

Change on the range

Kent Monkman's paintings re-imagine history from the point of view of aboriginal and gay culture

By Nancy Tousley
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Spotlight

Kent Monkman: The Triumph of Mischief, at the Glenbow Museum, through April 25, and Kent Monkman: The Treason of Images, at TrépanierBaer Gallery, through March 13. Catalogue: \$59.95

Step right up, ladies and gentlemen, and enter the red curtains to experience Miss Chief Eagle Testicles' Travelling Gallery.

This ageless beauty, whose fashion icon is Cher and whose platform heels are seven inches high, is the consummate impresario. She is part hunter, warrior, adventurer, time traveller, artist, film director, star, two-spirit seductress and the alter ego of the Toronto artist Kent Monkman.

Inspired by early 19th-century artists Paul Kane and George Catlin, who became famous for their depictions of the Indians of the Wild Old West, Miss Chief has "determined to dedicate whatever talents and proficiency I possess to the painting of a series of pictures illustrative of the European male."

Eyebrows going up? Well, think of it as tit-for-tat. Monkman uses mimicry to brush history against the grain.

Miss Chief is the brilliant stroke in Kent Monkman's reimaginings of the West and the encounters of white men and First Nations from the point of view of aboriginal and gay culture. Her travelling gallery is the conceit for *The Triumph of Mischief*, his travelling exhibition, now at the Glenbow Museum, which he and Miss Chief have modelled on Catlin's *Indian Gallery*. In the late 1830s and early '40s, Catlin toured his paintings of native people, his collection of artifacts and a group of aboriginal performers to major cities in the United States and Europe.

The fact that Catlin represented himself in his painting inspired Monkman to create his alter ego. Miss Chief, a figure of exuberant sexuality, has been the animating force or centre of attention in nearly every picture Monkman has painted since she made her first appearance in *Portrait of the Artist as Hunter* (2002). Her presence complicates things and makes the ambitious reach of Monkman's paintings richer and deeper.

Miss Chief is a berdache or man who wears women's clothing, performs a woman's roles and is accepted in native cultures. She, like Monkman, is a two-spirit person. Moreover, she is a berdache whose roles include mediator, healer and artisan, and a trickster whose powers are magical.

Doubling, along with mimicry, humour and parody, is a constant strategy of Monkman, whose parentage is Swampy Cree and Irish-English. In addition to the dualities of his alter ego, his paintings and films are full of double entendres, visual puns and pairs of characters, often of two races, like cowboy and Indian, a persistent stereotype of superiority even today that Monkman reverses, often with bawdy hilarity.

The doubling in Monkman's travelling gallery conceit turns his own show into an installation work. At its centre is the shimmering Theatre de Cristal, a transparent teepee-cinema, made of strings of glistening beads, in which two short films are projected on a white simulated buffalo hide on its floor. Surrounding the teepee on the dark red walls, a colour museums favour for 19th-century shows, are two of Monkman's very large paintings, a salon-style hanging of smaller ones, a wall monitor for videos of two of Monkman's performances as Miss Chief and the text of Miss Chief's Wanderings of an Artist (2007), quoted from above.

A small side gallery contains a suite of five brilliant photographs, Miss Chief: The Emergence of a Legend (2006), made to look like old tintypes, that show her in evolutionary roles as a performer in Wild West shows, vaudeville and silent movies. A case contains her red high heels with beadwork (Made in China), her dream-catcher bra, her red-silk-lined raccoon jock strap and her Louis Vuitton arrow quiver.

The film, Miss Chief's Magical Winter Count (With Traditional Swampy Cree Beadwork), is projected into the corner on two white simulated buffalo hide screens. A terrific send-up of stereotypes and stereotyping, the film-within-a-film suggests that the photographer and filmmaker Edward Curtis and his famous images of the "vanishing race" formed the underpinnings of the Hollywood Indian. Curtis is shooting a film called Shooting Geronimo. When he dons a wig to become Geronimo, to demonstrate how the shooter should play his part, he is accidentally shot dead. Uh oh: cut to Intermission.

When the film begins again, it is The Dead Man's Tale and Curtis has been transformed into General George Custer, who was killed by Indians at the Battle of Little Big Horn. The two native actors, for whom this has been a silly game of dress-up from Curtis's wig and costume trunk, claim a white man did it and run off. Miss Chief, who has been looking on with amusement, revives the dead man and the two ride off together with Curtis/Custer in the slumped-over posture of the Indian in James Earle Fraser's (in)famous statue of a near-dead horse and rider, The End of the Trail (1915).

The Treachery of Images, Monkman's solo show at TrépanierBaer Gallery, functions well as an extension of the work at the Glenbow.

The medium is a large part of the message in Monkman's work, and shows how messages are transmitted by media. He shoots his films in the style of silents, made in the period when film genres and stereotypes were being codified. His landscape paintings are based on those of 19th-century artist Albert Bierstadt and others. Bierstadt's huge canvases depicted sublime western vistas, often in Yosemite Valley, which are imbued with transcendent light and signified the doctrines of manifest destiny and Christianity.

But where Bierstadt's landscapes are emptied of people, erasing the presence of the non-Christian First Nations, Monkman's are populated by both races, their figures drawn from Catlin, Kane and Kriegoff, French painters like Poussin, David and Gerome, ancient Greek mythology, aboriginal iconography and a host of other art historical references. A raven or coyote signals the presence of the Trickster. The same sky and mountains, claimed by Bierstadt as symbols of national might, were the home of animistic aboriginal people who viewed the mountains as their ancestors.

And Monkman imagines that the red man and the white man felt a strong attraction for each other, filling a gap left by the unacknowledged history of homosexuality on the frontier.

Moving across time and enmeshing the past with the present, Monkman is looking not for the triumph of one race over another -- that would be the white man's way -- but a balance struck between them through the breaking down of the old metanarratives and myths. *Trappers of Men* (2006), his largest painting and first to reach the huge scale of a Bierstadt, is based on Bierstadt's *Among the Sierra Nevada, California* (1868). Resplendent in pink, Miss Chief appears, standing on the water of the mountain lake, like a miraculous apparition, a Christ or a Venus. The vision stuns the assorted figures along the bank, who include Catlin, Curtis with his tripod camera, Mondrian, Pollock, white traders bartering for furs and assorted explorers. The trappers of men would seem to be those who take possessions and land as well as images. Miss Chief, like Monkman's mischief, can be seen as a liberating opening of the trap of colonialism, racism, bigotry and oppression, the larger themes being trod upon by Miss Chief's seven-inch high heel shoes.

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