

Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience:

Kent Monkman

by Raymond Boisjoly

Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience, Kent Monkman's nationally touring exhibition, began at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto in late 2017 and stopped in every region throughout the country except the Arctic before arriving at the Museum of Anthropology (MOA), where it will end its run in early 2021. The exhibition consists of paintings and dioramas from Monkman's studio alongside historical works and objects borrowed from public and private collections from across Canada, including the moccasins of the Plains Cree Chief Pihtokahanapiwiyin; Benjamin West's painting commemorating the 1759 Battle of Quebec titled *The Death of General Wolfe* (1770); baby carriers from Plains Ojibwa, Sahaptin, and Iroquois peoples; and antique metalwork and dinnerware. Importantly, the exhibition was conceived after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada was active from 2008 to 2015, the purpose of which was to document the history and lasting impacts of the Indian residential school system in Canada on Indigenous peoples. The exhibition was also initiated in observation of the 150th year of Canadian Confederation which saw a tremendous surge of interest from museums, galleries, and other cultural institutions in representing Indigenous engagement with the colonial history of Canada. While much of the programming supported by Canada 150 provided a necessary course correction concerning the under-representation of contemporary Indigenous artistic practices in all realms of Canadian culture, exhibitions which sought to speak to Canadian history in such a broad comprehensive manner, such as *Shame and Prejudice*, gloss over the diversity of Indigenous experiences and histories.

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Vancouver, like any part of Canada, is not representative of Canada, and it would be a mistake to reduce it to being merely “Canadian.” The MOA understands the importance of this, and engages in programming that is connected to local audiences and their histories. For example, an understated monument at the MOA’s entrance signals one of the ways the institution engages with its specific location on the traditional and unceded territory of the hə́nqəmíṇəm-speaking Musqueam people. In 2015, MOA, in collaboration with the Musqueam First Nation and Museum of Vancouver, presented *čəsnałəm, the city before the city*, an important exhibition concerning the living culture of Musqueam people and Vancouver as an ancient landscape. What feels like a crucial centring of the institution’s complicity in the ongoing displacement of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories and the ongoing dispossession of their land and resources is lost upon entering *Shame and Prejudice*, where the exhibition is narrated in French and English, the official languages of the state, along with the Cree language rendered in syllabics in exhibition texts. This effectively centres Monkman’s own cultural and ethnic specificity as a member of the Fisher River Cree Nation, rather than offering a dialogue with the Musqueam people in the spirit of reconciliation. Instead, Cree is presented with the authority typically granted to the languages of the state with all of their colonial power, and therefore made complicit in the linguistic displacement of hə́n q əmíṇ əm. The presence of the Cree language seems to only contribute to the exhibition in terms of optics, representing an image of Indigeneity without presenting a reasoning for the presence of this specific language in the exhibition texts. We are led to believe that the importance of this choice should be self-evident, and that representations of Indigeneity— *any* Indigeneity—can only be good or beneficial. Much of the exhibition feels as though it has been dropped in from above without any effort to find ways to articulate its concerns in relation to the Musqueam people or local historical trajectories. An overly general history of Indigenous life in Canada is thus imposed upon this place without nuance.

This history is narrated by Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, Monkman’s genderfluid, time-travelling alter ego. Presented in nine chapters derived from the fictional memoir of Miss Chief, it covers a broad history of Canada including Confederation, Indigenous relations to health and sickness, and contemporary experiences of Indigenous peoples in urban centres. Monkman’s work makes extensive references to art history, with Monkman stating his aim in the exhibition’s small accompanying publication to “authorize Indigenous experience into the canon of art history.” This claim appears especially strange considering MOA’s recent support of solo exhibitions by both Carl Beam and Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, two Indigenous artists that have made significant contributions to the narrative of Canadian art history.

One aspect of Monkman's engagement with art history is especially troubling; in "Chapter VI: Incarceration," Monkman portrays Miss Chief as an inmate in a sculptural diorama titled *Minimalism* (2017). While the entire exhibition offers a broad critique of Canadian history in order to make the figure of a reductive Indigeneity visible, *_ Minimalism_* is a misguided critique of late modernist art, specifically the work of American artists James Turrell and Donald Judd. The latter's work is referenced in the furniture of the inmate's prison cell and the former in the form of a glowing colour-changing screen before which Miss Chief kneels, as if in awe. Miss Chief is presented as a stand-in for imprisoned American Indian activist Leonard Peltier who is referenced in paintings later in the exhibition. The work conflates two types of institutions, the museum and the prison. While plenty of criticism may be offered to implicate western institutions in the limiting of Indigenous knowledge and culture, museums are not prisons. The work is accompanied by drawings and letters to family, friends, and allies from incarcerated Indigenous peoples in the US who are denied a proper place as artists and named subjects within the work or exhibition. The presence of these letters is not addressed in anything but the labels; they are denied a contextualization that would make their inclusion truly meaningful. Framed and presented on the outside of the diorama, they may be missed by inattentive viewers. While Indigenous peoples do face overrepresentation in Canadian penitentiaries, it is entirely distasteful to represent yourself—even via an alter ego playing Leonard Peltier—as the subject of that suffering and struggle.

Shame and Prejudice flattens the complexity of Canadian history and the diversity of Indigenous peoples and nations who live on this land. To use Miss Chief as the protagonist of this historical narrative can only be seen as self-aggrandizing. While Monkman wants to represent all Indigenous peoples, he appears to have only thought to represent himself.