The Pink Indian

Kent Monkman's paintings of a mischievous drag diva in a feather headdress and heels sell for six figures—to the likes of Elton John and Belinda Stronach. How a half-Cree illustrator from Winnipeg sexed up the exploitation of First Nations people and conquered Toronto's art world

By Gerald Hannon

Photograph by Jody Rogac

Pink high heels. Heartthrob pink. These are dream shoes, shoes to break your heart. Shoes that are up to no good, shoes to dance their way into millennial visions or scuttle their way into nightmares. Tricky shoes. Trickster's shoes. Kent Monkman's shoes. He is painting them into the picture he's working on as I watch, his fine-tip brush glowing with pink acrylic pigment. The figure in the picture who's wearing those still-wet, kick-ass platforms is Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, a virtually naked bubble-butt hussy in a cascading feather headdress. I am watching Kent Monkman sitting in front of a canvas painting a picture in which Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, who looks remarkably like Kent Monkman, is also standing before an easel, putting the finishing touches on a canvas. Tricky.

Monkman, of mixed Cree, English and Irish heritage, looks a decade younger than his 45 years, the light sprinkling of gray in his hair somehow accentuating, rather than diminishing, his youthful appearance. His eyes often seem slightly bloodshot, the result, perhaps, of endless hours of close-up work. He is aristocratic and reserved in his bearing, a persona that softens as he gets to know you. Miss Chief has been a recurring figure in his work since her first appearance seven years ago in a painting called *Artist and Model* (it's the one painting he refuses to sell). He has also brought her to life from time to time, dressing himself up in similarly flamboyant costumes (right down to the shoes) for the films, videos and performance pieces that are a significant part of his work as an artist. The prototype hasn't changed—in that debut painting she's the same bubble-butt hussy, in a clinging pink loincloth (which doesn't quite hide her namesake testicles), pink platform heels and a swoon of a feather headdress. Here, too, she's standing before an easel, painting. Her model is a naked cowboy, tied to a tree, pierced with arrows à la Saint Sebastian, his eyes closed either in death or, more likely given that he has an erection, in lust. The painting, in its detail and its symbols, is practically a pictorial encyclopedia of the artistic issues that have gripped Monkman ever since—placing First Nations people in charge of their own destiny, making the European male the object of their gaze, reviving a fluid approach to sexuality crushed by the arrival of Christianity, refusing to reject contemporary pop culture in favour of a sentimentalized, archaic past.

> *Monkman modelled the character of Miss Chief on Cher, who dressed up in a glitterized native costume for her 1970s hit "Half-Breed." Miss Chief does Cher one better—her quiver is by Louis Vuitton*

There's always a before and after moment in any artist's life. For Monkman, the pivotal year was 2004, when the National Gallery of Canada bought a small painting, *Portrait of the Artist as Hunter*. (Monkman says he was surprised enough to give them a great price.) Four years later, the gallery bought *The Triumph of Mischief*, a seven-by-11-foot canvas crammed with libidinous revelry that somehow manages to be a complete history of both Western art and the troubled interactions between First Nations and European colonizers, all playing out before the world-weary eyes of Miss Chief (who is carrying a chic little birch-bark clutch and studiously ignoring Picasso). The gallery has also bought an installation called *Boudoir de Berdashe*, an early video and a series of five photographs entitled *The Emergence of a Legend*. Those purchases were official endorsements of the highest order, and though they didn't catapult Monkman to prominence overnight, they did assure collectors of his credibility and, perhaps more importantly, his bankability. The art-savvy wealthy came knocking. Bruce Bailey, an investment banker and a knowledgeable, confident collector whose moves the art world follows, purchased three large canvases in 2004. Clothing magnate Joe Mimran, of Joe Fresh, bought a painting. So did Belinda Stronach. So did the Royal Bank of Canada. David Furnish bought one for Elton John. As part of the Gehry relaunch in 2008, the Art Gallery of Ontario commissioned a Monkman piece for its new Canadian galleries. These days, his larger canvases sell for something like $150,000. A smaller, six-by-nine painting might set you back $100,000. Monkman is one of the very few mid-career artists to see his work enter the auction market, a privilege usually reserved for the safely dead or the very, very famous. In a smart marketing move suited to these trying economic times, he recently released a series of limited-edition etchings based on his current work. The asking price? A reasonable $1,000 apiece. Want to check them out first? There's an app for that, downloadable to your smart phone from akimbo.ca.

