

M.A. in Communications and Culture Project Paper

**Indigenous Art in the Museum Context:
An Exhibition and Analysis of the Work of Kent Monkman**

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Introduction

From October 3, 2007 to February 14, 2009, Candice Hopkins and I co-curated an exhibition of Indigenous art entitled *Shapeshifters, Time Travellers and Storytellers*.¹ Held at the Institute for Contemporary Culture (ICC) at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), the show included work by Canadian artist Kent Monkman and seven other contemporary artists, as well as a selection of historical artifacts from the ROM's collections. The genesis of the show grew from the curators' desire to engage in the ongoing debate around the collision between past and present that was to be so conspicuously manifested in the Daniel Libeskind-designed postmodernist extension to the ROM. It was a timely opportunity to exhibit some of the groundbreaking work coming from some of Canada's contemporary artists, particularly in the context of the museum, which maintains a traditional approach to Indigenous arts and cultures. As the inaugural ICC-generated exhibit in the newly opened ROM wing, the show was to comment on the multiple layers of the colonial relationship as it was reflected by the museum's history of displaying and housing Indigenous art, and the relationship of contemporary Indigenous artists with the museum and its collections.

The *Shapeshifters* exhibit proposed an indirect examination of the museum's role in containing and interpreting Indigenous art and artifacts. By demonstrating the non-

static nature of Indigenous contemporary art and the artists' ancestral and emotional connections to the artifacts held in the ROM's collections, the exhibit aimed to break open some of the constraints and limitations inherent to the anthropological and aesthetic forms of representation favoured by the museum. Curator Jolene Rickard writes:

A museum cannot serve every need, but it can display a broad range of ideas presented by Aboriginal artists... If the only interest in Native art is the visual aesthetic, if the political and philosophical dimensions of that art are merely footnotes, everyone will be deprived of an opportunity to rethink the Americas not only as an Indigenous space, but also as a continuously colonizing Canadian/American/European/Asian space. (2002:121)

The curators and artists approached this exhibit as an exciting opportunity to engage the museum space and collections in a contemporary dialogue about the ongoing colonial relationship and how it has morphed over time. As Sarah Milroy eloquently summarizes in a review of the exhibit, the show offered "a new look at our entangled worlds" and a deepened understanding of "the interaction between white and native cultures and the ties of history that bind us together" (Oct. 6, 2007). Rickard states that it is imperative to rethink the historical narrative of the Americas in an ongoing process of discourse and reinterpretation. In accord with Rickard's position, the exhibit aimed to demonstrate that neither the past nor the present can be interpreted in a vacuum; relationships between objects, stories, ideas and histories are constantly changing meaning in response to new interactions.

As the first ICC-generated exhibit to take place in the new addition to the museum, this project made an important contribution to the history of the ROM and the ICC. The fact that the ICC chose to showcase contemporary multidisciplinary works by Indigenous artists was a symbolic gesture and a first for the ROM, which had never previously mounted an exhibit of contemporary multidisciplinary Indigenous art. In this essay, I focus on the contributions of Kent Monkman. As I hope to demonstrate, in his engagement with the ROM's collection and history of display, and in the body of work produced for the exhibit, Monkman strategically and effectively enacted the queer Indigenous re-visioning of colonization that he had already embodied in his visual and performance art.

1. Kent Monkman, the Artist and his Politics

Kent Monkman (b. 1965) is a Canadian artist of Cree ancestry whose ongoing body of work, initiated in the 2004 series of paintings entitled *Eros and Empire*, revisualizes and rewrites the story of colonization from a queer Indigenous perspective. By "queer," I refer to the current definition used by the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, a term re-appropriated to connote self-empowerment through sexual and gender expression that does not conform to a heteronormative perspective. Through visual art, film and performance art, Monkman has had considerable success with this series, with works represented in numerous public and private collections including the National Gallery of Canada, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Museum London, The Glenbow Museum, The Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, The Mackenzie Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the

Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. In 2008, Monkman debuted the solo exhibit *The Triumph of Mischief* at the Hamilton Art Gallery, which toured to galleries across Canada.

In his work, Monkman speaks directly to the absence of first-hand Indigenous perspectives and interpretations in the North American canon of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art, and to the heavily romanticized imagery of the period that shaped ongoing images and perceptions of Indigenous people. His work offers a counter-history to the dominant colonial ideology that has shaped North American society and continues to influence interpretations and understandings of Indigenous identities and cultures. Smithsonian curator Paul Chaat Smith writes, "The creation myths of North America allow little room for Indians. We are inconvenient reminders of a tragic past" (2005: 26). Through the invention of his striking drag-queen alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, Monkman challenges the creation myths of North American colonization, specifically those cultivated by nineteenth-century painters. These mythologies cast Native North Americans as members of a tragic race on the verge of extinction and perpetuate the idea of the Indian as a "noble savage," an inaccurate identification that influenced later and ongoing imagery of Indigenous North America (See Ellingson: 2001 and Le Blanc: 2003). Shirley Madill observes:

In their paintings, artists such as George Catlin, Paul Kane, Cornelius Krieghoff and Frederick Verner froze Aboriginal people in time. The paintings of Catlin and Kane in particular were perceived as official documents – evidence that provided historically accurate information on First Nations culture. In fact, the works were more truthfully evidence of European dominance on First Nations culture. This

misleading view fed into popular culture, such as Hollywood movies and romance or adventure novels, as well as consumer goods. (2009:28)

The agenda of these artists was quite simply to capture a vanishing race on the verge of extinction, thus heightening the romantic appeal of the work, its artists and their subjects. Additionally, during this period the Hudson River School of painting, made famous by artists including Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Edwin Church, were portraying the landscapes of North America with celestial and majestic imagery that was heavily influenced by romanticism and alluded to territorial conquest as a manifestation of divine destiny (Howat, 1987). The taming of these wild vistas, usually portrayed as uninhabited by humans, elevated the stature of the artist and his fellow colonizers as heroic adventurers discovering a “new world.” It is likely for this symbolic reason that Catlin often inserted himself into his landscape paintings.

