

Arts

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THE MODERN TOUCH OF AN OLD MASTER

Kent Monkman is about as famous as a living painter can be in this country. Dakshana Bascaramurty gets a peek at the process behind his art

Photography by Melissa Tait

Kent Monkman, one of Canada's most prolific painters, is standing before a group of models, trying to coax out their best B-horror movie impressions.

"Let's see fear! You're afraid these guys are going to beat the shit out of you. You're afraid!" he says, vibrating with the energy of an overzealous drama teacher.

This group is clustered in one end of Monkman's painting studio, a 3,000-square-foot space with soaring ceilings in Toronto's west end. All the platforms, canvases, tables and brushes have been pushed to the perimeters of the room for the day.

The models, a group of indigenous actors and amateurs, are stiff: too newly acquainted to give their all, to potentially embarrass themselves with the melodramatic expressions they've been assigned. They're modelling for a painting reference, which is like acting on stage: Everything needs to be dialled up.

Monkman is asking them for screams—ugly screams. Some of the models take his advice. The camera shutter clicks.

"Next?" Monkman instructs, his tobacco-coloured eyes wide and wild.

"Like, 'Get out of here, motherfuckers!'" He sticks two middle fingers up at them.

A few more shutter clicks. The models fan themselves and dab at the sweat on their brows. A powerful light has been mounted at a high angle. It's meant to mimic the sun and creates hard shadows and strong highlights. "Painter's light," Monkman calls it.

He will shoot photos of this group for a few hours, give them a cheque for \$80, and send them on their way. And one day their sneering likenesses will be immortalized in acrylic on canvas, perhaps hanging on the wall at Montreal's Museum of Fine Art, or in the private residence of one of Canada's top art collectors, maybe part of a travelling exhibition with stops in Paris and Denver.

In the prime of his career, Monkman is about as famous as a living painter can be in this country. He is separated by a few centuries from the Old Masters but everything about his practice suggests he could have been their peer. His inspiration, his technique and the way he operates his studio are that of a Renaissance painter at the top of his game; only, modern technology to

bring his work into the 21st century.

At 52, he's got the lean and toned build of a triathlete, radiant skin and haircut of an undergrad, and lives in a summer uniform of a black fitted tee, grey shorts and trendy Adidas kicks. The only sign of his age and the gruelling schedule he keeps are the bags under his eyes.

The Cree artist grew up in Winnipeg but has spent much of his career in Toronto. His catalogue of acrylics on canvas serves as a crash course in both Western art history and Indigenous studies. He's not the first artist to link the narrative of popular history, giving Indigenous players agency, but he's certainly the most successful, with his signature mix of candour and irreverence. His travelling series *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience* created so much buzz that during its final weekend in Toronto, the line to enter the gallery snaked out the door and wound along multiple flights of stairs.

Behind each of Monkman's paintings, some of which have sold at auction for nearly \$90,000, is an elaborate multi-stage process that takes well beyond the cost of paint and brushes.

MONKMAN, PAGE 6

R6 | GLOBE ARTS



STAGE 1 Each painting begins with research. Kent Monkman and studio manager Brad Timmouth devour news reports about the Dakota Access Pipeline protests and patronize protest photos to a mood board. On another, they pin art history inspiration: battle scenes from the French Romantic period.



STAGE 2 During a full-day photoshoot, Monkman and Timmouth direct 32 models—some playing water protectors, others cops—through a range of scenes inspired by their mood boards. At the day's end, they have 3,000 images to use as references for a series of paintings.

Monkman: Painter is certain the Old Masters would have embraced photography

FROM 1

For the first time, the Cree painter has lifted the curtain on his practice, offering *The Globe and Mail* access to his studio for three months to see how a painting goes from concept to completion. His point of view is unique, but so is his process. Monkman has styled his studio after the Old Masters, using classical, sometimes controversial, techniques and new technology to create art casts Indigenous people—his people—in a different light.

STAGE ONE: THE ARTIST'S CONCEPT

In 2016, Monkman was watching the news coming out of the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North and South Dakota in quiet rage. Hundreds of protesters, most of them Indigenous, had been arrested protesting the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. It cut through the Missouri River, endangering the water supply, they argued.

As he studied the images coming out of the protests, that rage was coupled with another feeling: familiarity. He'd seen these scenes before: Indigenous people staring down police clad in riot gear, land protectors tending to another's wounds, paramilitary officers violently arresting unarmed protesters. There were tear gas and plumes of tear gas in the background. This was Standing Rock, but it was also Oka, Wounded Knee and Kent State University. This was news, but it would eventually be history, too. Much of his previous work had been inspired by trips to art museums or reading history books, but this time, he was bursting forth from something that was happening in the here and now.

In March 2017, around the time *Shame and Prejudice* was wrapping up its exhibition in Toronto, Monkman started talking to Brad Timmouth, his 29-year-old studio manager, about what would become known as "the protectors series": a set of paintings based on the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, told from the point of view of the water protectors.

how to recreate them in the studio.

