

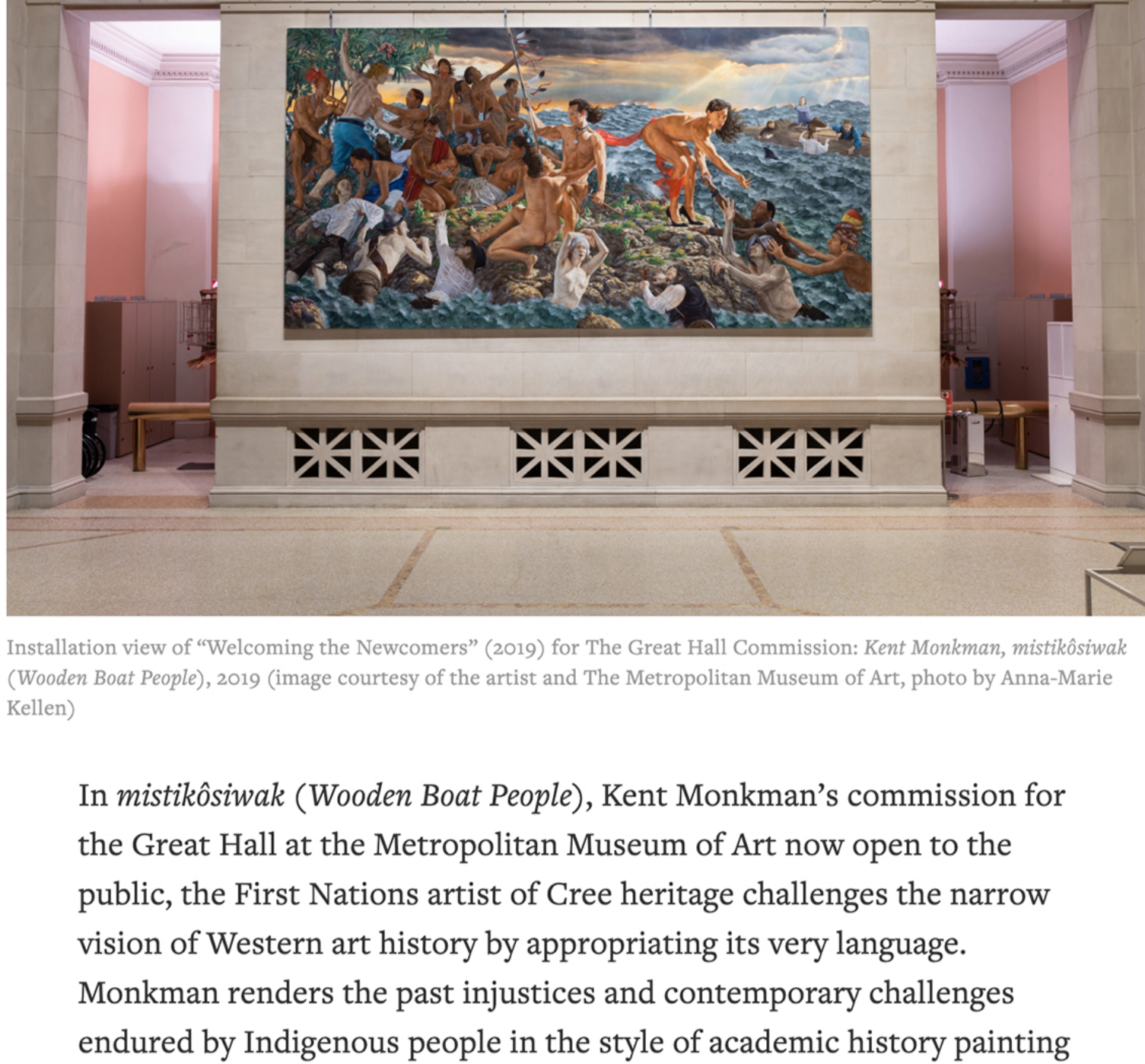
PHOTO ESSAYS

Kent Monkman Introduces Candid Indigenous Narratives to the Metropolitan Museum's Great Hall

In a new major commission for the Met, Monkman renders the past injustices and contemporary challenges endured by Indigenous people in the style of academic history painting.