The paintings and writings of Paul Kane and George Catlin are a key source of inspiration for Monkman’s film, painting, installation and performance art work. Each published extensive diaries in which the “Red Man” was seen as a sympathetic character of inferior intelligence, ultimately doomed to extinction. Catlin articulated this notion throughout his diary, writing that his work would “doubtless be interesting to future ages; who will have little else left from which to judge of the original inhabitants of this simple race of beings, who require but a few years more of the march of civilization and death, to deprive them of all their native customs and character” (1884:16). Kane lamented the loss of the Native while using the subject as the source of inspiration for his romanticized art and adventures, writing, “All trace of his footsteps are fast being obliterated from his once favourite haunts, and those who seek to study his native

manner and customs must travel far through the pathless forest to find him" (1859:1). The "vanishing race" and "noble savage" mythologies that developed in the nineteenth century continued to pervade popular culture, gaining momentum in the twentieth century through Hollywood films, pulp fiction and television.

Monkman has mined the diaries and archives of Kane, Catlin and their contemporaries as inspiration for his own work, using the same methods of diary-writing, self-insertion and myth-making employed by the earlier artists in order to transform their historical narratives and create new meanings. "Banished to the dustbin of art history, and the ethnology wing of the museum," observes Monkman, "the First Peoples of North America are forever trapped in these paintings and photographs as 'monuments of a noble race'" (Burnett, 2007). For Monkman, the creation of a new version of history – one that exposes specific historical narratives as subjective fantasies – is a necessary strategy for establishing a contemporary Indigenous identity. Playing with non-linear concepts of time, Monkman not only establishes his queer identity within the contemporary context, but also firmly roots it within a traditional, cultural framework that had been systematically erased from history.

Monkman's work is distinctly postcolonial in terms of deconstructing the narratives of colonialism, appropriating the visual and narrative language of colonialism to challenge its continued dominance as an ideological framework for contemporary identities. The postcolonial strategy however, is inseparable from Monkman's play with issues of sexuality and gender, which I have chosen to focus on primarily in this essay. Using nineteenth-century colonial and landscape art as his point of entry, Monkman's work is an exhaustive process of re-imagining the history of colonization using a

contemporary queer Indigenous aesthetic. This strategy allows him the opportunity to create what Homi Bhabha refers to as a “third space” (1994:8) or hyperreality arising from a forced encounter between past and present, fact and fiction. Moreover, in his paintings, films, installations and live performances, Monkman insists on his own inclusion in the artistic canons of North American historical and landscape art. At the same time, his work inserts a queer Indigenous and contemporary narrative into the story of colonization, collapsing time in order to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of these continued mythologies. In the process, the fictional and subjective qualities of history are exposed, thereby offering the opportunity for new narratives.

2. Monkman’s Proposed Intervention in the ROM’s First Peoples’ Gallery

Monkman was one of the first artists to agree to participate in the *Shapeshifters* exhibit and he worked closely with the curators from the show’s inception. From the start, he wanted to respond to the recent and controversial opening of the ROM’s Daphne Cockwell First Peoples’ Gallery. Unveiled in January 2006, this was the first permanent gallery at the ROM devoted to their collection of art and artifacts from Canada’s First Peoples. Reacting to the presence of a large body of nineteenth-century painter Paul Kane’s work, which occupies the central corridor of the gallery, renowned Anishnaabe artist and curator Robert Houle was quoted in *The Globe and Mail* asking, “What’s a dead white guy doing in the middle of our gallery?” (qtd. in Milroy, 2007). Like Houle, Monkman wanted to respond to the ROM’s continued investment in non-Indigenous representations of Indigenous people and their cultures. He and the curators proposed an intervention in the First Peoples Gallery which would see Monkman

hanging a small painting responding to the work of Kane in the central corridor of the gallery, next to Kane's own work. The idea, supported by then-ICC director Kelvin Browne, was to insert surreptitiously an alternative narrative, specifically one from a contemporary queer Indigenous perspective, to challenge the dominant historical narrative offered by Kane's body of work. The context of this intervention was crucial – the ROM's staff curators of The First Peoples' Gallery were not Indigenous and there had never been an opportunity for an Indigenous artist or curator to challenge or respond to Kane's representations at the ROM. While ROM curator Ken Lister's display of Kane's sketchbooks and objects allowed visitors a glimpse of how Kane romanticized his subjects for public consumption, there had not been an opportunity for discourse or engagement with this subject matter in the gallery.

The ROM holds Canada's largest collection of Kane's work, comprising over 100 oil paintings and 350 sketches. The First Peoples Gallery also opened with a display of the man's artifacts and a kiosk outlining his life and works. The authority of Kane's work is rarely challenged and its accuracy rarely addressed in a meaningful way in the museum context. Monkman's agenda was not simply to critique Kane's work but rather to bring new relevance and a contemporary context to the canon. Monkman's paintings meticulously recreate traditional landscape paintings, now a largely outdated art form. In many ways, the artist pays homage to the nineteenth-century European artists who pioneered this art form and who inspire his own body of work. "There is a genuine love of the old masters here," says Monkman, "a genuine love of painting. All through history, painters have learned by copying the old masters" (Burnett, 2007). Neither the artist nor the curators were proposing that there was no validity in Kane's work or that

the paintings were no longer relevant; as Monkman recognizes, “The reason I respond to these artists is because I think their work is important” (Walrus, 2008). Rather, the aim of the intervention was to challenge the singular authority given to European interpretations of Indigenous cultures through the historical lens and to encourage the consideration of alternative narratives. Monkman’s work also relies heavily on humour which, as Gerald McMaster has noted, is “almost completely lacking in the works of [historic] non-Native artists” (2007: 24). The intervention was seen as an opportunity to insert this vital aspect of Indigenous cultures into a space where humour and sexuality have been effectively written out of the story.

While realizing that this intervention would be a bold step for a traditional museum to take, the artist and curators believed that it was a timely and exciting opportunity for this multi-layered discourse on Indigenous representation, particularly in light of the ROM’s daring and controversial postmodernist architectural reconfiguration of the museum itself, which ROM Director William Thorsell claimed was an example of the museum’s revitalization and growth (Studio Libeskind: 2007). Following a number of consultations and discussions that culminated in a face-to-face meeting with William Thorsell and ROM Head Curator Mark Engstrom, Monkman was refused the opportunity to hang his work in the First Peoples Gallery. However, the process of attempting this thwarted intervention ultimately shaped Monkman’s contributions to the *Shapeshifters, Time Travellers and Storytellers* exhibit and provided the context for my analysis of the work. As a result of negotiations with the ROM over the proposed intervention, the curators were given a compromise in the form of permission to borrow Kane’s *Medicine Mask Dance* (1848-56) for the exhibit, which provided a critical context for Monkman’s

work. The lack of cooperation from the First Peoples Gallery curators and the final outcome of the negotiations highlight the political necessity of Monkman's work and the continued dominance of colonial narratives in shaping understandings of First Peoples identities in the museum context.

