

Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience

In June of 2011, during my first, and only, visit to the Prado, I was unexpectedly transported by a Spanish history painting, *Execution of Torrijos and his Companions on the Beach at Málaga* (1887-1888), by Antonio Gisbert. Over many years of looking at and studying great paintings, many have impressed me with their virtuosic technical achievements, but never had a painting reached across a century to pull me into the emotional core of a lived experience with such intensity. It felt as though Gisbert had sent a message into the future, a passionate defense of freedom and a critique of authoritarianism. I was humbled by the effect this deeply political work of art had on me, and felt a new urgency to undertake a serious subject with similar gravitas.

I could not think of any history paintings that conveyed or authorized Indigenous experience into the canon of art history. Where were the paintings from the nineteenth century that recounted, with passion and empathy, the dispossession, starvation, incarceration and genocide of Indigenous people here on Turtle Island? Could my own paintings reach forward a hundred and fifty years to tell our history of the colonization of our people?

Over the past fifteen years, with Miss Chief's cunning use of runny mascara, and my deep love of art history, I have developed a personal language of painting and art making in a variety of disciplines. Using humour, parody, and camp, I've confronted the devastation of colonialism while celebrating the plural sexualities present in pre-contact Indigenous North America. A gender-bending time-traveller, Miss Chief lives in the past, present and future. She embodies the flawed and playful trickster spirit, teasing out the truths behind false histories and cruel experiences.

My mission is to authorize Indigenous experience in the canon of art history that has heretofore erased us from view. From Albert Bierstadt to Paul Kane and Cornelius Krieghoff, museums across the continent hold in their collections countless paintings that depict and celebrate the European settlers' expansion and "discovery" of the North American landscape, but very few, if any, historical representations show the dispossession and removal of the First Peoples from their lands. This version of history excised Indigenous people from art history, effectively white-washing the truth from Canada's foundational myths and school curriculums.

When Barbara Fischer invited me in 2014 to create a "Canada 150" project for the University of Toronto Art Museum, I leapt at the opportunity to represent a critical perspective on the last hundred and fifty years of history of Turtle Island. As Canadians celebrate the big birthday of confederation in 2017, we cannot forget that the last hundred and fifty years have been the most devastating for Indigenous people in this country: deliberate starvation, the reserve system, the legacy of incarceration, the removal of children to residential schools and the sixties scoop, sickness and disease, persistent third world housing conditions on reserves, contemporary urban disenfranchisement, violence and poverty. The fact that Indigenous people continue to survive all of this is a testament to our resiliency and strength.

In my extensive research for this project in museum collections across the country I found inspiration for my own works, and located historical objects and artworks to present in conjunction with my own paintings, drawings, and sculptures. I wanted to activate a dialogue about the impact of the last hundred and fifty years of European settler cultures on Indigenous peoples, and about Indigenous resilience in the face of genocide.

Up until the final report from Truth and Reconciliation Commission, published in 2015, most Canadians were ignorant of the severity and trauma of residential schools: thousands upon thousands of children were abused, with estimates as high as 30,000 dead or missing. It is almost impossible to imagine the damage to children forcibly removed from loving families, and the agony felt by the parents. Surviving sexual and physical abuse, many were starved, and sometimes even used as guinea pigs for medical experiments. They were forced into free labour, made to feel shame about who they were, and in the process lost their languages and ties to their cultures. The last federally funded residential school finally closed in the 1990s, and the intergenerational trauma of these experiences continues to reverberate in our families and communities in varying degrees of psychological and social dysfunction. Through the witness of many thousands of residential school survivors in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Canadians have now been confronted with the dark past that haunts this nation.

My paternal grandmother, Elizabeth Monkman (born Elizabeth Everett, 1914-1983), was a survivor of the Brandon residential school in Manitoba. I grew up not knowing much about her experiences, and wasn't encouraged to ask. Only on her deathbed was she able to speak openly about her own suffering and the abuse she endured in the schools. She was one of thirteen children born to Caroline Everett, only three of which survived to adulthood.

As I began to assemble this exhibition, I reflected on the impacts of the residential school system in my own family: the removal of children, the cyclical violence and abuse handed down from one generation to the next, the loss of our language and cultural knowledge, the impact of the Church, the destruction of addiction, and incarceration. If all of this was present in my own family, the impact of colonization on Indigenous families and communities across the continent is statistically so staggering it's nearly impossible to comprehend. Joseph Stalin said "one death is a tragedy; one million is a statistic." Can this country begin to heal, reconcile, and offer restitution for the hundreds of thousands of shattered lives and damaged families, and for each individual life?