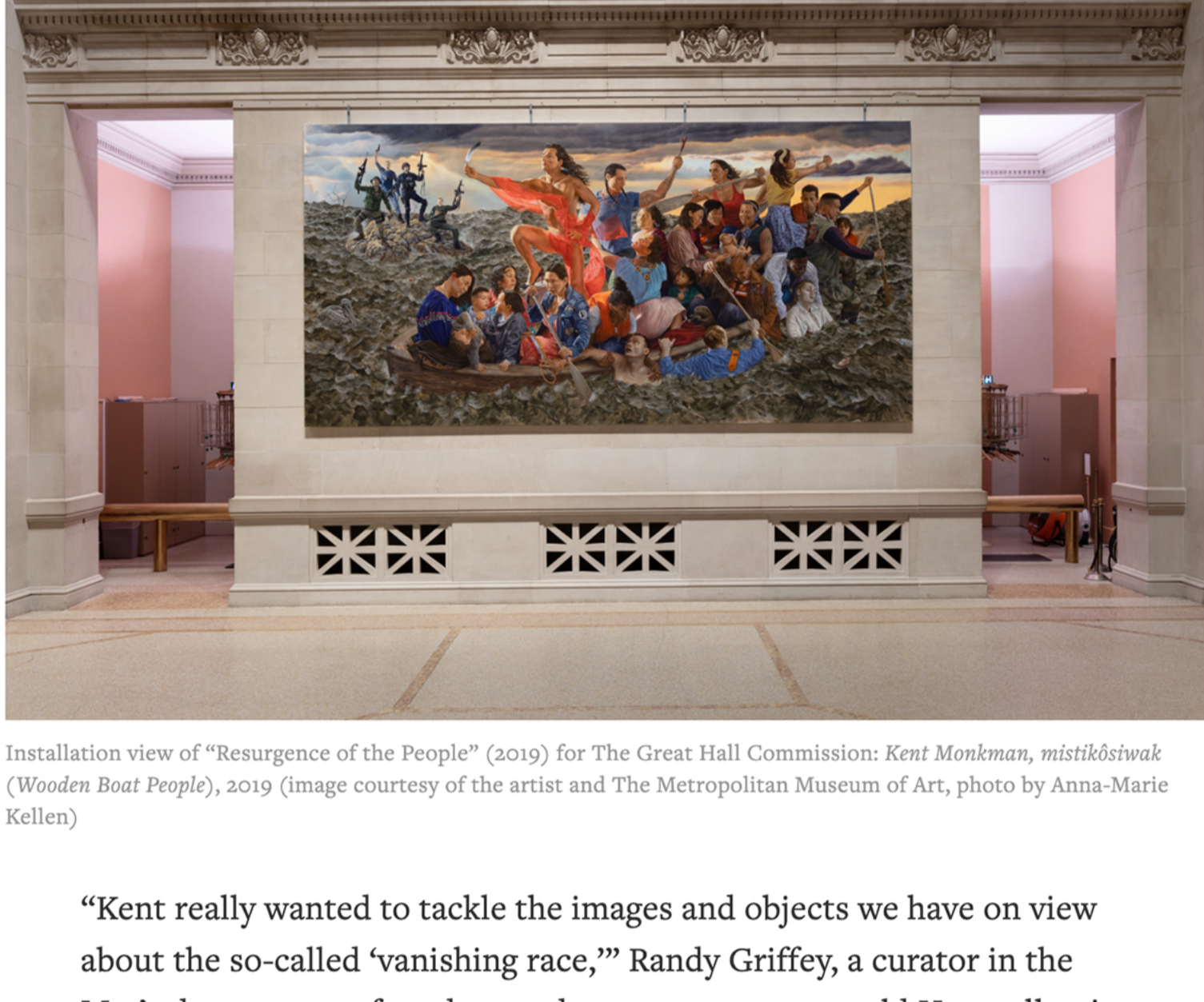
Valentina Di Liscia December 24, 2019



Installation view of "Welcoming the Newcomers" (2019) for The Great Hall Commission: Kent Monkman, *mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People)*, 2019 (image courtesy of the artist and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photo by Anna-Marie Kellen)

In *mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People)*, Kent Monkman's commission for the Great Hall at the Metropolitan Museum of Art now open to the public, the First Nations artist of Cree heritage challenges the narrow vision of Western art history by appropriating its very language.