Timmouth and Monkman mounted a pair of corkboards in the studio so they could put up a grid of iconic images from Standing Rock and historically significant standoffs of a similar nature, printed onto letter-sized sheets of paper; on the other, they tacked up another set of printouts—an art-history survey of battle scenes, most American Revolutionary art and paintings from the French Romantic period.

"I really wanted to make the contemporary feel historic and the historic feel contemporary," Monkman explained.

Over six months, while juggling other projects, Timmouth kept adding to the collection. The corkboards were pushed around the studio so staff could properly navigate the space as they switched between different canvases to meet other deadlines. While the paintings are the bread and butter of the practice, Monkman's studio dabbles in other media and it's common for different projects to be in progress simultaneously. One afternoon, two assistants were building an installation in the wood shop, another was on a computer working on a virtual-reality project and three studio painters worked on canvases destined for three separate destinations.

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G THE GLOBE AND MAIL | SATURDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2017



Kent Monkman directs a photography session in his Toronto studio on Aug. 30. The photos of actors portraying Indigenous protesters and police officers were used as source images for Monkman's new paintings known as 'the protectors series.'



Chief's Wet Dream, which Monkman and his team have been working on for two years.



A week before the shoot, Chicico and Armaments Group, a massive costume and prop warehouse in Toronto's west end district. They had a long list: police uniforms, tactical vests, rifles, helmets, pepper spray canisters, riot sticks. An employee made up an estimate but hinted it would be expensive. As the white men file in, Chicico greets them and shows them what they'll be wearing. Monkman's studio uniforms on, they look even more unapproachable.

STAGE TWO: THE ARTIST'S SUBJECTS

If the idea of one of Canada's most renowned artists basing his paintings on photographs gives you pause, know that Monkman himself had the same concerns.

He thought it was cheating. "It was my own purist thing of what being a painter is," he says.

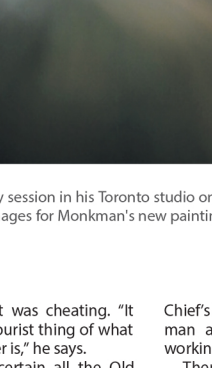
Now he's certain all the Old Masters would've embraced photography if it had been available to them. In fact, there were some, such as 19th-century French Romantic Eugène Delacroix, who used photography as a reference. They needn't be thought of as a fool, Monkman realized, but a tool that could help him sharpen his own skills.

"When you have the structure of your source material really nailed in your photograph, it really liberates and give you freedom to express with paint," he said.

With photo shoots, he can experiment with adding movement to fabric, play with light to create dramatic shadows. He can remove from the cross was a sketch or a smaller painting—an "image study." Keeping that at his side for reference, he'd then move to a bigger canvas, filling in gaps with his imagination, improvising along the way. That system doesn't work now that he has a team of painting assistants, so photo shoots have become a crucial step in his process. A sketched torso might look fine when it's two inches long, but anatomical obscurities become glaringly obvious blown up on a seven-foot canvas.

He's not going for photorealism in his work, and in fact despises painters who strive for that. His practice is classified as contemporary art, not realism. It's the period in which he's creating it—in many ways, Monkman seems like a soul with classical leanings who was simply born in the wrong century. He would often ask about what they don't like in contemporary art, and the studio even designed a whole performance piece, *Casualty*. At one point, after a Miss Chief, styled as a nurse, visits an ailing art movement in hospital. The piece took its performance art, Jeff Koons's mass-produced figure in Santa Fe, and huge canvases covered in nothing but black paint.

On the day of the shoot, the painters have time off. As the models filter in to the room, many pause to study a massive canvas. It's a work in progress, a 12-by-24-foot painting called *Miss*



Chief's Wet Dream, which Monkman and his team have been working on for two years.

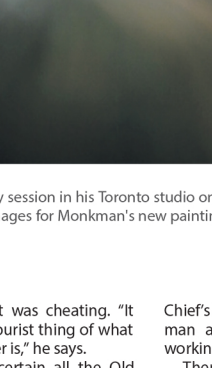


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STAGE THREE: THE ARTIST'S APPRENTICES

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STAGE FOUR: THE ARTIST

To the untrained eye, the protectors painting, *They Are Warriors*, looks close to finished. Esteves has finished her work on it and passed it on to Monkman. The protectors' clothes are vibrant, every tiny pocket on the officers' tactical vests is detailed. Sure, the rocks in the foreground need to be filled in and two of the characters are missing hair, but once those little tasks are completed, what's left, really?

A lot, actually. This is Monkman's favourite stage. This is the ring of a ceramic mug, the colour gliding on a feature film, the masters of an LP.

On a quiet orderly manner, Monkman raises the head of the easel, attaches an iPad to a custom-built wooden arm on it and loads the reference photo. He squirts a blob of brown paint from a tube and with a palette knife mixes it with red and green to create a rich chestnut. In his hand, he transforms: his

shadow doesn't cross over his face. She does this a few times while the front of Sudar's shirt gets soaked.