When I grew up in the 1970's in Winnipeg, residential schools were not talked about in mainstream public conversations, and there was certainly no mention of them in the public school curriculum. First Nations mostly made headlines with the depressing faces of colonization like violence, incarceration, alcoholism and poverty; but the root causes of these systemic problems were never discussed in the public realm. They didn't fit with the glossy brochure version of Canada: squeaky-clean, chiseled Leyendecker Mounties and cartoon beavers, a new country of pink-faced hard working immigrants. Modern Canadians didn't want to acknowledge or remember to whom the occupied lands rightfully belonged. This was a "new" country ripe for the plucking. What happened in the past was no longer relevant, a cumbersome affront to the optimism of the newcomers. Modernity's rejection of tradition and embrace of capitalism were liberating and useful to the endless sea of industrious immigrants who fled political and social oppression in Europe to begin anew in North America. However, when the doctrines of Modernity were thrust upon Indigenous people, it had devastating effects.

The last hundred and fifty years of Canada are concurrent with the rise of European Modernism and of emergence of Modern Art. The Canadian treaty signings of 1873 occurred ten years after Manet's innovative painting, *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), transformed conventions of pictorial space and set Modernism on its path. The painter's flattening of pictorial space echoes the shrinking of space for Indigenous people who were forced onto reserves that are tiny fractions of their original territory, now comprising only 0.2 % of Canada. The Cubists' appropriations of tribal artifacts known as Primitivism were upending European art-making traditions whilst Indigenous traditions and languages were being beaten out of Indigenous children in residential schools. Picasso's phallic bulls and his

butchering of the female nude were contemporaneous with the European aggression against the female spirit (homophobia, violence against women) in North American Indigenous societies, many of them matrilineal.

The nine chapters in the exhibition encompass a wide range of themes -- from the period of New France to the contemporary *Urban Res*. Included are works relating to New France, the period a hundred and fifty years before Confederation, as this was a time when Indigenous peoples were still major players in the economy that shaped North America, the fur trade. Not yet incarcerated on reserves, Indigenous people were still able to move freely in search of game, pursuing the seasonal livelihood that they had since time immemorial. The Roccoco installation, *Scent of a Beaver* (2016) based on Fragonard's painting, *The Swing*, (1767), positions Miss Chief balancing the power struggle between French and English for dominion over the fur trade. In two of my newest paintings, *The Death of the Virgin (after Caravaggio)* (2016) and *The Scream* (2017), I seek to do justice to the unimaginable pain of losing children with a sense of sincerity and defiant bluntness.

Several other themes are shaped by my research in museum collections: food and drink, and the animals that provide physical and spiritual nourishment for Indigenous people. The theme of a personal journal or memoir, as exemplified by the exquisite miniature gouaches from the fantastic imagination of Nicholas Point, a Jesuit priest, also reverberates in the didactic panels that are narrated in Miss Chief's passionate and heartfelt treatise for her family and community. Framing the exhibition with a narrative inspired in part by Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Miss Chief's social climbing and liaisons with the powerful colonizers, despite her trickster flaws, are negotiated with the well-being of her family and community in mind.

Food and drink (and the deprivation of food) as invoked by the earthenware and CP silver laid out on an opulent dining table, takes us from the baroque opulence of New France to the starvation policies of John A. Macdonald's government, the development of the railroad, and the decimation of the bison populations. The bear as a spiritual force appears often in my work, and the beaver is both, a symbol of Canada and the currency of the fur trade. It is found in numerous museum objects: trade silver pendants, Indigenous clothing, and earthenware.

The main theme of this exhibition, however, is resilience. My goal is to counter the one-sided version of art history that exalts European "discovery" of this continent and to celebrate and commemorate the indomitable spirit of Indigenous people. The greatest evidence of resilience lies in the creativity of Indigenous artists across this continent who are overcoming the intergenerational impact of genocide and transform their troubled experiences into many forms of transcendent art and expression. I hope my paintings will function as a critique of colonization, authorize Indigenous experience in art history, and excite people with the enduring power and possibility of history painting, perhaps even reaching across the next hundred and fifty years.

I dedicate this exhibition to my grandmother, Elizabeth Monkman who, like many of her generation, was shamed into silence in the face of extreme prejudice.

Kent Monkman, January 2017