

# Aboriginal art with attitude



PAUL GESSELL  
ART AND THE CITY

Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle was late for the pre-vernissage interview. So, SAW Gallery staff and *Team Citizen* whiled away the time speculating on exactly what this cross-dressing aboriginal he-she-devil would look like in person.

We'd all seen the Chief's scratchy silent movies, *Group of Seven Inches* and *Shooting Geronimo*. On the silver screen, this Cher look-a-like is definitely tall, far taller than the cowboys and frontiersmen the Chief loves to ravish, sometimes while riding a horse. But how would the Chief look without Vaseline rubbed on the camera lens to fuzzify things?

Suddenly, a man of average height walked into SAW. He was wearing jeans and a shirt, rather than bangles and a loin-

cloth. There were no outrageously sized platform high heels nor an upstanding feathered headdress to make him tall. It was the Chief, or to be precise, his creator, Kent Monkman.

"Did you think I was going to ride in on a horse?" Monkman asked the surprised looking people in the room.

Well, yes, if you must know. Or at least there could have been a brass band and twirling batons.

Seeing Monkman in the flesh is akin to Dorothy discovering the Wizard of Oz is really just an ordinary man manipulating a series of levers to make him sound oh, so powerful.

The difference, of course, is that Monkman, a Toronto-based artist of Cree descent, is far from ordinary. His art takes hilarious, but well-aimed, pokes at racial and gender stereotypes. He is also rewriting history and turning aboriginal art on its head with his videos, paintings and installations, many of them starring Chief Share Eagle.

Monkman is everywhere these days.

A retrospective of his work is



CHRIS MIKULA, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

**Kent Monkman's offerings in *Oil Spill* include a couple of paintings of Wild West landscapes peopled by stereotypical male Indian figures having their way with the white men.**

touring the country. It is in Hamilton for the summer and will then visit Toronto, Winnipeg, Halifax and Victoria. He would love to bring the show to Ottawa. But there are no takers so far.

Monkman was one of the stars of this year's Montreal Biennale and had a solo show running simultaneously at Montreal's very hot Galerie Pierre-François Ouellette.

He has popped up occasionally in group shows in Ottawa during the past few years and just last week surfaced in SAW as part of the gallery's current and very impressive group exhibition, *Oil Spill: New Painting in Ontario*, which continues until Sept. 15.

*Oil Spill* includes seven figurative artists who curator Stefan St. Laurent thinks best show off the new directions of

Ontario painters and reveal that the reports of the death of painting are vastly exaggerated.

Three of the artists are from Ottawa: Michael Harrington, Petra Halkes and Dave Cooper. As well, there are Jeremy Bailey and Kim Dorland of Toronto and Jaclyn Conley, who just moved to New York from Essex.

Monkman's offerings in *Oil Spill* include a couple of paintings of Wild West landscapes peopled by stereotypical male Indian figures having their way with the white men. There are also some watercolours of Wild West figures made to look like Michelangelo-style drawings. The spirit of Chief Share Eagle abounds even in the works without her likeness.

Monkman's artwork, including Chief Share Eagle, is largely inspired by the early 19th-century paintings of American artist George Caitlin, a theatrical sort who travelled the Old West creating paintings of idyllic scenery and untamed savages. Sometimes Caitlin put himself in the paintings. They sold like hotcakes.

See ART on PAGE E7