3. Monkman Confronts Paul Kane in *Duel After the Masquerade*

In his painting, *Duel After the Masquerade* (2007), created specifically for the *Shapeshifters* exhibit, Monkman as the character Miss Chief challenges Paul Kane to a painter's duel. It takes place in front of Kane's Toronto home, located, ironically, in Toronto's gay district of Church Street and Wellesley Street. The painting portrays a fallen Kane, paintbrush hanging limply from his hand, looking visibly defeated as a triumphant Miss Chief casts him a farewell glance over the shoulder of her floor-length fur coat. As in all of Monkman's work, Miss Chief is highly sexualized, with a muscular body that is both hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine. Through Miss Chief, Monkman externalizes the concept of the Two-Spirit identity, in which a person houses both the male and female spirit (Williams, 1986). The concept of being a Two-Spirit person is a uniquely Indigenous approach to queer sexuality; it places emphasis on the spiritual elements of sexuality, rather than just the sexual or biological aspects. Michel Foucault writes that sexuality is not a "natural given," but rather a historical construct in which physical pleasure is controlled and manipulated according to the dominant power structures and ideologies of the time (1978:106). Monkman proposes an alternative to a historical narrative that has written out queer identities; the insertion of his Two-Spirit

presence challenges the static and mutually exclusive Christian-based gender roles that define sexuality based on physiognomy alone.

In *Duel After the Masquerade*, as in much of his work, Monkman utilizes the aesthetic and strategic language of queer and camp to reconstruct the Two Spirit identity, creating in the process a new approach that speaks to traditional, as well as contemporary, sensibilities. The Two-Spirit narrative has roots in the traditional Cree culture, as well as relevance to Monkman's present-day life. The Cree word *ayekkwew*, for example, means "neither man nor woman" or both "man and woman" (Williams 1986:82-83), and it is well documented that Two-Spirited people were accepted and often celebrated in the majority of pre-contact North American tribal societies (Jacobs, 1997). In fact, it was the discovery that George Catlin had purposefully chosen to exclude the berdashes he encountered from his popular work that inspired Monkman's creation of the Miss Chief narrative (Liss: 42). In all of her guises, Miss Chief is a sexually charged entity, displaying the hyper-femininity of the drag queen with a muscular authority and physicality that is distinctly masculine. The concept of a hybrid spiritual gender is the basis for the Two-Spirit philosophy that Monkman affirms and reclaims in this work, melding it with the contemporary drag queen persona. While not referring directly to the Two-Spirit identity, Marjorie Garber's analysis of drag as a political tool used to motivate recognition and acceptance of a third gender, or what she refers to as the "third term," is useful in articulating the political significance of Monkman's use of a hybrid sexual identity in his work. Garber writes:

The third term is not a term. Much less is it a sex, certainly not an instantiated "blurred" sex as signified by a term like "androgynous" or "hermaphrodite," although

these words have culturally specific significance at certain historical moments.

The “third” is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility.

(1992:11)

Garber argues that drag questions the assumed naturalness of gender “through the discourse of clothing and body parts” (11). This has a destabilizing effect on accepted concepts of what constitutes the male and female. The concept of Two-Spirit identity is a recent one whose meanings and interpretations are still being articulated by artists, scholars and individuals. Monkman creates a new framework for negotiating the Two-Spirit identity, as well as preconceived notions of Indigenous masculinity, art and culture.

Referencing one of Kane’s most famous and reproduced works, *Medicine Mask Dance* (1848-56), as well as French painter Jean-Leon Gerome’s *The Duel After the Masquerade* (1857-59), Monkman inserts Miss Chief into the centre of a new narrative that not only intersects with past historical events but also follows distinguished artistic traditions. Trin Minh-ha has observed, “the return to a denied heritage allows one to start again with different re-departures, different pauses, different arrivals” (1991:14). Although Minh-ha speaks to diasporic individuals re-imagining their lost or denied heritages, I think her work translates well to the cultural and historical losses experienced by Indigenous people who were also displaced from their land and people. Through his mastery of the painted backdrops and visual language of his predecessors, Monkman returns to various sites of conquest, rewriting and re-visualizing these narratives using the very tools of the colonizers – specifically, meticulously rendered mythologizing landscape imagery – in order to arrive at an interpretation of events that

relates to his own life. In addition to mimicking the rhetoric of nineteenth-century Hudson-River-style painting, Monkman utilizes its narrative tropes to fashion an alternative historical imagining that functions both to critique and reinvent the genre. Having been denied a space in these historical narratives and the artistic canon itself (which continue to be validated and given authority by art galleries and museums), Monkman returns to the point of early contact to add new possibilities to the mythology. By conflating notions of time and space, Monkman creates a "third space" where he can negotiate the process of decolonization and establish new power dynamics. Bhabha writes that freedom exists in the decolonization of the imagined spaces created by colonizers, a point also articulated by Monkman, who re-visions this territory as a space where he can travel through time in the guise of his alter ego and rewrite history from a uniquely queer Indigenous perspective.

