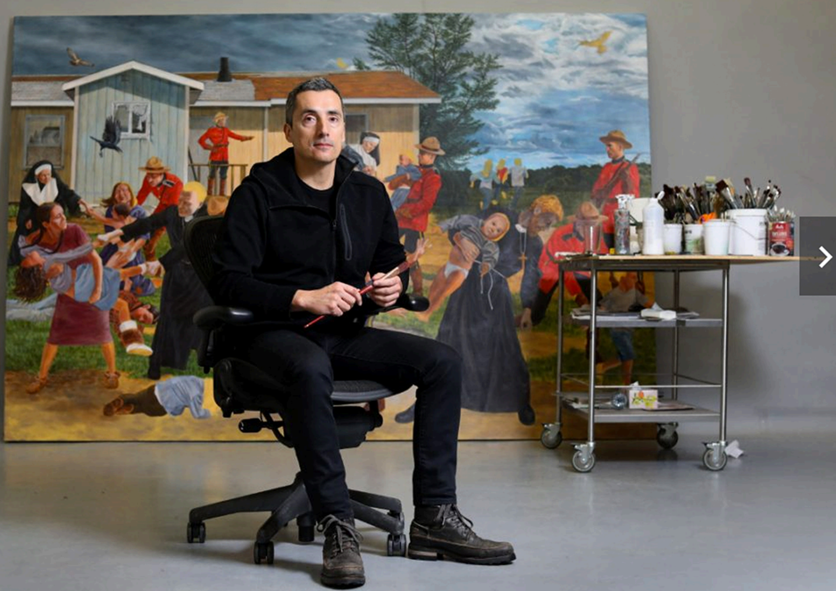
Truth, resilience and indigenous art find their place in 2016

Artist Kent Monkman prepares for a 2017 exhibit in a year that saw indigenous art taking its proper place in the public realm



Kent Monkman, a Canadian artist of Cree ancestry, is getting ready for a show in January at the University of Toronto. (RANDY RISLING / TORONTO STAR) | ORDER THIS PHOTO

By MURRAY WHYTE Visual arts
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At a recent festive gathering in his west-end studio on Sterling Road, the artist Kent Monkman stood near one of his not-quite-finished paintings and shrugged, a little sheepish at its state of completion. Not finished yet, but one way or the other, soon to be: In January, Monkman will open Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience, a sprawling display of all-new works at the University of Toronto's Art Museum.

For Monkman, who is First Nations Cree, the exhibition offers a divergent take on Canadian history in time for its 150th anniversary. When the show finishes its Toronto run in the spring, it will travel to each and every province and territory, a powerful reminder that shame and resilience themselves, two intense features of Canada in the 21st century, know no boundaries from sea to shining sea.

With paintings that explore the often squalid conditions of urban First Nations communities here, contemporary reserves, residential schools and a Canada before the 150 years being marked — the Canada pre-Canada, you might say, a pointed reminder that yes, in fact, a society and culture did exist long before Europeans "discovered" it — Monkman makes an elegant, powerful point about land, culture, ownership and history at perhaps the most extraordinary moment for such things in this country.

A year after the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was delivered in December 2015, on the decades of rampant abuses that took place in the federally sponsored residential school program for aboriginal children, the heightened awareness of indigenous issues and specifically, culture, in the main of society brought on by its aftermath, feels unprecedented.

A broader swath of Canadians is becoming aware of what the art world, here and abroad, has known for a long time: That indigenous contemporary art in Canada is a powerful, accomplished realm that stands alongside, and often above, any other in our history.

Don't get me wrong: This is hardly a 2016 revelation. Rebecca Belmore, who was the first indigenous artist to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale in 2005, has been a presence in the broader culture for decades; the late Ojibwa artist Carl Beam, whose visceral mixed-media mash-ups are among the most potent artworks made here, period, enjoyed his heyday in the '80s and '90s. Robert Houle, the curator, writer and artist who helped define a genre of fiery, poetic art around the ills of colonialism in Canada, has been working longer still, and continues to.

Brian Jungen, Duane Linklater and Nadia Myre, Sobey Prize winners all, are among the most broadly exhibited mid-career artists in Canada; around them is a community of accomplished artists — Raymond Boisjoly, Sonny Assu — that seems only to be growing.

