

A monk in mischief's clothing

Kent Monkman turns colonial visions of sexuality and superiority on their head

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Drew Anderson

It's a queer thing. Artist Kent Monkman is handsome and pretty. As a man he's lean, young looking, with pepper dark hair accented by touches of salt. And his pretty alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, is sometimes adorned in pink feathers, a flowing headdress, in a beaded native getup that would make RuPaul blush, clenching a Louis Vuitton bag. And other times you may find Testickle in a dream catcher bra with raccoon underwear and beaded red stripper shoes.

His alter ego lurks everywhere in his work, mostly paintings, but also video, installation and performance. Monkman aims to challenge colonial depictions of Aboriginal People and the landscapes they called home, mimicking early 19th century work by artists such as Paul Kane and George Catlin — often massive paintings of wide-open vistas, complete with biblical allegories. Look closer at the canvasses and you see males frolicking in homoerotic joy, native painters subjecting European specimens to “modelling” and Testickle running amok, seducing trappers or running them off the sled trail. Here the power relations and the sexual rules have been rewritten.

“I'm populating them with other narratives,” says Monkman, a Winnipegger of Cree and Irish descent who has called Toronto home for the last 20 years. “A lot of what I do is look at mythologies, so I also populate them with a very strong aboriginal way of looking at the world.”

One of those ways of looking at the world is the idea of being two-spirited, a native concept relating to sexuality that doesn't fit hetero norms. Homosexuality was often celebrated in these cultures before the introduction of Christianity and the near decimation of Canadian First Nations. “My family were Christians,” says Monkman, whose work is currently on display at the Glenbow Museum. “It's not about bashing Christianity, it's about how certain beliefs become sort of twisted by human beings who have ulterior motives.”

“You can't paint everything with the same colour; I don't think it works just to reverse it. It's about a complex relationship, a complex history of people; you have cultures coming together, you have Aboriginal People converting to Christianity in different ways. So a lot of my work really is about complexities of relationships; it's not trying to simplify things and saying ‘this is right and this is wrong.’”

It's also not about being serious all the time. Monkman's work is funny, if you haven't already guessed. Two large paintings dominate Glenbow's contemporary gallery space, facing off across the room with a beaded crystal teepee in between. In one, *The Triumph of Mischief*, a priest is held up to the saddle of a Native warrior, lost in ecstasy while being embraced from behind. Around him you find Picasso, Lewis and Clarke and one poor man who appears to have a feather up his bum. It's a chaotic scene with tranquil mountains as its backdrop.

In the crystal teepee — *Théâtre de Cristal* — videos play on white buffalo hides rimmed with beaded embroidery, while in the projection room, *Miss Chief's Magical Winter Camp* plays on two more hides. In this work, *Testickle* causes non-stop mischief between a filmmaker and his two native subjects.

"Humour is this thing that opens people's spirit, so I think after you've had a good chuckle, you're a little more open to receiving a different idea," says Monkman. "That's kind of my strategy, is to seduce with fun and play and humour and these sexy images, then you have their attention. Then you can talk about more hard-hitting subjects."

The Glenbow seems the ideal setting for those subjects, considering its large collection of historical work produced by white Christians. "It's exciting for me to be at a museum like this because they have a wonderful collection of historical work," says Monkman. "So works that I've done here resonate in different parts of the collection, historical parts of the collection."

Glenbow deserves credit for mounting this show. On a weekday afternoon, school children congregate in the lobby of an institution that is still dominated by the past, despite its resurrection of contemporary art collecting and exhibiting. In a city with latent, or perhaps overt, homophobia issues, mounting a challenge to historical art and heterosexual dominance is a refreshing change.

Guest curator Ben Portis, the man responsible for organizing the Calgary stop of this travelling exhibition, says that the installation is different in each city. In Toronto it's a more cosmopolitan affair, for example. "In Calgary, it ties into a kind of re-imagining of the forces that shaped this city and this culture," he says.