Monkman's strategies of mimicry and reenactment free him to explore his individual identity and its relationship to historical narratives, stereotypical iconography and cultural commodification. Gerald McMaster describes Monkman as a "privileged other" whose strategy of re-enactment offers an opportunity to reevaluate the tangled histories of Native and non-Native North Americans (McMaster, 2007). In his role as Miss Chief, Monkman is able to access a unique and, as McMaster says, privileged space that transcends the restricting confines of gender and race, time and place. Here, the artist uses the powers of his hybrid identity to arrive at new understandings of identity. "For everyone involved in re-enactment," McMaster explains, "it is a transformative experience, for it allows us to momentarily step into a real or imagined past" (2007:13). Occupying the role of "privileged other," mimicry and re-enactment

allow Monkman to provide audiences the opportunity to experience a suspended reality of new historical possibilities. Bhabha describes “colonial mimicry” as “the sign of double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the other as it visualizes power” (1994:86). In accordance with Bhabha’s definition, *Duel After the Masquerade* mimics the style, form and composition of European colonial painters while re-enacting a historical narrative that positions the non-Indigenous storyteller as the creator of Indigenous signification and representation. As Bhabha writes, Monkman’s strategy is more complex than mere mimicry; in his mastery of the colonial language, he assumes the position of authority and power. He is able to harness the tools of the colonizer and appropriate them to create meaning and escape the confining role of “other” that was the defining representation of Indigenous identity in this highly influential period of art.

In a seminal essay on Monkman’s work, David McIntosh articulates the artist’s unique mimetic strategies, referring to him as a “postindian diva warrior who oscillates between illusion and reality, between the artificiality of virtual simulations and the actuality of embodied desires” (*Fuse*: 13). McIntosh asserts that, by embodying the simulacral histories of North America, Monkman reverses the colonial gaze and embodies simulated absence. The effect is a transformation of history and the opportunity for “new becomings.” McIntosh writes that Monkman exceeds “simple role reversal and simulation by constructing eloquently disjunctive palimpsests that break open to reveal new seams of meaning” (13). In the terms of Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra, outlined in the essay “The Precession of Simulacra”, in which the real “is nothing more than operational,” Monkman’s work challenges the version of historical

truth put forth by 19th century artists and effectively rewrites history within the framework of a queer Indigenous ideology that runs counter to the dominant ideology of Christian heteronormativity. In the process, Monkman exposes what Baudrillard refers to as the fable of the Empire – in this case embodied in the work of Kane and the museum itself – as a product of a colonial ideology that the artist views as deeply outdated (1998: 145). Seizing Baudrillard's notion that truth only exists in simulation, Monkman finds the ultimate advantage over colonization strategies; by creating and controlling the image, he becomes the "truth" teller, the "privileged other" referred to by McMaster. The late Native American writer Louis Owens observes:

It is the artifactualization, the stereotyping, the damningly *hyperreal* "Indian" that makes it so difficult for actual living Indian people to comprehend survival, and to adapt and change while holding to cultural identities, amidst the still-colonialist, dominant Euroamerican societies of the Americas. (1998: 18)

Monkman addresses the conundrum articulated by Owens by occupying Baudrillard's hyperreal space and time, traveling back to where specific meaning was created in order to intercept it and create a new simulation for present-day audiences who can appreciate his strategy of undermining the ideological imperatives of colonialism. His work is particularly effective in the contemporary hyper-mediated context, where our interactions and meanings are increasingly based on simulations.

Employing the concept of masquerade in the hyperreal territory of his painting, Monkman exposes the illusory nature of Kane's work, as well as of the popular iconography of Indigenous people. It is well documented that Kane used "artistic license" in his portrayals of Native North American people and cultures (See Eaton,

1993; MacLaren, 1993). After extensive travel to communities across the continent, he often completed his paintings on return to his studio in Toronto, using a collection of field sketches, as well as memory and imagination, to create the now iconic imagery captured in his oil paintings. Diane Eaton and Sheila Urbank note that his studio oils were remarkably different from his initial field sketches (1995: ix). It was a priority for Kane to capture the exoticism of tribal dignitaries and individuals dressed in traditional regalia because he knew that this was what his audiences craved:

It was Kane's custom in the studio oils to embellish the subjects of his field sketches with Native regalia – feathers and war bonnets, pipe stems, bear-claw necklaces, and elaborately folded buffalo-skin shirts – regardless of band or tribal origin, in order to recast them as Europeanized icons of the Romantic 'noble savage.' Europeans wanted mythologized depictions of North America's Native people that dramatized them as proud, independent, virtuous, and manly.”

(Eaton, 1995: xi)

For example, Kane's *Medicine Mask Dance* does not represent an actual event or ceremony. Rather, it is an appropriation of distinct cultural markers, such as the masks and the circle dance, as a means of creating the “Indian” that existed in Kane's imagination. The Nisg'aa people of the West Coast are represented in the painting as though being documented; the fictional quality of the elements is not made obvious to the audience. In response to Kane's strategy, Monkman purposefully exposes obvious fictional elements in his paintings, such as the placement of twenty-first-century luxury brands in a nineteenth-century setting. By exposing the process of historical myth-

making to the viewers, Monkman articulates their complicity and gives them the opportunity to serve as agents in his re-visioning.

As its title suggests, the concept of masquerade is the central theme of Monkman's *Duel After the Masquerade*, the composition that re-enacts Gerome's painting. The scene portrays Kane, masquerading as Indian in a buckskin outfit, being held up by a group of white male friends wearing the traditional West Coast Nisga'a masks depicted in *Medicine Mask Dance*. Monkman himself is in drag, donning the playful guise of Miss Chief. A glass slipper lies between the dueling Miss Chief and Kane, a reference to the Cinderella story and a powerful reminder to the viewers that they are in the territory of the hyperreal, where fantasy and spectacle require us to suspend our notions of what is real. As Guy Debord explains:

Understood on its own terms, the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance. But any critique capable of apprehending the spectacle's essential character must expose it as a visible negation of life – and as a negation of life that has *invented a visual form for itself*. (1998: 143)

In accord with Debord's claims, Monkman's painting exposes the instability of the spectacle, while simultaneously using it to create a new signification of queer Indigenous power, agency and authority. Monkman occupies the role of the artist and storyteller in his paintings, while also exposing artists such as Kane as untrustworthy due to the artistic license and individual ego employed in their works – both elements that are rife in Monkman's own art. This obvious contradiction is useful for Monkman to demonstrate that all meaning and reality is unstable and created to meet the objectives

of a specific regime of power. In accord with Debord's declaration that reality exists "solely as an object of contemplation" (142), Monkman uses the unifying nature of the spectacle to create a relationship with his audiences that works to erode normativized notions of the real.

