

Trickster in drag upends colonial view

BY ROBERT AMOS, SPECIAL TO TIMES COLONIST JUNE 26, 2010

That's outrageous!

The Triumph of Mischief more than lives up to its name. Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, Postindian Diva Warrior, has come to town and my preconceptions have fallen like nine-pins before her onslaught of paintings, films, photos and costumes.

Miss Chief -- the persona of Toronto-based artist Kent Monkman -- is an over-the-top drag queen Indian princess in feathers, sequins and high-heeled platform moccasins. Her field of play is the image of indigenous people, as constructed by the colonists. We created this fantasy image to dominate the aboriginals, to romanticize their existence and then erase them from the land and history of the New World. In the hands of white male scientists and historians it has been very successful -- until now.

Miss Chief boldly sashays into the history of art (George Catlin, Paul Kane, Cornelius Krieghoff), photography (Edward S. Curtis) and Hollywood westerns. By her commanding presence she shows those "documents" to be the fantasies they truly are. Then s/he offers her new spin on the narrative and those "facts" fall.

S/he first grabs our attention with a gallery of oil paintings in huge gold frames that rival the Luminist canvases of the golden west by Edward Church and Albert Bierstadt. Only on close inspection do you realize that the Noble Savage, who has the cowboy on the run, is wearing pink high heels, The fleeing cowpoke sports buttless chaps.

Artist and Model, a painting set in a sylvan bower a la Barbizon, presents Miss Chief in a floor-length war bonnet (and little else) painting a pictogram on a birchbark canvas. Her model is a buff cowboy backed up against a tree. His jeans are down around his ankles, he's fully erect and he is pierced like St. Sebastian by arrows from Miss Chief's Louis Vuitton quiver. Ouch!

Miss Chief hints that the "scientific" detachment with which Franz Boas and Marius Barbeau studied the First Nations men masked their envy and perhaps lust for the buckskin braves. Then s/he turns the tables on them to create her performance, The Taxonomy of the European Male, and the results are at first hilarious, then chilling and finally thought-provoking in a way you won't forget.

Miss Chief stars in her own film, Shooting Geronimo, and she made me laugh out loud more than once. On a movie set of a Dodge City main street, a filmmaker has set up a painted backdrop of cactus and badlands. He pays two young native men to don wigs and breechcloths and instructs them to dance.

Those two sure can bust a few moves, but the filmmaker is furious -- he wants them to be more "authentic." As he shows the Indians how to dance, my laughter flipped to outrage, then changed to

insight as I realized the truth behind this skit: the fool filmmaker was me!

And Miss Chief was mugging behind the camera.

S/he does it again and again, grabbing hot-button issues, important and unresolved -- colonialism, sexuality, the meaning of art -- and shuffles them adroitly. S/he's a trickster who heals us with laughter in this amazing performance, and gives us the emotional tools we need to come to terms with other shows of contemporary First Nations culture, on show now at the Royal B.C. Museum (ethnology galleries), Open Space (Alison Pebworth, Peter Morin) and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria itself (SMASH).

Miss Chief brings more to the gallery than I can comprehend or summarize. Consider one large painting, superbly executed in proper academic manner, which centres on a group of naked white men grappling with large snakes -- clearly, Laocoon. They pose beneath a smoke hole/skylight in a native lodge, and northwest coast carvings spill out of a bag at their feet. Which art is more monstrous?

Before the Laocoon group, winged cupids warm themselves by the campfire. Norval Morrisseau paints the snakes and men in his Woodland erotic style. A European maiden in classical dress works on a pictograph-style painting, while her beau in a frilled shirt lifts her hem to reveal white high heels.

At the very least, one wants to know which is the savage and which is civilization. As I left the gallery I found myself searching every other painting -- Sophie Pemberton, T.S. Cooper -- for some of those sneaky transgressions that upset the status quo. This, truly, is the Triumph of Mischief!

Kent Monkman: The Triumph of Mischief (Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1040 Moss St. 250-384-4171, aggv.bc.ca, until Aug. 29).

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