

**THE GLOBE AND MAIL** 



Monkman's piece, *Lot's Wife*: 'She is punished for remembering,' says the artist. 'We're not supposed to look back and remember where we are from.'

## Kent Monkman: Honouring the dispossessed

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Near the town of St. Peter's, Man., not far from Selkirk, the Red River cuts its silent course through the prairie. On a warm day, you can sit on its banks and look out across the water. It's a quiet place, with a lot of birdsong in the air and the sound of wind in the grass.

I have never been there, but I have heard it and seen it through the unmoving camera lens of Kent Monkman, an artist of mixed Cree and Irish descent, now resident in Toronto, whose Cree great-grandmother, Caroline Everette, once lived there.

Born in St. Peter's in 1875, she stayed until 1907, ultimately bearing 13 children, only three of whom survived to adulthood, before she and her family were forcibly relocated to less desirable land. The farm they had tilled was claimed by white settlers from the fledgling Anglican settlement, supported in their avarice by the policies of the Canadian government. It was a story to be repeated three times in her life before she finally was able to make a permanent home, off-reserve, on Matheson Island, further north on Lake Winnipeg.

This fall, Monkman is projecting his film of this place in the Winnipeg Art Gallery as part of the group show *Winnipeg Now*, and he has placed before it a life-sized sculptural self-portrait in white. Dressing his chalky likeness in a diaphanous white robe, with a white beaded purse slung over his right arm (a nod to native beadwork), he has placed the figure in a small plot of long grasses and wildflowers. Behind it, a baby deer finds sanctuary in the reeds.

Cross-dressing and gender role play are not new to Monkman – he is widely known for his more biting and satirical homoerotic fantasies, strident and often comic restagings of Canadian history executed in sculpture, paint and photography. This new work, however, strikes a more contemplative note; it's a dramatically mute monument to dispossession. Monkman has titled the piece *Lot's Wife*, invoking the Biblical story of the woman who, despite divine threat of reprisal, turned back in her leave-taking for a final glance at Sodom, her former home. For her defiance, God turned her to a pillar of salt. There's a knife twist, then, at the heart of Monkman's metaphor: A metaphor drawn from a Christian story is used to eulogize a way of life that Christianity unravelled.

"She is punished for remembering," says Monkman of his Biblical heroine. "We're not supposed to look back and remember where we are from.

"Also," he says, "the story of Lot's wife was always told to us as a story about how God destroyed gay people. But it was Christianity that did not accept homosexuality." In Cree culture, there was always the tradition of the berdache – "two-spirited people who were honoured in the society," he says. Straddling the genders, they often performed women's work, taking on the more physically onerous jobs. They were often also the faith keepers, with the additional role of arbitrating disputes between men and women – indispensable, in short, to the maintenance of the social fabric. Monkman here looks back to this pre-homophobic world with a longing for what has been lost.

The baby deer, however, sweetens the tone of elegy. "He just stands for innocence, for childhood," Monkman says, embodying for the viewer the idea of new beginnings. "This is meant to be a piece that speaks to all generations."

*Winnipeg Now continues at the Winnipeg Art Gallery until Dec. 30. The show also includes works by Sarah Anne Johnson, Paul Butler, Michael Dudeck, Dominique Rey, Rodney LaTourelle, Marcel Dzama, Jennifer Stillwell, Daniel Barrow, Guy Maddin, KC Adams, Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan.*

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