Kane's *Medicine Mask Dance* took obvious cues from George Catlin's earlier painting *Dance to the Berdash* (1835-37), which offers a rare reference to the honourable role that the Two-Spirit person, at that time referred to by Europeans as the "berdashe," held in many Indigenous cultures. Catlin's *Dance to the Berdash* portrays a ceremonial feast given by a community in honour of a Two-Spirit person. Catlin later wrote with disdain about the ritual and the feminine role of the berdash in his letters, while acknowledging the sacred place that the berdash held as healers in their society (1841: 89). Despite mimicking Catlin's composition, Kane erases the Two-Spirit presence in his own work. McIntosh writes that *Medicine Mask Dance* is "one of Kane's most reproduced paintings, which is an acknowledged work of fantasy and a mimetic quotation of Catlin's *Dance to the Berdash*, which is in turn the only image of sexual and gender difference produced by the colonial gaze that Kane then elided in his version (Fuse: 19). Monkman's *Duel After the Masquerade* reinstates the queer Indigenous body that Kane erased, this time in the roles of artist, subject and storyteller. In the process, Monkman challenges the illusion of Indigenous men's masculinity, pride and nobility that was created by the work of Kane and his contemporaries. As Munoz observes,

[m]asculinity is, among other things, a cultural imperative to enact a mode of "manliness" that is calibrated to shut down queer possibilities and energies. The

social construct of masculinity is experienced by far too many men as a regime of power that labors to invalidate, exclude, and extinguish faggottry, effeminacy and queerly coated butchness. (1999: 58)

Monkman makes a highly politicized gesture in his work by putting the Two-Spirit Indigenous identity back into a narrative that has blatantly articulated a process of exclusion and erasure. Anishaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor articulates this point:

The simulation of the *indian* is the absence of real natives – the contrivance of the other in the course of dominance...The postindian absolves by irony the nominal simulations of the *indian*, waives centuries of translation and dominance, and resumes the ontic significance of native modernity. (qtd. in McIntosh, *Fuse*: 14)

Monkman's ironic postindian diva articulates the point that a time-traveling, half-breed drag queen wreaking havoc on nineteenth-century landscapes is no less real or valid than a history that excludes Indigenous and queer perspectives and narratives.

In *Duel After the Masquerade*, Miss Chief confronts Kane while wearing distinctly modern regalia that includes a fur coat and Louis Vuitton bag. Louis Vuitton accessories are a recurring theme in Monkman's work and here represent the commodification of Indigenous cultures, which have seen traditional ceremonial objects, medicines and even spiritual philosophies transformed into material commodities in contemporary society. The story of colonization itself was commodified at the expense of Indigenous people. Artists such as Kane became famous documenting the attempted extermination of the Native North Americans, and Kane's paintings are now owned and protected by museums and worth millions of dollars.²

Monkman embraces the material trappings of modern life – luxury brands and designer accessories– because he recognizes these as codes of power in modern western society. He dons these symbols of wealth and import to signify his own authority and success, while acknowledging the complex history of colonization that gave rise to late-capitalist culture. The Louis Vuitton brand is also significant for its imitators; today fake Louis Vuitton bags and accessories are abundant in market stalls for a fraction of the price of the originals. The use value of the object no longer has meaning, with the line between the real and the simulated brand having been erased. The real brand struggles to demonstrate its authenticity and confront its declining caché in the face of mass availability. Monkman references the ongoing process of commodifying and fetishizing of Indigenous art and identity in his work, critiquing the historical glorification and signification of Indigenous artifacts and cultures that is represented by the ROM's own history of display.

Complementing the Monkman and Kane paintings, which hung side by side in the ICC gallery for the exhibit, Monkman added a textual element to the work through the inclusion of excerpts of verbal works by Kane and Monkman's alter ego, Miss Chief. The first of these was from Kane's published diary and reads in part:

I had been accustomed to seeing hundreds of Indians about my native village, then Little York, muddy and dirty, just struggling into existence, now the city of Toronto, bursting forth in all its energy and commercial strength. But the face of the red man is no longer seen. All traces of his footsteps are fast being obliterated from his once favourite haunts, and those who seek to study his

native manners and customs must travel far through the pathless forest to find them. (1859: 1)

In this excerpt from the larger text included in the exhibit, Kane sets himself up as the romantic “wandering artist.” His words indicate that he sees himself representing modernity and the “new world,” while the Native represents a retreating and outdated past. This attitude and worldview informs Kane’s work, setting him up as the authority and adventurous documentarian of a vanishing race.

In Monkman's *Duel After the Masquerade*, however, Miss Chief takes on both the authoritarian and contemporary roles; in the frame, she turns her back on a fallen, demoralized Kane and, ostensibly, his outdated notions of Indigenous identity and authenticity. Likewise, in the second text excerpt, written in the voice of Miss Chief, Monkman mimics Kane’s language to reiterate this point:

Unfortunately, I was to suffer much humiliation when he publicly declined to create a likeness of me. He claimed that my “authenticity” was questionable, as was evidenced by the “contamination” of European influence in my style of dress... To save face, it was necessary to challenge him to a duel. (Hopkins, 2008: 30)

In the writing of a mock diary, Monkman extends the hyperreal space beyond the canvas, creating an imagined spectacle with a narrative that extends further than the paintings themselves. Confronting the fiction of Kane’s diary, which has been documented to have been ghost-written, with a work of fiction of her own making, Miss Chief challenges the notion of the real, proposing that her words and identity are no less valid than those of Kane, who also used elements of fiction in creating his own public

persona (MacLaren: 2010). By creating political junctures in the accepted meanings of nineteenth-century colonial art, Monkman counters the authority and negative impact that these interpretations continue to have. As the artist himself has said, "The artwork of the 19th century was really about freezing Indigenous people in time and setting us backward. A lot of my work is about deconstructing the authority of these paintings – because they continue to hold authority over how Indigenous are perceived" (Goddard, 2007). Following in the tradition of the Miss Chief body of work, *Duel After the Masquerade* is humorous, camp and highly stylistic. The underlying political intent of the piece, however, is to free contemporary Indigenous people from confining signifiers, and to create signification in the face of absence.

