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Kent Monkman: Revisionist history, spiked heels and all

The celebrated First Nations artist stays on target with his campy critique of colonialism, on canvas and onscreen

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Kent Monkman, Iron Horse, 2014

By: **Murray Whyte** Visual arts, Published on Fri Feb 20 2015

It's fair to say that Kent Monkman stands alone in a genre of one: revisionist history, colonial period, of the Eurocentric fantasy of the "noble savage," all seen through a queer lens. Anybody else? Didn't think so.

Monkman's oeuvre is served up with a generous dollop of satirical glee, but that's only part of the point. Monkman, who is Ontario Cree, has been chipping at the foundations of our politely Eurocentric art world for years now, but all is not played for laughs.

His first targets, the heroicized landscapes of the Group of Seven, had him paint his own versions of famous paintings with all kinds of savage naughtiness playing out mid-frame. In the foreground of one, a [headress-wearing aboriginal chief romantically entangled — to put it mildly — with a cowboy](#), for example.

It's outrageous, sure, but Monkman's skill is as much as a critic as a painter. He uses humour and gleeful camp as a Trojan Horse of sorts to communicate the very real dissent at the core of his project: about the shameful historical treatment of Canadian aboriginals by British and French colonizers, and the bedrock of the same inequities today.

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In a current show at [Pierre-Francois Ouellette Contemporary Art](#), Monkman trots out a suite of new paintings very much on theme, but which show how far he's travelled. An unapologetic history nerd, art or otherwise, the artist enlists a posse of mythological characters, all of them proverbial sirens: Leda, Helen of Troy, Danae and Minerva, and recasts them as muscled-up Indian braves wearing spiked heels, in drag.

If it sounds absurd, well, it is and that's the point: Monkman's queer-culture send-up of the foundational myths of western patriarchal culture are the thin edge of his critical wedge, forcing open a more fraught conversation about the gross brutalities of colonial culture.

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Better yet, Monkman uses the conquerors' tools against them, painting in an unabashedly romantic style. *Expelling the Vices*, in which a tarted-up brave in knee socks and high heels lashes a troop of British officers with a whip, seems a clear homage to the mannered neoclassical history paintings of French artist Jacques-Louis David, to choose just one.

Monkman has always been a readable sort, with his complaint lying not far below the surface. In recent years, he's advanced significantly as a painter, though, and you can see it here in works like *Iron Horse* (here's the Helen of Troy reference), in which bare-chested warriors push a giant iron steed along a track. Like the others, it's kind of ridiculous, but it's also undeniably beautiful. The surrounding mountains, bathed in sunlight, are luminous and sublime, appearing to have an internal source of light — as good a painterly turn as it gets.

Painting is just one part of the Monkman experience. The other is on full display at the [Bank of Montreal's Project Room](#) for the rest of the year (Monkman is this year's recipient of the bank's granting program, with which it commissions a significant piece by a single artist annually).

It's called *Casualties of Modernity* and in it, Monkman's alter-ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle — a native chief in drag played by him — attends to the sick and dying: Cubism, Conceptualism, painting (which she declares needs to be saved).

It would be truly one for the art nerds if not for Monkman's comic flair. Casting it as a daytime hospital drama, he makes his point with unrepentantly cheeky lowbrow melodrama. And by the way, casualties of modernity? That's what colonialism is all about and Monkman's ancestors are among the most aggrieved.

Nonetheless, Miss Chief appears to call a truce: Romanticism, lying dead on the table in the form of a naked, neoclassically buff ivory-skinned lad, is revived by her tears.

At the same time, Monkman seems to reveal a personal esthetic bias, made clear in his paintings, however tongue-in-cheek. That it aligns with the moment in history where colonial incursions were accelerating toward their most brutal seems at least a moderate paradox, but all is not black and white. For all his upfront camp spectacle, there's more to Monkman than meets the eye.

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