Miss Chief's playfulness appeals to a broad audience—she makes his work sexy-funny rather than sexy-prurient, doesn't lecture, treats serious issues through boisterous performance and myth making, reminds us of how badly we've treated our Aboriginal nations but doesn't make us feel guilty about it. Miss Chief is a provocateur and a proud outsider. She's also the reason Monkman is at the centre of the Canadian art world.

Today, I am sitting with Monkman in his bright studio and dwelling, a renovated landscape architect's shop with a green roof on a narrow, unprepossessing street near Bloor and Lansdowne (he bought it three years ago, attracted by its high ceilings and substantial storage space). The street front is forbidding—the small yard lies behind a wooden fence too high to see over. There is no doorbell and no other way to announce your arrival if he forgets to leave the gate unlocked. Once inside, though, you enter a genial space, warmly lived in, bustling with art, books, works-in-progress, all the detritus of a painter's life (there is no sense of disorder, though; he is fetishistically organized). When the sun breaks through the clouds this chilly spring day, the skylight floods our corner of the room in a dazzle of dancing dust motes, and the painting on which he's working glows almost overpoweringly into life. High up on the walls there are large, unframed finished canvases. At eye level nearby are others in various states of completion, including a commissioned portrait of John Ralston Saul, author and spouse of a one-time governor general (Saul is standing near a kayak in an Arctic landscape).

Monkman leans in close when he works, his face no more than a foot away from the canvas. His clothes are paint-spattered ("I treat myself as a human paint rag," he says). There is an unsightly bulge on his right shoulder under

As his fame grew, Monkman began to dress up as his alter ego, Miss Chief. In 2007, he performed before 500 people at the ROM

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIAN BOYLE/ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

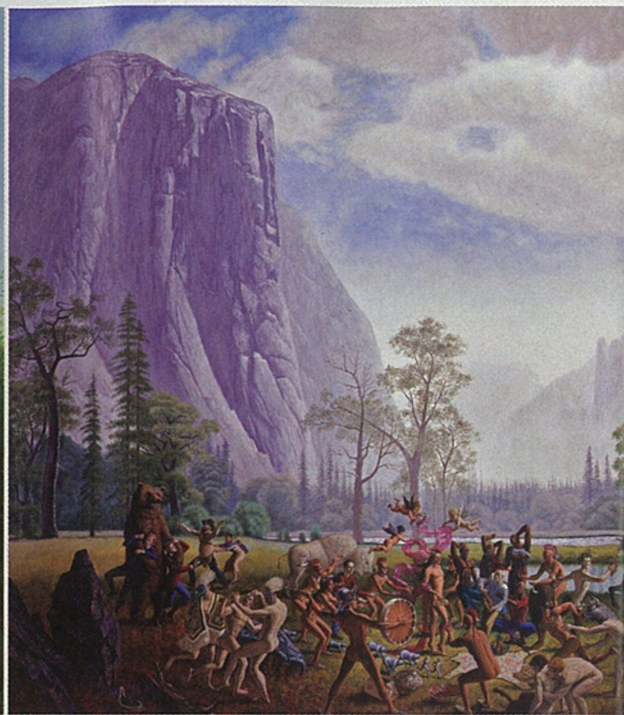
his sweater—an ice pack, there on the recommendation of the physiotherapist he's seeing for the repetitive stress injuries that are now a painfully routine part of Monkman's busy life. Next time I visit, he will paint while supporting his right arm on a Styrofoam block balanced on his knees, the ice pack still on his shoulder. Sometimes, he balances Aboubacar, his aging, demanding cat, on his knees as well.

There have been times, before a show, when he has worked 18-hour days. That gruelling schedule may be coming up again. He's completing several private commissions, including one for Montreal's Musée des beaux-arts, and is preparing for several solo and group shows. Art Toronto 2011, the Canadian mothership of international art fairs, invited Monkman to conceive an art installation for its four-day run next month at the Convention Centre. Called *The Art Game*, it promises to be an 80-foot-long maze constructed from the same panels that shape all the exhibit's booths, its entrance placed strategically at the top of an escalator. Steven Loft, the curator, describes it as "a tongue-in-cheek look at the art world that creates a funhouse atmosphere, a spectacle that will put the audience on display." It will also contain four rooms with actors parodying museum dioramas that present First Nations people in their native habitats (something Monkman has always wanted to take on). There will be surprises, says Loft.