4. Drag and Camp Strategies in Monkman's Miss Chief Installation

Accompanying the exhibition of the Monkman and Kane paintings and text excerpts, a gallery installation of some of Miss Chief's regalia further complemented the exhibit. The pieces, many of which had been used in Monkman's films and live performance art, further extended the hyperreal space, suggesting a Miss Chief who exists in physical form outside the canvas. By creating a physical alternative to an alter ego previously confined to canvas renderings, Monkman gives his narrative a validating authority to which Kane and other past artists no longer have access. Rather than take advantage of this privileged presence, however, Miss Chief uses the immediacy of her physical being to reinforce Monkman's painterly problematizations of claims to authenticity made by anybody -- living, historical or fictional.

The concept of shapeshifting was a central theme in the exhibit, and Monkman's work embodies the transformational element that is prominent in much of traditional Indigenous storytelling. In his time travelling, gender bending and shapeshifting, Monkman pays homage to the trickster, a mischievous and disarming rebel who consistently challenges authority and is unbound by the rules of time. "[A]ppropriation, inversion, and abrogation of authority," Owens writes, "are always trickster's strategies (1998:15). The role of the trickster is that of teacher and, while Miss Chief cannot be simplified as only a trickster character, Monkman does unleash a parade of trickster strategies with the political and moral intent of instructing viewers on strategies for transforming long-held historical assumptions.

Like many of the other works included in the exhibit, Monkman's installation directly challenges the museum's traditions of display, which exert control over defining and valuing cultures, while stripping Indigenous artifacts of their original meaning and use value. By presenting Indigenous items, many of which were tools and everyday objects not intended for aesthetic glorification, in glass cases, the objects are themselves colonized and commodified. As Richard Fung writes, "The placement of objects – their contextualization, juxtaposition and institutional housing, whether in an ethnographic museum or an art gallery – both reflects and constructs competing claims of legitimacy" (2002: 38). By mimicking traditional museum display in his own work, Monkman proposes an assertion of the legitimacy of his point of view, using campy irony to expose the commodity fetishism of the museum and thereby the dominant culture.

Camp is a crucial strategy employed by Monkman, and one that is extremely effective in his live performances and related installation work, although the figures in his painted work are notably influenced by campy 1950s pulp fiction imagery. Fabio Cleto argues that camp is often a political strategy used to renegotiate power and subvert the dominate/hetero ideology as mere farce (1999: 89). He writes that camp is a “survivalist strategy,” a “system of humour through which an oppressed social group transvalues negativity” (1999:89). By incorporating the fundamental elements of camp and drag into his work, Monkman reclaims the museum space that has effectively determined a non-value on his identity through a process of exclusion and/or misrepresentation. The camp aesthetic functions, in Monkman's installation work, as a destabilizing strategy. Humour and irony are used to invite the discovery of layered meanings. In Monkman's *Shapeshifters* installation, Miss Chief's tongue-and-cheek titled garments – *Raccoon Jockstrap* (2004), *Louis Vuitton Quiver* (2007), *High-heeled Moccasins* (2005) and *Dreamcatcher Bra* (2005) – are displayed in full museum splendour, enclosed in custom-made glass boxes with formal display cards bearing the ludicrous titles of the works. The Louis Vuitton quiver, Dreamcatcher bra and other accessories of Miss Chief's regalia speak on one level about the commodification of Native cultures and sexualities. At the same time, they exude camp qualities through their amusing juxtaposition against the subject of Indigenous identity formation. As Esther Newton writes, “incongruity is the subject matter of camp, theatricality its style, and humour its strategy” (103). The *Raccoon Jockstrap* was one of the first ensembles worn by Miss Chief in her second public performance (2005). Fashioned from a vintage trapper's hat previously owned by deceased *Globe and Mail* art and film critic Jay Scott,

not only does the item reference the colonial relationship that began with trapping, it also signifies Miss Chief's coming out, the process of her own transformation from representational painted figure to performative agent. The object's obvious humour disarms viewers, making the highly politicized and sexualized nature of its message easily palatable and presumably non-threatening. In this piece, Monkman plays on the usual association of Indigenous North Americans with the production of fur as raw material. While it is well known that Indigenous people played an important role in the fur trade, and made and wore fur clothing, their role in the story of fur production is usually limited to that of trader/exporter. In this example, it is the Indigenous person, Miss Chief, who fetishizes, sexualizes and commodifies fur as an object of aesthetic value. In this role reversal, Miss Chief early on associates herself symbolically with societal wealth, power and overt sexuality.

In an early painting, entitled *Artist and Model* (2004) and in Miss Chief's inaugural performance-art intervention at the McMichael Gallery (2004), Monkman's alter ego uses camp to claim her identity not only as queer and Indigenous, but also as an artist. In the painting, Miss Chief ties her colonial subject to a tree while proudly displaying her canvas, which bears a simplistic drawing of the model resembling early "primitive" petroglyphic art. In the performance, a sophisticated, cultured Miss Chief dresses up her primitive white male models in more "civilized" clothing, plying them with alcohol, and again painting representations that bear little resemblance to the subjects' actual physicality. This trope of colonial and artistic role reversal is also used in the presentation of Miss Chief's installation objects, the titles of which are tongue-in-cheek yet biting in their critique of representational subjectivity. Humour thereby undercuts the

political nature of the statement, making it palatable yet distinctly obvious for audiences well versed in the history of colonization.

Camp is a political strategy that transforms its subject and reinforces the superiority of the live performer (Newton:107). By using the drag-queen persona, Monkman reveals accepted historical truths as farce. While Cleto and Newton contend that not all camp is necessarily queer, it is nonetheless a queer destabilizing tool and one that often accompanies drag. Newton writes:

Both the drag queen and the camp are expressive performing roles, and both specialize in transformation. But the drag queen is concerned with masculine-feminine transformation, while the camp is concerned with what might be called a philosophy of transformations and incongruity. (1999:103)

By incorporating camp humour and irony into his work, Monkman elevates the role of the drag-queen as political apparatus, a gesture that which would not be effective or possible if performed “straight.” The role of the drag-queen is to send up fixed notions of gender identity through mimesis and the mock savagery of camp, which Monkman exploits to great effect.