Monkman renders the past injustices and contemporary challenges endured by Indigenous people in the style of academic history painting — a genre whose imposing presence and institutional prestige he simultaneously channels and critiques. Many of the characters in his two 11-by-22-foot canvases borrow the guise, postures, or expressions from protagonists of European and North American works in the Met's collection, in particular ethnographic and romantic portrayals of Native American subjects by non-Native artists.



Installation view of "Resurgence of the People" (2019) for The Great Hall Commission: Kent Monkman, *mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People)*, 2019 (image courtesy of the artist and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photo by Anna-Marie Kellen)

"Kent really wanted to tackle the images and objects we have on view about the so-called 'vanishing race,'" Randy Griffey, a curator in the Met's department of modern and contemporary art, told Hyperallergic. Viewers are encouraged to experience Monkman's source material firsthand, aided by didactic wall labels that indicate the cited works' locations in the museum galleries, but Griffey emphasized that the two paintings stand on their own. "Despite all the art historical references, Kent wants his work to be as accessible as possible," he said, noting that the Great Hall is located at the museum's entrance and does not require an admission fee to visit. "The reason he's adhered to a figurative style is a commitment to communication."

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Kent Monkman, "Welcoming The Newcomers" (2019), acrylic on canvas (image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photo by Joseph Hartman)

The first painting in the diptych "Welcoming The Newcomers" (2019) recreates early encounters between First Peoples and colonial settlers.

Some locals pull shipwrecked European explorers onto the rocky shores in a gesture of altruism; others draw weapons in defense of their lands. Monkman's nonbinary alter-ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, who emerges in both works as a symbol of the fluid gender identities embraced by the Cree, extends their muscular arms toward three men in the ocean. One of them is a figure wearing an intricate turban reminiscent of Jean-Léon Gérôme's "Bashi-Bazouk" (1868-69), an oil on canvas work in the Met collection titled after the Turkish name for mercenary soldiers fighting for the Ottoman Empire. The French artist has been heavily criticized for his exoticizing and orientalizing interpretations of the Near East.

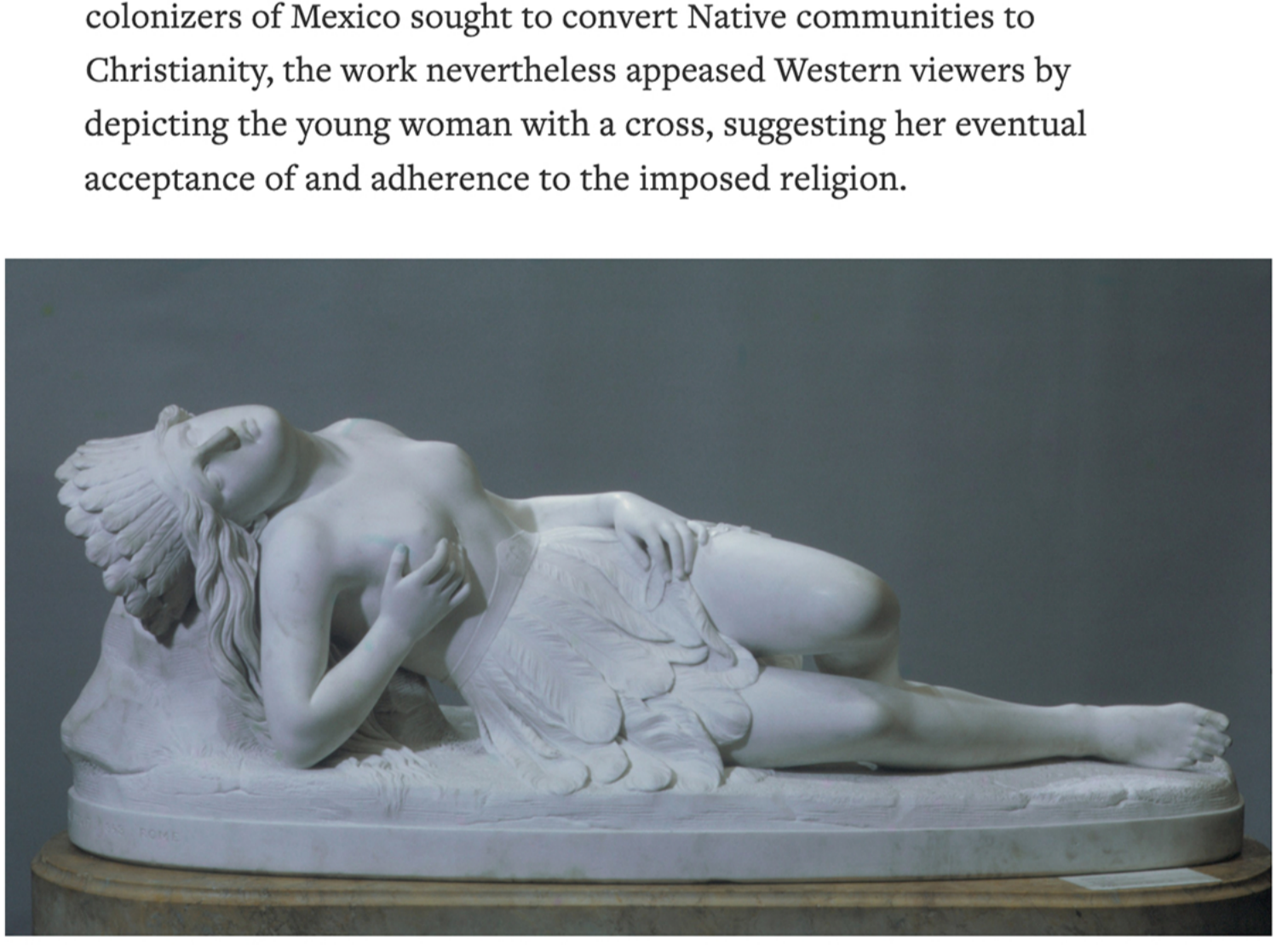
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Jean-Léon Gérôme, "Bashi-Bazouk" (1868-69), oil on canvas, 31 3/4 x 26 in. Gift of Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, 2008 (image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