The painting he is working on as I watch is called *East vs. West*. The first thing you notice is its unfashionable, old-style, grandmaster, painterly virtues—few artists paint like that anymore, capturing dreamy, idealized landscapes with a preternatural glow that wouldn't look out of place beside the best examples of the Hudson River School (technically accomplished 19th-century American artists who favoured highly romanticized panoramic vistas). Take a closer look, though, and Miss Chief, the character centre stage in the painting, has full control of the pictorial space. She may be dwarfed by all those towering mountains and trees, but she's supremely confident in her pink platforms, at her easel, painting a pair of struggling angels.

Monkman was inspired to create Miss Chief while studying the work of a painter about whom he has ambivalent feelings. George Catlin was a 19th-century American artist and showman who travelled the American west, collecting artifacts and recording what he thought of as a vanishing culture. He sometimes painted himself into his depictions of First Nations life. He was a tireless self-promoter, lecturing and touring his "Indian Gallery" of paintings and artifacts to American and European cities. Monkman wanted Miss Chief Eagle Testickle to be a larger-than-life character who would challenge the subjectivity and authority of the European gaze, an alter ego who could live anachronistically in his paintings, a bossy egomaniac who would counter Catlin's disgust with the berdache element in native culture (the berdache were men and women in pre-contact North America who favoured the dress and mannerisms of the opposite sex). Miss Chief is, in part, a glance back at Molly Spotted Elk, a native actor and dancer who performed in New York and Paris in the 1920s and '30s. Good homosexual that Monkman is, he also took as his model Cher, who performed her 1970s hit "Half-Breed" on horseback, in a feathered

Artist and Model is Monkman's first painting of Miss Chief. It's not for sale



The Triumph of Mischief is one of five Monkman works purchased by the National Gallery

My Treaty is With the Crown includes a figure who resembles Prince William

headdress and a glitterized native costume. Miss Chief goes Cher one better in the painting *Artist and Model*—the quiver for her arrows is by Louis Vuitton.

Monkman kicked that audacity up a notch when he began appearing in public dressed in full Miss Chief drag. "I guess I'm a closet performer," he says, "and I finally found a reason to indulge it." Like Catlin, he also realized that it was a canny bit of self-promotion. He made his debut in 2004 at the McMichael Canadian Collection in Kleinburg, the Vatican of all things Group of Seven. The McMichael has long had a vexed relationship with contemporary art; the founders, Robert and Signe McMichael, demanded new acquisitions be similar in spirit to works by that iconic group of Canadian painters. When Monkman arrived for a short residency, the gallery was showing an Edward Curtis film (Curtis was an American who photographed native peoples in the late 19th century) and was otherwise full of masks and totem poles. Beautiful stuff. Safe stuff. There was clearly no space for contemporary work, or contemporary visions of or by native artists. So Monkman and several friends and colleagues surreptitiously staged and filmed a performance titled *Group of Seven Inches*. They used Tom Thomson's cabin as part of the set (the gallery had moved it from its original location in the Rosedale ravine and rebuilt it on their property), incorporating into the action a couple of young male hotties wearing loincloths. Monkman, dressed as Miss Chief, arrives on a horse, captures the boys, plies them with alcohol and, in what surely must be a first at the McMichael, pours booze over the naked lads and licks it off their nipples. For Monkman, this was much more than a thumb-your-nose-at-the-institution moment: it was also a form of protest, after the gallery had taken down an elaborate artwork by his First Nations friends Mary Anne Barkhouse and Michael Belmore.