Marjorie Garber argues that drag questions the assumed “naturalness” of gender “through the discourse of clothing and body parts” (11). This has a destabilizing effect on accepted concepts of what constitutes the male and the female. By portraying the hyper-feminized version of gender, drag queens effectively demonstrate how identifications of women, and thus also men, are constructed in society. Ultimately, there is no such thing as a “real” woman or man in terms of gender. By staging a drag-queen intervention on the nineteenth-century, Monkman reminds his audience that

queer politics is not just a contemporary phenomenon – Indigenous transgendered identity and cross-dressing existed pre-colonization just as it does today. His political motivation is to renegotiate the terms of queer Native identity and incorporate queer and transgender sexuality into the historical versions of the past that have been ingrained in our collective psyches through decades of paintings, photographs, film and media.

In order to effectively maximize the strategy of camp in his work, Monkman could not limit his Miss Chief persona to canvas. By making his appearance as the real-life Miss Chief, both in performance and on film, the artist transforms himself physically in order to confront audiences with his sexual existence and affirm his power. His transformation into an embodiment of Miss Chief allows him to use the physical and performative strategies of drag and camp to move beyond limitations he found within the medium of painting. Because he cannot perform in the gallery space at all times, Monkman's installation serves as representation for the performative Miss Chief, alluding to a person that exists not just on canvas but within the current, physical environment. The strategy is to present an identity that can be accepted by audiences as authentic, thereby creating a stronger alternative reality from which to challenge the work of Kane and his contemporaries. By housing Miss Chief's regalia in glass museum cases, the commodified symbolic value bestowed on it is ironic in the same way that a knock-off Louis Vuitton bag can be; in both cases, the objects' values are overtly symbolic and pose a direct challenge to the associated commodity values of those objects deemed by consumers, audiences and museums as being somehow more authentic. While Monkman's intervention may not have changed the monetary value of

the ROM's collections, it nonetheless confronts the arbitrary nature of cultural commodification using a method that speaks directly to the museum and its audiences.

5. Monkman's Intervention on the Museum Space in the Live Performance Séance

Monkman's final contribution to the *Shapeshifters, Time Travelers and Storytellers* exhibit was a live performance séance in the central lobby of the newly opened ROM extension on the evening of October 19, 2007. In front of an audience of over 400 people, Monkman donned the guise of his alter ego for a rare performance that was specifically written and enacted to address the primacy given to European representations of Indigenous people in the museum context. The performance was also a response to the earlier proposed intervention by the artist that was rejected by the ROM. As mentioned, that intervention would have seen the placement of a Monkman painting alongside a large body of Kane's work housed in the First Peoples' Gallery, a newly opened permanent gallery of Indigenous art and artifacts that met with considerable criticism due to the predominance of Kane's work included in the space. While this negotiation was unsuccessful, it was an essential component of the artist's work to stage an intervention of some sort in the museum space, outside the contemporary art context of the ICC gallery space. Monkman wanted to engage with the museum space and public audiences, who may not necessarily attend the contemporary exhibit. Public art interventions have been an ongoing part of Monkman's body of work, initiated in a series of international performances that he refers to as "Colonial Art Space Interventions." As part of the series, Miss Chief made her live debut in the 2004 performance *Group of Seven Inches* at the McMichael Canadian Art

Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario. The performance, which was later turned into an award-winning Super 8 Film of the same title, saw Miss Chief enter the gallery grounds in full drag regalia on the back of a white horse. Trailing her were two “savages” of European descent whom she then attempted to civilize through the introduction of art, alcohol and sexual innuendo. Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art curator, David Liss, writes:

In this project, colonial roles and gender expectations are reversed, as white men (actors hired by the artist) become the subjects of ethnological study by the cross-gendered Monkman/Miss Chief... As the premier home of the art of the Group of Seven, the McMichael is significant in the accepted canon of what constitutes Canadian identity, or at least one version that is readily identifiable. As an institutional gatekeeper, the McMichael exercises a certain power over what is included and what is not. The Group's romanticized depiction of the Canadian landscape as an unpopulated, undiscovered wilderness is not lost on Monkman, who regards history as a mythology forged from relationships of power and subjugation. (2006: 82)

The aspect of intervention is itself a crucial element of Monkman's work, particularly in the context of institutions such as the McMichael and the ROM, which have taken on the responsibility of defining the Canadian art canon and giving primacy to artists such as the Group of Seven and Paul Kane. The authority and authenticity of these artists and their work in the context of Canadian art is rarely disputed, particularly from an Indigenous perspective.

In his performance art, Monkman operates from what Christina Ritchie refers to as “the perception of the museum as a nexus of power, prestige and value formation (1992:11). His performative work aims to infiltrate multiple levels of the museum and offer an alternative approach to its systems of representation, display, historiography and ownership. Symbolically, there was no better manifestation of that power than the ROM’s new wing, which cost over 270 million dollars (much of it public money) to construct. Ritchie writes that, by conducting a critique through the medium of performance art, “the production of meaning shifts from a frame of institutional authority to one of audience participation” (10). Through audience participation and collusion, the power structure also shifts, if only for the duration of the performance. In this space, new meanings and interpretations are introduced. In Monkman’s performances, the more fun the audience has – the greater the extent to which they are in on the joke – the more complicit they become in undermining the authority of these institutions and the Eurocentric and patriarchal systems on which they were founded.

Through the performance of *Séance*, Monkman brings Kane and his contemporaries George Catlin and Eugene Delacroix back from the dead to engage in a discussion about their art. In his letters, Catlin writes: “I find that the principal cause why we underrate and despise the savage, is generally because we do not understand him; and the reason why we are ignorant of him and his modes, is that we do not stoop to investigate” (1884:102). Monkman reenacts Catlin’s ideas regarding Indigenous people in reverse, taking on the role of curious artist and explorer to learn first-hand about the motivations behind Catlin’s work, which seems conspicuously outdated. For the dialogue with Kane and Catlin, Monkman uses direct quotations from their respective

diaries to amusing effect. This is a comic trope used often by Monkman, who selects quotations that seem so far-fetched it is difficult to believe they were written by some of North America's most renowned and respected artists. For the dialogue with Kane, Miss Chief acts petulant and bored, rolling her eyes and indicating that she has heard these old refrains about the "dying race" far too many times. Kane's dialogue alludes to stories that have been given authority for generations, but it is Miss Chief who controls the narrative, cutting him off and mocking his outdated and misconstrued notions, saying at one point "I'm sure the audience would love to hear more of your *true* stories, but I need a drink" (Hopkins, 2008: 50). The use of camp here undermines the authority of Kane in the context of the museum space, where he had up to that point in time been given the highest authority and been deemed a "national treasure" (ROM, 2000). Armed with the elaborate feathered and sequined drag-queen regalia of Miss Chief, the political and destabilizing force of the message enters the museum space unchallenged. The drag-queen persona proves again to be useful in its ability to disarm, but no less potent when its politicized intentions are revealed.