But what the art world knows and what the public sees have often been two different things, and institutional indifference and squeamishness have traditionally been bulwarks guarding the division for years.

There is no shortage of those who would add "hostility" to that list. Richard Hill, a prominent scholar at Emily Carr University on indigenous art, found himself on the outs with the Art Gallery of Ontario more than a decade ago, where he was hired as a curatorial assistant in 2000. His 2003 exhibition "Meeting Ground" proposed the then-radical idea of integrating indigenous art among the fabric of the Canadian galleries' bread-and-butter Canadiana landscapes of the Group of Seven and their ilk.

The show was groundbreaking, but for the institution, it was also unsettling. In a forum earlier this year at the Banff Centre, Hill recalled the opposition within the AGO's walls to the idea of such integration, which eventually lead to his resignation in 2004.

Fast forward to now, and we have a very different story. In July, the AGO hired Wanda Nanibush, an Anishinaabe curator and artist, to be its first-ever on-staff curator of Canadian and indigenous art. It was the culmination of a year or so's worth of behind-the-scenes work by Nanibush, alongside the AGO's head curator of Canadian art, Andrew Hunter, to do exactly what Hill had intended, some 12 years earlier; now, the Canadian galleries are a fluid, sometimes-discomfiting blend of First Nations and Colonial-descended artists both.

The resulting frictions do what art is meant to do: Disrupt expectations and differentiate deep, unsettling truth from intractable beliefs. Our country has had a mountain of skeletons tucked away in a closet for centuries; in its way, the AGO, finally, is setting them free.

Tributes and Tributaries, a survey of art made in Toronto between 1971 and 1989, is notably inclusive, and not just of indigenous artists, but the broad mix of cultural expression often left aside in the city's conceptualism-heavy narrative. (It's on 'til May, so see for yourself.)

However present — and celebrated, and vital — as indigenous artmaking has been over many years here, the institutional embrace of First Nations culture (be as cynical as you like; they've spent decades earning it) feels like a shift.

A landmark, not just for the artist himself but just this kind of engagement, happened earlier this year at The Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, when it invited Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun — a critical powerhouse when it comes to the ethnographic frame that has dogged Indigenous art for generations — to mount Unceded Territories, an unfiltered, massive display of his politically-charged work alongside its permanent collection. The show itself recalibrated institutional modes of engagement while it revealed a surging truth about interest in such things: *Unceded Territories* was the best-attended exhibition in the museum's history.

Don't put the 2016 parameters on it — the things we're seeing are the product of many years' planning — but the reflective light of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has surely helped bring the important work being done out of the shadows.

"I don't think there's been a point in recent history where you can say the general public has been as aware of indigenous people and indigenous issues as they are right now," Greg Hill, the National Gallery's curator of indigenous art told me recently.

A quick scan seems to quantify the point. Look-backs always have an element of checklist to them, so let's get it over with: At the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, Form Follows Fiction, Luis Jacob's look at Toronto contemporary art history, embraced First Nations art as an integral part of the city's cultural development, a subtle shift in such things; the National Gallery of Canada mounted a career retrospective of the work of First Nations painter Alex Janvier (only the third such show for an aboriginal artist in the gallery's history) equal in scope and scale to its recent, expansive take on acknowledged abstract master Jack Bush; Duane Linklater, who early in the year received a $50,000 grant to produce a project using 3D printing technology, opened From Our Hands at Mercer Union in July, likely the most powerful exhibition I saw this year. Rebecca Belmore, ever a presence, was named the winner of the $50,000 annual Gershon Iskowitz Prize, which also means a solo survey show at the AGO in the coming year.

Even being able to tally such things up, of course, means there's much left to be done. But for an entire culture marginalized not so long ago as able craftspeople and not much more — in the '70s, Janvier, Daphne Odjig, Norval Morrisseau and others fought to be taken seriously as contemporary First Nations artists, and without them, none of this would be possible — it matters.

Less important now than what was is what's soon to be, and with *Shame and Prejudice* looming in the near new year, maybe we can see 2016 as a departure point, after which nothing was the same. Here's hoping.