

Kent Monkman's buffalo jump is a wry tour de force



PETER SIMPSON - THE BIG BEAT

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A view of *The Rise and Fall of Civilization*, by Kent Monkman, at the Gardiner Museum in Toronto. (Photo courtesy Gardiner Museum)



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Kent Monkman has recreated a traditional aboriginal buffalo jump and, typically, it's history that lands on its head.



ADJUST

Long-held illusions about aboriginals end up shattered on the floor, like the pieces of bone china that are broken and piled at the centre of Monkman's room-sized exhibit. The china is also a practical link to the exhibition location, at [the Gardiner in Toronto](#), or "Canada's national ceramics museum."



COMMENT

The *Rise and Fall of Civilization* is the installation's title, a purposefully overblown nod to the simplistic dioramas presented for so many years in so many museum exhibits. As seen in earlier work, in Ottawa most notably during the Sakahan exhibition at the National Gallery in 2013, Monkman rebuts official histories with a sly wink and a confident command of various media.



PRINT

In *Sakahan*, he built a full-sized teepee and furnished it with designer luggage made of birch bark, and a hilarious video in which his campy alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testikle, interfered with a white filmmaker's hapless attempt to make an early cowboys-and-Indians movie.

Monkman is working on a considerably larger scale at the Gardiner. The 3,500-square-foot room on the gallery's top floor is dominated by a rocky cliff, like those over which aboriginal hunters — perhaps Plains Cree, as were Monkman's ancestors — would drive a herd of bison, and then harvest the meat, pelts, and anything else of use.



Picasso-esque bison in *The Rise and Fall of Civilization*, by Kent Monkman, at the Gardiner Museum in Toronto. (Photo courtesy Gardiner Museum)

That is, until settlers all but eradicated the once-bountiful bison, ending a lifestyle that indigenous people had maintained for millennia. White hunters shot the bison for fur or for fun, or to clear land for cattle, at the behest of the expansionist American government.

In Monkman's imagination, the bison are still plentiful. Two stand atop his rocky cliff, while another hangs in the air, mid-leap. Five more walk in a loose line across the floor at the foot of the cliff, while many others are painted on the walls, like ancient drawings in a cave. It all creates a sense of standing in a herd of the shaggy, mighty beasts, resolute and roaming the plains of history.

Two human presences are strong in the room, one physically, and the other historically and stylistically. There are allusions to Picasso, as the artist who saw something new and real, and who in doing so changed art history. That leap to modernism was contemporaneous to the disaster of aboriginal life, with its reservations, its residential schools, its descent, for many, into despair and even squalor.

The allusions begin with that leaping bison, which is covered in a patchwork of coloured pelts, and a comic, cartoonish, Picasso-esque face. Picasso is referenced again on the floor, both in the simple lines of the running bison, and in the pile of broken china through which the bison run.

Sticking up from among the shards of china — which in the 19th century was commonly made from bison bones collected from the plains — are bicycle handlebars that echo Picasso's stylized bull horns. Monkman has designed china bicycle seats and emblazoned each with a scene, drawn in traditional blue pigment, of Miss Chief Eagle Testikle on her rearing horse, her whip lashing toward a fallen cowboy, as two bison impassively stand astride.

The other human presence in the room is Miss Chief herself, who stands atop the rocky cliff, resplendent in a long, bold, blood-red gown. One arm reaches out over the bison, the herd, the broken china, as if to bless it all, to sweep away the false history and present something new, and true.

It is all quintessentially Monkman — dexterous in its execution, both accessible and profound, both funny and sad. In *The Rise and Fall of Civilization*, Monkman has once again corralled a herd of materials and influences, and created a resonant intrusion into the comfortable fault lines of accepted history.

I walked out of the room and asked myself, is there a more compelling artist in Canada today?

The Rise and Fall of Civilization by Kent Monkman

When & where: to Jan. 10 at [the Gardiner Museum, Toronto](#)