One gallery agonized over how to show a typically homoerotic Monkman painting in which an Indian brave is about to penetrate a cowboy bent over a log

Monkman's appearances as Miss Chief are infrequent, and they're most often orchestrated to send up a conservative institution. On the evening of October 19, 2007, at the ROM, Monkman scheduled a seance in which Miss Chief would call on the spirits of artists Eugène Delacroix, Paul Kane and George Catlin. (Delacroix seemed to be included for no other reason than that Monkman happens to be a great admirer of his work.) Five hundred people turned up, milling about excitedly in the towering main floor lobby, awaiting the arrival of Miss Chief Eagle Testickle. They weren't disappointed. She appeared in a billowing cloud of theatrical smoke to a climactic moment from Mahler's *Fourth Symphony*, wearing a stunning feather headdress (there would be several spectacular costume changes over the course of the evening), a billowing lace cape, a fur-trimmed bra and yards of sparkles. She called up the spirits of those three great painters. Their voices answered from a speaker system (Delacroix en français, bien entendu). Miss Chief introduced herself as a "simple, humble painter" interested in a discourse—in particular with Paul Kane, a 19th-century Canadian who had crossed the country, sketching and painting, not always accurately, the different Indian nations he encountered. (The ROM has a large collection of Kane paintings.) At the climax of the night's performance, three male breakdancers whipped off their shirts and started performing, while Miss Chief announced "a dance to the berdache—we are about to bring it back, more unaccountable and disgusting than ever." The shirtless dancers drew the crowd into a happy, rollicking free-for-all. Miss Chief took her bow, to tumultuous applause.

It was a triumph because it was not a lecture or a screed. Any righteous indignation was couched in humour and a clear admiration for the work of earlier artists who happened to reflect the prejudices of their time. "Artists like Kane and Catlin have enormous value," Monkman says. "I'm trying to open a discussion about their work, not devalue it." But Miss Chief still had to put her big, pink platform-heeled foot down—there was to be no more unquestioning deference to Eurocentric voices from the past.

Miss Chief Eagle Testickle was born in this new millennium as part of the feverish redevelopment of an artist's life. Monkman has a more prosaic backstory. He was born in the small town of St. Mary's, near Stratford, to Rilla Unger, a woman of Anglo-Irish descent who had married Everet Monkman, a Cree man. Both were devout evangelical Christians, and they had met through church work. Kent was the youngest of three boys (and the family would eventually adopt a girl, giving him a sister). The Monkmans first lived as missionaries on a remote reserve at Shamattawa, in northern Manitoba. They lasted just two years there—he says his mom did her best, but she wasn't used to the north, she couldn't speak Cree, and they lived in a cold little cabin. By the time he was ready for Grade 1, they were living in Winnipeg. When I ask what his father did, he's vague. "A lot of things," he says. "Church work, he drove a taxi, he was a social worker, he was a bush pilot during much of my childhood." He died in a plane crash when Kent was 21. His mother still lives in Winnipeg.

The family member with the greatest influence on his life was his great-grandmother, Caroline Everette. She was born in 1875, died in 1975 (Kent was 10), had 13 children (only three of whom made it to adulthood), spoke mostly Cree and, he says, provided a direct connection to the long and troubled history of forced native relocations. Not that he heard much about it as a child ("I think maybe they were trying to protect us"). He would eventually discover through his research that his ancestors were subject to "Treaty 5 Between Her Majesty the Queen and the Saulteaux and Swampy Cree Tribes of Indians at Beren's River and Norway House." The treaty was signed in 1875 (Victoria was the Queen in question), the year of his great-grandmother's birth. Most of the First Nations chiefs who signed did so with an X. Under its terms, Monkman's forebears would be forcibly relocated three times. Caroline's daughter, Elizabeth, was made to attend residential school. But that was ancient history. For little Kent Monkman in Winnipeg, life was good.

The family had moved to a modest home in River Heights, a gentrified, largely Anglo neighbourhood. The Asper children went to the same school as Kent. Most of his friends were white kids. He fit in nicely. He was often at the top of his class, had exotic good looks that could be read as Mediterranean, was popular with both boys and girls, was clearly artistic. If he was lusting after guys, he wasn't thinking about it, which was easy, because he was

PHOTOGRAPHS: ARTIST AND MODEL BY ISAAC APPLEBAUM; THE TRIUMPH OF MISCHIEF BY ISAAC APPLEBAUM/NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA; MY TREATY IS WITH THE CROWN COURTESY OF KENT MONKMAN/BRUCE BAILEY ART PROJECTS

Monkman's great-grandmother, uncle and father, in northern Manitoba; Monkman at age four, with his parents and siblings; Monkman at 17, the age he began studying art at Sheridan College

lusting after girls as well. His career, he says, was preordained. "I knew that I would be a 'capital A artist' from the age of four or five. There was never a question as to what to do with my life. The only question was how? What's the path to becoming an artist?" Turns out the path led to Sheridan College, in Brampton. He was 17 when he arrived. He wanted hard skills: painting classes, drawing classes, colour theory. He wasn't much interested in the then-fashionable conceptual approach to art creation and criticism. "There, the idea was everything," he told me, "but I wanted a skill." He learned how to observe, and as long as he was painting or drawing, he was happy. He graduated from Sheridan in 1989 with a degree in illustration.