The medium of performance allows Monkman to re-imagine colonization with the roles of colonized and colonizer complicated. Through camp and irony, the audience is brought into the ruse and encouraged to challenge the mock-innocence of the diarists and painters who expressed sympathy and fascination for the Indigenous people with one hand, while exploiting them with the other. As in the paintings, in the performance Miss Chief is a sexually charged entity, displaying the hyper-femininity of the drag queen with an authority that is distinctly masculine. A breathing symbol of triumph and

survival, Miss Chief's revival of the "Berdash Dance" inverts the process of erasure undertaken by Catlin and his contemporaries. As McIntosh observes:

While Catlin's colonialist project may have been intended to dominate and exterminate First Nations existence through simulated textual and image representation served up as factual documentation, his excision of berdashes, or as he called them, disgraceful and degraded "beaus, dandies, faint hearts, old women, gay bucks, fops", served as a specific foundational act of invisibilization, giving berdashes presence in a few overtly hateful words and a single sketch, only to extinguish them from the historical record... . (2007: 42)

Miss Chief tells Catlin that he has "failed to extinguish the Dance to the Berdash" before ending the performance with a raucous dance number (Hopkins, 52). The dance is a reenactment of a traditional ceremonial dance, which Monkman reclaims through his contemporary interpretation, just as he reclaims a space for the traditionally respected Two Spirit identity . Through performance, the artist engages with the story of colonization in a direct way that speaks to contemporary viewers who -- unlike the nineteenth-century artists he challenges -- have absorbed the languages of camp and drag into their vocabularies. Furthermore, Monkman pays homage to the traditions of oral storytelling cultures, where stories and ideas are represented through the subjectivity of the storyteller and his/her direct engagement with the audience. In order to accomplish these layered meanings in the work, performance and intervention are a necessary complement to Monkman's painting and installation work, with the artist allowing himself to be reliant upon the communal discourse of his audience members, rather than simply speaking *at* them.

Conclusion

This analysis only scratches the surface of the large exhibition that was the basis for my project-based thesis. What I have attempted to do here is focus specifically on the ways in which Monkman's queerly inflected notions of Indigenous identity were manifested in the *Shapeshifters* exhibition. Monkman's work is often critiqued and reviewed through the lens of post-colonialism and, while critiquing the colonial relationship is a fundamental and obvious aspect of his work, I wished to pursue a closer interpretation of how this critique is specifically manifested in the sexual politics of the work. In the multi-disciplinary works included in this exhibit, and in his larger and ongoing body of work, Monkman taps into theories of sexuality that point to an Indigenous queer identity that has not been articulated in this way before. Historical and traditional Two-Spirit narratives that have, until recently, been denied through a systemic process of exclusion and erasure inform this emerging identity. Monkman is a part of a movement in Indigenous contemporary art that sees artists renegotiating the accepted histories of colonization as a means to make sense of their contemporary, and often hybrid, identities. Several of these artists were included in the *Shapeshifters* exhibit because their work demonstrates a continuum that includes the linguistic, cultural and artistic traditions of their ancestors while taking advantage of the most modern technologies and concepts that the twenty-first century has to offer. Their ability to access the sensibilities and knowledge of the past while utilizing the technologies of the present puts them in the privileged position articulated by McMaster.

My analysis of Monkman's work offers a new lens through which to interpret Indigenous work that utilizes the aesthetic and strategic language of queer and camp to reconstruct the Two Spirit identity. This type of work is gaining momentum, particularly in film, where artists such as Thirza Cuthand are exploring their sexual identities in conjunction with their historical and Indigenous roots. The emergence of these artists and their work shows a distinctly queer Indigenous point of reference that avoids categorization. This framework can also be used to contextualize work by Indigenous artists who do not necessarily identify as queer but nonetheless use the strategies of camp and humour to undermine pre-existing notions that have existed since colonization about Indigenous identity, masculinity and cultures. This approach is noticeable, for example, in the performance art work of renowned artist James Luna whose work, like Monkman's, exposes the links between sexuality, colonialism and power.

While the intent of the exhibit was in part to comment on the multiple layers of the colonial relationship as it was reflected by the role of the museum, it was extremely important to the curators in presenting this exhibit that the theme and approach moved beyond the rhetoric of imperialistic oppression and subjugation. While the historical fact of colonialism and its repercussions underscored all of the work in the exhibit, it was not our desire to simplify the complex hegemonic relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures with a one-sided critique of colonization. The goal was rather to speak to the disjuncture that exists in contemporary interpretations of time, where the past is presented as a fixed and static notion. It was our intent to demonstrate that, through a constant and rigorous renegotiation of the past, new meanings and ideas can

emerge, particularly for Indigenous artists who are only recently finding voice in the contemporary art world. Monkman's work in this exhibit perfectly captured the complexities of its curatorial intent.

The ROM's postmodern architectural renaissance was symbolic of the museum's own identity politics – a desire to break with the past while maintaining its traditional models of representation and display. Monkman's work effectively captured some of the conflicted layers of politics, colonialism, patriarchy, historiography and power that are the context for any exhibit of Indigenous art at an institution like the ROM. His work exposed the ongoing problems of Indigenous museum display, while also paying homage to the important work housed in the collections. I hope that this analysis will contribute to the ongoing development of new approaches to Indigenous intervention and contemporary art display in the museum context.

Endnotes

¹ The word “Indigenous” is used throughout this essay to refer to the First Nations, Inuit and Métis people of North America based on the definition outlined by the United Nations in their Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (2007). As there is no definitive and universally accepted word for “Indigenous” people, the words “Native” and “Aboriginal” are also used synonymously.

² In 2002, Kane’s *Scene in the Northwest* portrait sold at auction for \$4.6 million. The ROM houses the largest collection of Kane’s work in the world.

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