughtered bison. The incongruous image conflates modernism and 19th-century depictions of indigenous peoples. The bison itself was based on the work of Pablo Picasso, whose Cubist imagery finds its way into several of Monkman's paintings as well as his installation art. But Monkman is critical of the artist who had a reputation as a womanizer and struck a macho attitude. Monkman uses Picasso as a counterpoint to his own performance-art alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, an

indigenous drag queen Monkman created to explore themes of cultural exchange, appropriation, and gender. "I wanted to talk in my work about colonized sexuality," Monkman told *Pasatiempo*. "I call it colonized sexuality because we had men that lived as women in our cultures and the Europeans, when they came, they didn't understand that. There was just a male-female binary. They couldn't comprehend that there could be gender fluidity and an acceptance of that in indigenous cultures."

Monkman's show *Failure of Modernity*, opening Friday, Jan. 15, at Peters Projects, includes the flattened bison from the SITE installation but not the full diorama. Monkman's take on modernism is that much in European art was lost during the modernist period, but far more was lost to indigenous cultures. "My perspective is that it was a failure for indigenous people because, in some cases, we're losing our languages, we were put into boarding schools. It's been a failure for the rest of the world, too, because when you lose indigenous cultures, you lose a lot of knowledge: traditional knowledge about how to live off the land, traditional plants, that sort of stuff. Once these things disappear, they're gone forever."

The show is composed primarily of Monkman's paintings but also features mixed-media works that represent a new evolution for the artist. "The exhibition also includes what I'm calling video paintings," Monkman said. "I do a background painting and videotape the figures against a green screen and digitally insert them into the paintings. Those are displayed on monitors so they're like living paintings. There's four brand new works that I'm showing and each has characters in them. Each one is about two minutes long. My performance alter ego Miss Chief is featured in all of them. It's kind of a nice crossover of video and film work, performance work, and the paintings."

*Failure of Modernity* is part of a larger, yearlong project Monkman is working on called *Outside In/Reclaiming Space*, which explores Native influences on Western art. Picasso, for instance, borrowed from tribal cultures in Africa. He and his contemporaries such as Paul Gauguin were associated with Primitivism, which adapted imagery from non-Western cultures. Monkman's paintings are figurative narrative works that, conversely, borrow from European art traditions. *Death of the Female*, for instance, uses a mix of contemporary, classical, and modernist imagery. The setting is an urban street where a group of Native men come to the aid of a fallen figure: a Cubist rendering of the female form. They're watched from a distance by antiquated figures derived from Native depictions of 19th-century painter George Catlin. In the doorway of a run-down home, one can see a shape created in the style of a Francis Bacon abstraction. "The idea with this body of work was to reflect on this period of modernity," Monkman said. "Those painters I'm referencing — Picasso, the Cubists, and Francis Bacon — there was a kind of violence to their work in their depictions of the figure but, more than that, it was really about reflecting on the last 150 years of modernity. I was trying to articulate that Native American experience using the language of Western painting."

Monkman also draws on compositions by the Old Masters in his work. Among them are representations taken from French Baroque painter Nicolas Poussin. "Poussin was one of the sources, and there were a number of other references where I was looking for groupings of the human form, expressing some kind of pity or different human emotions associated with something tragic or sad. The last 150 years have represented a period of loss and a kind of compression of culture from the point of view of indigenous people. The flattening of the pictorial space in my work kind of functions as a metaphor for that."

One of Monkman's video paintings, *The Human Zoo*, references a period during the late-19th and early-20th centuries when photographers including Edward S. Curtis, anthropologists, painters including Catlin, and others saw Native Americans and First Nations peoples as a vanishing race. The period was marked by a rush to gather and record as much knowledge as possible before their cultures disappeared. The result was a picture, frozen in time, by which contemporary Native peoples are still unfairly judged and compared. Catlin played a part in perpetuating this idea. "Catlin created a large body of work, took it to Europe, and traveled around with it, and also took different groups of Native performers with him, and they would perform for European audiences as part of his traveling gallery," Monkman said. "That was during that period of time when Europeans were looking at a lot of non-European cultures, and you had things like the human zoos where people were brought over from other continents and displayed as exhibits." Catlin is one of the animated figures in the video painting and so is Miss Chief. "I created a back story for that character where she was one of those people who performed in his touring exhibit. It kind of riffs on Josephine Baker, who was doing those revues in Paris in the early 20th century."

Much of Monkman's artwork on the theme of modernism and indigenous cultures recognizes back-and-forth interactions between them. "A lot of my work is about the space between cultures that's quite fluid, where different cultures are borrowing from each other and gaining and losing to each other, as well. I'm trying to find the right language and sources to talk about that space, which is hard to define." ◀