

Kent Monkman: The Treason of Images

February 11 to March 13, 2010

Opening Reception: Thursday, February 11th from 6 to 8 pm, Artist in Attendance

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Kent Monkman, *Death of Adonis*, 2010
Acrylic on canvas; 6' x 10'; 1.83 x 3 metres

The Treason of Images

The Belgian Surrealist painter, René Magritte's *La trahison des images* (*The Treachery of Images*), 1928–29, was a touchstone of modernity. It revised ideas of the world as surely as Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* or Albert Einstein's *Theory of General Relativity*—stimulating imagination, insight and invention, at the same time causing new perplexity and insecurity. Famously and simply, Magritte illustrated an elegant curved smoking pipe, below which he painted the sentence: “Ceci n'est pas une pipe.”

A small early canvas by Kent Monkman was titled *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, 2001. In it, an Indian prepares to sodomize a cowboy, who submissively kneels over a fallen log, waiting as his rapist cocks his weapon. The cowboy's rifle, propped idly within his reach, is one of several equivalent pipes found in the painting. Its title becomes its caption, an ironic, aggressive utterance in the moment before penetration. Smoking a peace pipe, of course, became the clichéd ceremonial rite between Europeans and Aboriginals on the occasions of treaties made, soon to be broken, familiar from any number of film Westerns.

Monkman painted *The Treason of Images* again in 2008, somewhat more cryptically. This scene finds a potentially harmonious gathering by a small waterfall. A naked Aboriginal poses with arm upraised as if to hurl a salmon spear. Rather than scanning the stream, he looks perplexedly towards a European photographer. The photographer's back is towards the viewer, both arms also raised, waving a clutched umbrella, either in enthusiastic direction or a tantrum. He wishes to portray his model as the ancient Greek god Poseidon, classicizing his idealized noble savage in a picture that will outlive and eternalize the youth after he and his people have vanished. Casually looking on are two Aboriginal dandies, attired in ludicrously exaggerated leggings and boots, exotic feathers in their hair. One sports a feathered hand fan; the other a long-stemmed pipe.

Dandies among the Indians were a source of vexation to frontier artist George Catlin, who encountered such fops throughout his travels, disparaged in his journals, yet at the same time harboured secret fascination at their preening, narcissistic attention to physical appearance and fancy costume. Catlin once began a portrait of one of these young men that reportedly aroused such a ruckus in the village that he abandoned it having only rendered its figure in preliminary outline. Monkman alludes to the omission and repression of two-spirited sexuality, first by the Europeans and subsequently by Aboriginals, in a series of imaginary double portraits. *Eagle's Ribs with Tinselled Buck No. 6,932*, *Two Crows, a Band Chief with Tinselled Buck No. 7,429* and *Old Bear with Tinselled Buck No. 10,601* respectively depict a finished, identifiable, albeit oddly off-centre, warrior, chief and shaman. Each is paired with a chalky background sketch of lounging dandy. The numbers arbitrarily assigned by Monkman refer to the comprehensive ambitions stated by Catlin, simultaneously census and inventory, dependent on the degree of individualism he deigned upon his subjects.

The presiding two-spirit entity throughout Monkman's impressively integrated body of painting, performance and film is Miss Chief Eagle Testickle. Being of both past and future, Miss Chief embodies the contemporary ramifications in Monkman's imagery, which on first appearances might seem anachronistically arrested in the late nineteenth century. Those were years when encounters in the West decisively swung toward conquest. Monkman's art returns to this period to stage alternate outcomes, to undo devastations long thought irrevocable. Miss Chief witnesses and mourns the misdirection of both Aboriginal and European. Above all, she is the muse of attraction and sexual pleasure, always mercurial, unreliable indicators of love or trust.

In *The Death of Adonis*, 2010, Monkman rearranges what was German-American painter Albert Bierstadt's final commanding Western showpiece, *The Last of the Buffalo*, c.1888, which he triumphantly and controversially chose to represent him at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889. Bierstadt enigmatically depicted an Aboriginal hunter poised to lance a bison bull that is goring his horse. Their combat occurs on a plain where Indians rampage through a slaughtered herd while vultures circle overhead. In Monkman's painting, executed at identically sweeping 6' x 10' dimensions, the bull has mortally pierced the horse's underside. Its sudden rearing causes the cowboy rider's rifle to misfire, knocking off a companion. The cowboys' indiscriminate shooting has already downed one of their own, presumably a figuration of Adonis, Greek cult deity of life, death and rebirth. His body is cradled by a tearful Miss Chief, mascara smearing across her cheek. No scavengers loom to restoratively clean up this mess.

The self-serving American doctrine of Manifest Destiny co-identified the fate of the Plains peoples with the once teeming bison herd. For both, extinction was euphemistically forecast, as if by design of nature or God. This masked unstated policies of extermination. Monkman's *Body Bag*, 2010, re-flares the inextinguishable embers of such disavowed official attitudes, evident as recently as last year, when reserves in northern Manitoba found body bags in kits assembled by Health Canada to help them respond to swine flu outbreaks. On one side of his bag, Monkman pictures the eternal being, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle; the other is wool blanket material of the sorts once distributed, lethally infected with smallpox.

Sunday Afternoon in the Park, 2010 paints an equally deluded measure of care for Aboriginals. Monkman's arch nemesis, George Catlin (1796–1872), did not live to see if the Indians would ultimately be vanquished, as was supposed. During his last years, working under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution, Catlin proposed that the U.S. government create parks as managed sanctuaries for the native habitats, fauna and people of the West. Monkman's canvas portrays an outing of bored dandies, arranged in the reposed manners of leisurely Parisians, à la Georges Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, 1884–86. Simultaneously spectators and inhabitants in their own zoos, even shades of this bizarre vision eventually would come to pass.

Ben Portis, Toronto, January 2010

Ben Portis is a curator and writer living in Toronto.

Kent Monkman is an artist of Cree ancestry who works in a variety of media including painting, film/video, performance and installation. Monkman has exhibited widely within Canada, and is well represented in numerous private and public collections including the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the Montréal Museum of Fine Arts. He is represented by the Stephen Friedman Gallery in London, UK and TrépanierBaer Gallery, Calgary, Canada. Kent Monkman lives and works in Toronto. He will participate in the 2010 edition of The Biennale of Sydney, *The Beauty of Distance*, curated by David Elliot.

This exhibition is held in cooperation with Kent Monkman: The Triumph of Mischief at the Glenbow Museum, February 13 to April 25, 2010. The exhibition is organized by the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA), Curator David Liss and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Curator Shirley Madill.