Throughout the shoot, Timmouth repeats the word "lamentation" to Monkman. It's a code, a reminder of a different source of inspiration that doesn't even need to be tacked to corkboard: The Lamentation of Christ. The depiction of Jesus being mourned right after his body is removed from the cross was a popular subject in western art history from the Middle Ages to the Baroque period. It's a strong undercurrent in nearly every group shot taken this day.

A monitor is connected to the camera and Timmouth displays the photos as they display instantly in front of him. He marvels at one in particular, where Sudar is giving off a particularly Jesus-y vibe. "That could be its own painting," he says, in awe.

On a break, Tanguay tells me memories of protests she's attended. At one point, after a particularly violent scene, one of the Indigenous models burns sage to cleanse the space.

Monkman has been eyeing and professional with the white models playing the cops, but she shows extra warmth and familiarity around the Indigenous models. Maybe he's trying to put them at ease, since many of them aren't professionals, or perhaps he feels greater kinship. As this point the two groups have mixed a little—in some of the



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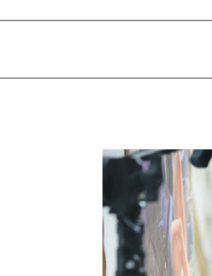


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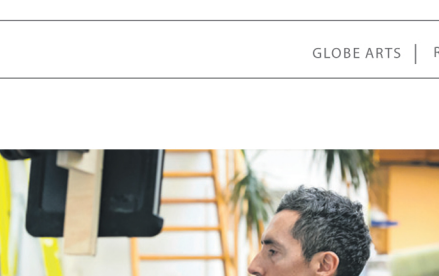
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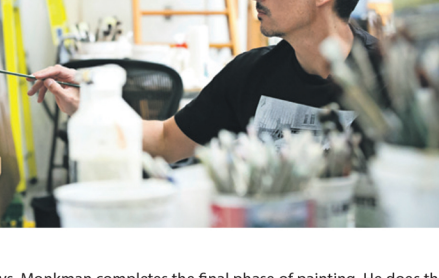
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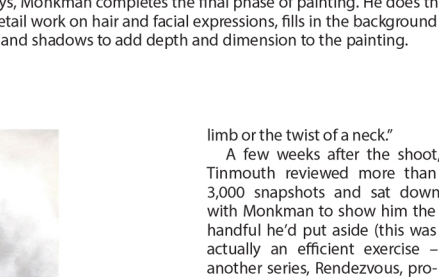
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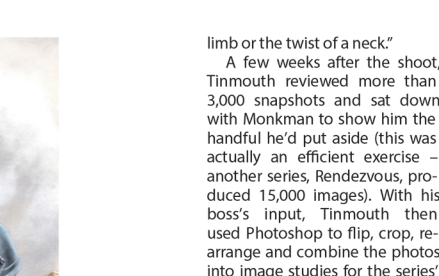
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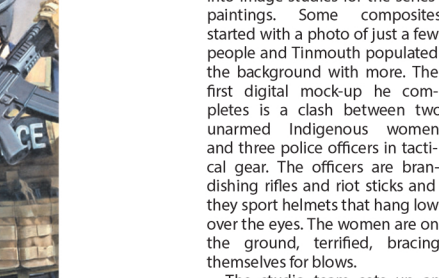
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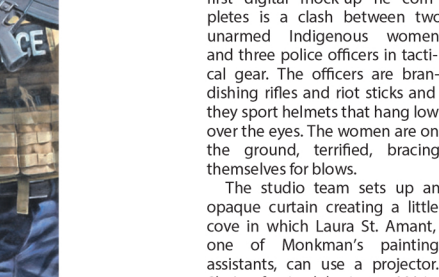
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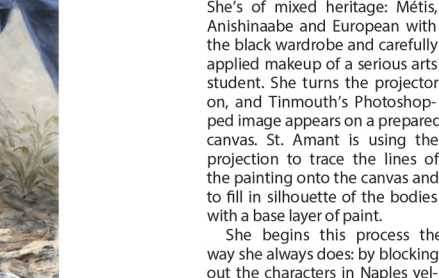
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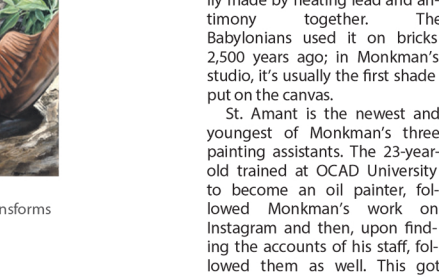
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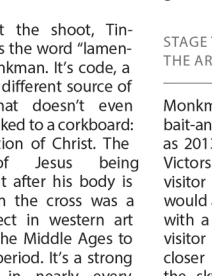


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Monkman touches up *They Are Warriors*. When he's finished with the work, almost every inch has been transformed in some small way.