That is not exactly artist with a capital A. In fact, he took a job about as far from capital A art as you can get—rendering storyboards for television commercials. It turned out that it not only paid well, it was probably the smartest job choice he could have made. He was always drawing—the job demanded that he churn out dozens of storyboards a week. Once they'd served their purpose, they'd be tossed in the garbage. He did thousands of drawings in felt marker, learning to draw quickly, spontaneously, intuitively and accurately. "That skill is something I really value," he says. "I'm rarely hindered by the inability to express an idea. If I can imagine it, I can draw it." He also became fascinated with the Old Masters, their techniques, their palette, and their ability to structure a painting for both the eye's challenge and its delight, and he studied, and read, and practised, and travelled. That hasn't changed—in June, he was at the Prado museum in Madrid, studying the institution's extensive collection of Velázquez paintings. Before that, he'd spent a decade poring over the works of Albert Bierstadt, a 19th-century American painter who exemplified the Hudson River School's devotion to the scenically sublime, working the man's techniques into his own artistic DNA. Peruse a catalogue of Monkman paintings and there are Bierstadt-inspired backgrounds on almost every page. The influence stops there, though—there are no natives screwing cowboys in a Bierstadt painting (and, Monkman points out as he dabs away at Miss Chief's shoes, Bierstadt would never have used that particular pink).

Monkman is one of the few mid-career artists to see his work enter the auction market—a privilege reserved for the safely dead or famous

Monkman's current style is the culmination of many years of experiment and development. For much of the decade starting in 1989 or so, he tried to be an abstract artist. "Partly I was distancing myself from my work as an illustrator," he says, "getting as far away from that as I could." Around the turn of the millennium, he began a series of abstract paintings incorporating Cree syllabic forms, arranging them in such a way that they suggested male bodies grappling with each other. It seemed to be the sort of thing a real artist would be doing, but the paintings failed to adequately address the theme that most engaged him—colonized sexuality, by which he means the impact of the Church on Aboriginal communities, in particular the repression of two-spirited sexuality.

In a way, those barely discernible wrestling male bodies in his Cree syllabic paintings simply had to come out of the closet. He put aside the vocabulary of modernism. Before long he was painting cowboys and Indians relating to each other in ways you'll never see in a classic Hollywood western.

There are few Monkman paintings that don't include a strong homoerotic element, though a refreshing if sometimes sophomoric levity keeps them well this side of sleazy. The humour can have an art world twist—he takes Magritte's famous *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* as the title for a painting in which an Indian brave is about to penetrate a cowboy bent over a log. This sometimes makes public institutions uneasy. Harbourfront's York Quay Centre agonized over showing that *jeu d'esprit* allusion to Magritte.

The lighthearted way in which Monkman handles sexuality today might suggest he had an easy time accepting his own, but that was not the case. He compares his upbringing to that of a friend, artist and illustrator Maurice

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE MONKMAN FAMILY

DON'T MISS AN INNING OF ACTION WITH ROGERSONDEMAND.COM

WATCH THE BLUE JAYS LIVE FROM ANYWHERE.

Enjoy streaming live footage and exclusive content online. It's free, for all Rogers customers.

Sign up today at **RogersOnDemand.com**

RogersOnDemand.com Your free online source for tons of the latest movies, TV and live sports.

Only available in Canada with an internet connection. ©2011

T

Vellekoop, who talked of "the legacy of fear and shame" they both had to deal with because of their family's religious beliefs. Vellekoop also remembers Monkman telling him how terrified he was after seeing *The Boys in the Band,* an early homo-angst film. Was that what it would mean to be gay—bitching and camping it up at precious little loft parties? Monkman, relieved that he was attracted to both sexes, pursued relationships with women until he was 30-something. One of the women, Gisèle Gordon, an artist and filmmaker, remains a collaborator on most of his video and film projects. Today, there are friends who will introduce themselves by saying something like, "Yeah, Kent and I go way back—I knew him when he was straight."