A reclining woman visible amidst the tangle of bodies on land, hand clutching her abdomen, is modeled after Thomas Crawford's sculpture "Mexican Girl Dying" (1846; carved 1848) on view in the American Wing. Inspired by historian William H. Prescott's "History of the Conquest of Mexico," which advanced the theory that Spanish colonizers of Mexico sought to convert Native communities to Christianity, the work nevertheless appeased Western viewers by depicting the young woman with a cross, suggesting her eventual acceptance of and adherence to the imposed religion.

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Thomas Crawford, "Mexican Girl Dying" (1846; carved 1848), marble, 20 1/4 x 54 1/2 x 19 1/2 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Annette W. W. Hicks-Lord, 1896 (image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

In the second gargantuan canvas, "Resurgence of the People" (2019), Monkman imagines the contemporary aftermath of colonization. The composition references Emmanuel Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware" (1851). The boat in the foreground in Monkman's version, however, in the high tides exacerbated by climate change, invoking images of migrant vessels. A band of white, armed figures from settler nations looms threateningly in the background.

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Kent Monkman, "Resurgence of the People" (2019), acrylic on canvas (image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, photo by Joseph Hartman)

Two women holding a baby evoke the Indigenous parents in Eugène Delacroix's painting "The Natchez" (1823-24 and 1835), whose child was born during their escape from French forces massacring the Natchez people in the 1730s. Griffey notes that the work is quoted in both "Welcoming the Newcomers" and "Resurgence of the People," but in the latter, Monkman reinterprets the man and woman painted by Delacroix as a lesbian couple.

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Eugène Delacroix, "The Natchez" (1823-24 and 1835), oil on canvas, 51 1/2 x 46 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Gifts of George N. and Helen M. Richard and Mr. and Mrs. Charles S. McVeigh and Bequest of Emma A. Sheffer, by exchange, 1989 (image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

"My people are heroes deserving of great history paintings," declared Monkman during a recent performance at the Met in which his alter-ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, delivered a lecture titled "A True and Exact Account of the History of North America." The power of Monkman's paintings lies in their specificity: rather than advancing a sweeping statement against reductive representations of Indigenous people in Western art history, he draws from its canon pointedly and deliberately to offer a productive counter-narrative. The new commission at the Met suggests the museum's willingness to self-reflect and consider its own collection with a critical eye, and represents an acknowledgment of institutions' complicity in perpetuating colonial discourses, in art and beyond.

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