

## VISUAL ART

# AT PLAY IN THE UNIFIED FIELDS OF HISTORY

→ Kent Monkman's grand artistic ambitions know no boundaries

Story **Sholem Krishtalka**

**K**ent Monkman is currently in three places at once. His newest installation, *Two Kindred Spirits*, is mounted at his Berlin gallery, Galerie Florent Tosin; it is also part of the Oh, Canada show at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, a sprawling exhibition that includes some 60 artists, the largest and most ambitious survey of contemporary Canadian art by an American museum; and it just opened at TIFF Bell Lightbox as part of *Home on Native Land*. Plus his latest paintings and videos recently opened in Centre Space, a new Toronto gallery that acts as a satellite space for his Montreal dealer, Pierre-François Ouellette Contemporain.

And this is only what's presently

→ **FANTASTICAL** A detail from Kent Monkman's new large-scale painting, *Miss America*, the first in a series of four paintings depicting the continents.

on the go for Monkman. In August, the show at Centre Space will travel up the 401 to Ouellette's actual gallery in Montreal. And then a Monkman video will be featured as part of a program of Aboriginal film and video presented by the Toronto International Film Festival. Altogether, a whirlwind of activity and deadlines. And once that's all done, Monkman will sit back, take a few breaths, and begin work on the most ambitious body of paintings he has done to date.

The first entry in this new series is the centrepiece of the Centre Space show. As I walk into his enviably cavernous live/work studio prior to the exhibition's opening, Monkman is squinting at a 7-by-11-foot canvas, walking around it, sizing it up for last-minute details and finishing touches. It rests on two paint cans and leans against a wall, perched in front of us as we sit down to chat.

"I'm just thrilled and relieved

to finally be finished this painting because it's been so long in the gestation and in the making, and it's a shift for me," says Monkman, resting into a deep slouch. The painting is enormous and a riot of activity. Crashed cars, conquistadors, indigenous North Americans, Mayans and Aztecs, mermaids, cowboys, black panthers, Lady Liberty suckling a baby while holding a gold handgun, the rapper Drake... all piled into a heaving triangular composition. Atop it all, perched on a rearing alligator, decked out in gorgeous heels and an Alexander McQueen gown, profile held proudly aloft facing the Naples yellow sunset across the horizon, is Monkman's stalwart drag avatar, the ever-present *Miss Chief Eagle Testickle*. The painting is called *Miss America*.

In some ways, *Miss America* follows in the footsteps of Monkman's overarching project of absorbing and re-processing the colonial

mechanisms of art history; but in certain senses, it suggests a new trajectory, an ambitious broadening of horizons. "It's not that radical a shift," he says. "I think my work is evolving conceptually, it just takes me a while to catch up with the physical execution of everything. You know where you want to end up, but you have to go through the long process of actually making the work." *Miss America*, sprawling and impressive as it is, is the first of four paintings, each meant to narrate a continent: America, Europe, Africa and Asia.

Monkman has always been interested in the way painting has been used to represent other nations; in the past, his sources have reliably been drawn from early colonial landscape painters, the artists who engaged with and depicted Aboriginals — Albert Bierstadt and his ilk. Monkman's love of old masters was always built into the work

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in winks and nods: a pose from Michelangelo here, a quote from classical Greek statuary there. This time, Monkman is wrestling directly with the Old World, taking his cue from the Rococo master Giovanni Battista Tiepolo.

The four continents are, in fact, a Tiepolo project, a series of frescoes installed in the Würzburg Residenz palace, part of a broader cycle of frescoes in which Apollo tours the universe; a kind of 18th-century travelogue. "The original paintings were about a form of globalism — Europe expanding its vision of the world." The frescoes are grand and stately, a parade of exotic people and animals. Of course, Monkman is not interested in straightforward mimicry, and his re-processing of the Four Continents is rooted in a much darker kind of globalism.

Monkman's Four Continents are just as much a deconstruction and camping of European colonial hubris as they are a sly commentary questioning exactly what is meant when people talk about global cultures. Monkman sees a weird kind of cosmetic universality born of the seemingly all-penetrating reach of consumerism. He pulls out a small pencil sketch, a diagrammatic mapping of the composition for the next painting in the series, Africa. "Those images that were coming through the news media," he begins, "one of the sources for inspiration for this was photos of rebels in Africa — in Libya, guys in flip flops and Nikes with AK-47s in the back of Toyotas." North African reb-

els wearing American shoes, totting Russian guns, driving Japanese cars. "Those really influenced how I was thinking about what is going on around the world. That was how I started to think about how the paintings would take shape."

Monkman is cognizant, also, about the ludicrousness of trying to faithfully represent entire continents. They were flights of fancy, rhapsodic fantasias for Tiepolo, and Monkman approaches the project with an analogous disregard for reality. "It's impossible to tell all the stories anyways," he says, "so you have to pick and choose. Some are more iconic, and some are more generic, and others are just fantasy." For Tiepolo, the Four Continents were an excuse to let his imagination loose, to envision these far-flung lands through the lens of feverish artistic imagination. For Monkman, three centuries later, the appropriate lens through which to re-process this hubristic intent is camp.

Miss America is a riot of pulp iconography, a delicate admixture of consumer culture, old movies, dime-store novels and cheeky allegorical verve: On the bottom right-hand corner, below the heaving mass of figures, a giant turtle's head emerges from the ground. "They're meant to be on Turtle Island," says Monkman — the name used by northeastern tribes to connote the landmass of North America.

The camp and the visual verve is rooted in a kind of seriousness, an attention to multiple vantage



Courtesy Galerie Florent Tassin

points of history, some forgotten, some indelibly imprinted in our visual memories. In the far background, three grid-like structures lean against a Mayan ziggurat; they are unmistakably the wreckage from the Twin Towers. The compositions, the careful attention to rich visual detail, the overwhelming size are all impressive, all hallmarks of an ambitious image-maker. But it's that synthesizing of the camp sensibility with historical interpretation, the juxtaposition of the fantastical against the injustices and cruelties of history, that are hallmarks of an ambitious artist.

"As I've developed my work, both technically and conceptually," says Monkman, "I've always been interested in grand history paintings, and studying compositions and thinking about the scale of them, and about the possibilities of story-

→ **CAMP MIRROR** Two Kindred Spirits, an installation at TIFF Bell Lightbox.

telling and of narratives. For me it's always been about working towards this kind of approach for a while. You don't just get there overnight; you get through stages of development artistically."

If Miss America is any indication of the direction of Monkman's Four Continents, and the development of Monkman's art in general, this new work will take him through and across some exhilarating new frontiers.

**MISS AMERICA** Recent paintings and video work by Kent Monkman. Until Sat, Aug 11. Centre Space. 65 George St. (416) 323-1373. centre-space.ca.

**HOME ON NATIVE LAND** Group show. Until Sun, Aug 19. TIFF Bell Lightbox. 350 King St W. tiff.net.

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