He began to experiment, finally accepting that he preferred sex with men and deciding that it was time to explore relationships with them, coming out eventually to his family, whom he describes as "ultimately supportive." He's had about four serious relationships with men, including one with composer and musician Dustin Peters that lasted some seven years. They separated three years ago but remain good friends—Monkman says he tries to stay friends with all his exes. He's currently single, having recently broken up with 25-year-old Ben Bergen, a student of economics at U of T who ran for city council in Ward 27 in last year's election (he came ninth, with 380 votes). Monkman helped out with fundraising and campaigning. And yes, they remain friends (Bergen cared for Monkman's cat while he was in Europe for three weeks in June).

His friends love him, but they have to share him with his first love, painting. Gordon remembers how, when she met Monkman in the early '90s (they shared a passion for vintage Honda motorcycles), he'd saved up enough money working as an illustrator to live off for a year. He rented a studio, and every day he went to it and painted for 10 hours. That regimen has barely changed. Dustin Peters remembers how obsessed Monkman was with perfecting his technique—he would always be sketching, evaluating his drawings by turning them upside down or looking at them reflected in mirrors, making sure they "worked" no matter the perspective. He was also voraciously inquisitive, eager to expand his knowledge of music, continuing to paint while Peters played classical discs, interrupting to ask how a particular musical effect had been achieved (he was enthralled by Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring"). He was a real mentor, says Peters, emphasizing by example how critical it was to work hard and keep doing what you love. "I'd see him get the kernel of some crazy idea and stick with it," he says. "And if he came up against a wall he'd plow right through it. He's a stubborn little fucker." The movie producer Damon D'Oliveira says that you might end up at Monkman's for dinner with a bunch of friends, and when the meal was over, everyone would start chatting and Monkman would get up, move to his easel and, while still holding up his end of the conversation, start to paint.

Monkman, for a recent show in a Paris gallery, placed a mannequin of Miss Chief in an art installation titled *The Collapsing of Time and Space in an Ever-Expanding Universe*

"This is where I'm going," Monkman told me one afternoon. "This is the future. No more Bierstadt backgrounds." He was pointing to a study he had prepared for a painting he will call *My Treaty is With the Crown* ("Kent," said one of his friends, "is a closet monarchist"). It recreates, with considerable historical latitude, the 1860 visit of the Prince of Wales to Upper and Lower Canada. Miss Chief appears in wispy loincloth and red thigh-high boots, using her tresses to dry the naked feet of the then Prince of Wales (who happens to look exactly like our current Prince William). Indian chiefs in feathers and finery stand to the left. Agitated British soldiers, dogs and a horse fill the right half of the canvas. Again, it has that Old Master look, though the forebears here are not the Hudson River School but a mash-up of classic Euro guys—Rubens, Tiepolo, Jean-Léon Gérôme, Titian. Monkman talks about what makes their paintings work—how their harmony, pattern and rhythm can depend on a character's hand gesture or the way a leg is turned or how a dog looks out at you. I'm not sure he quite has it yet—this painting strikes me as self-consciously balanced and overpopulated. He will, though.

The work's meaning is harder to parse. Miss Chief is clearly a Mary Magdalene figure in a posture of supplication and surrender. The painting, Monkman explains, "ties into the theme of Aboriginal surrender. But did we surrender our land? I don't think so—the original intent of our treaties with the Crown was to share and get along together. From the Aboriginal point of view, that was the story."

John Ralston Saul would agree. In his book *A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada,* he argues that Canada is a Métis nation, that "we are a people of Aboriginal inspiration organized around a concept of peace, fairness and good government." It is our reluctance to recognize and accept that truth that hamstrings us as a country (our elite, he argues, adhere to a hierarchical, European vision of government). Monkman takes the concept a step further, adding the berdache to the mix, reminding us through colour, dance, extravagance, silliness, skill and lavish amounts of sheer fabulousness that the native traditions of borrowing with generosity and lending with respect, of a complex balancing of individual and group, of acknowledging that the great circle could always grow to include outsiders, meant there was always a place in the fabric of community for people the Europeans dismissed as sexual freaks. Métis has always bridged into queer.

If our Métis nation needs a millennial symbol, we could do worse than this: a half-breed in a feathered headdress, wearing hot pink platform heels. ■

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF KENT MONKMAN