# Mischievous Makeover Madness

## CREE ARTIST MISS CHIEF EAGLE TESTICKLE (AKA KENT MONKMAN) IS INTERVIEWED BY DEAD FRENCH PAINTER EUGÈNE DELACROIX

History will never be the same

THE LAND WAS NEVER EMPTY. While the majestic landscape in the 2007 work The Triumph of Mischief evokes the work of Albert Bierstadt, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle's version is populated with all manner of misbehaving characters, real and mythological. The artist is visible left of centre; look for the cherubs.

BROODING, majestic landscapes serve as monumental backdrops to Cree artist Miss Chief Eagle Testickle's witty, wicked, and wonderful reframing of North American history. All manner of myth, whether Greek, Roman, biblical, Renaissance, Romantic, or colonial, are skewered — as we like to say in French, *comme le vice Anglais* — in Miss Chief's radical quest to upend received cant and help mend longstanding injury. In reimagining North America's tragic past, Miss Chief recasts the present and the future for natives and non-natives alike.

Drawing upon various artistic traditions, Miss Chief pays homage to the Old Masters she clearly admires, while exploding the problematic political and personal biases these artists and their works often represent. Mastery over the power of Western art while in open, often hilarious, rebellion against Western political hegemony has propelled the peripatetic and prolific artist to the top tier of the art world. Her works are now in the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Canada, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, and numerous private collections.

Miss Chief is poised for even greater success with her ambitious Confederation-themed show, Shame and Prejudice, timed to coincide with Canada's sesquicentennial in 2017. The touring exhibition, comprised of several new monumental works, as well as historical objects from major museums across the country, is a full-scale indictment of the West's treatment of Aboriginal people in North America over the last 150 years. Astoundingly, the ever youthful, time-travelling Miss Chief bore witness through it all.

CASUALTIES OF MODERNITY. More recent works like Love, from 2014's Urban Res series, address darker themes more directly.

**Miss Chief, I first saw you in 1846 in American painter George Catlin's Indian Gallery at the Louvre. In among Catlin's startling paintings and collection of artefacts he had a number of flesh-and-blood Indians, Ojibwe and Illinois, performing various rituals and songs. And there you were, such a stunning creature, looking nothing like the other Indians.**

Not everyone can pull off a Dior Dreamcatcher gown.

**That's part of the reason you split with Catlin, correct?**

He had the nerve to say I didn't look authentic enough and was always trying to dress me up with his tickle trunk full of traditional buckskin dresses. He always had an inflated sense of himself, claiming to be capturing for posterity images of a "dying nation." He had no sense how he, in fact, advanced the American colonial project, its Manifest Destiny. And he wasn't above writing pure fiction, either. He was wrong on so many fronts. First Nations are not a monolith. Our varied cultures are in constant flux. We didn't disappear. And we have our own traditions of documenting ourselves. We didn't need George in the picture. But his heart was in the right place, I guess. And a few other things, too — he was a good lover, despite his (ahem) shortcomings. And he brought me to Paris. It was the start of my education in Western art.

**And my education in the customs and manners of the North American Indian. When you modelled for my painting, The Natchez, you quickly disabused me of my outmoded notions of the "noble savage." You were such a trouble maker.**

Ah, Eugène. Too bad it didn't work out between us. When I saw you running around with that androgynous writer George Sand, I thought we had a chance. She's so mannish! But with all those hours you spend admiring photographs of male nudes, I suppose it's the mannishness that you're attracted to. I'm too much woman for you.

***La nuit, tous les chats sont gris.* On that front, help me with some terminology. To describe yourself, do you use *ayekkwew*, the Cree word for man-woman, *berdache*, the old French term for homosexual male Indian, or Two-Spirited, the contemporary English phrase?**

Yes.

**You want it all, don't you? I love your panache. You're as at home in biblical stories and classical mythology as you are in the Hudson River School and other 19th-century painting traditions. You hopscotch brazenly through time and space, inserting yourself into the historical record. To a man like me, rooted in the 19th century, such elasticity is bewildering.**

We're not so different. You, too, find inspiration in all manner of places: contemporary reality, the Bible, the literature of Shakespeare and Racine.... When you travelled to North Africa, you felt as if you had travelled in time back to ancient Greece and Rome. We Romantics are gregarious magpies.

**Your massive landscape paintings echo masters like Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt. And you've always had eye for composition, whether it's the landscapes or complicated groupings of figures. Your background in theatre design and commercial storyboarding has served you well.**

Wasn't it you who said, "If you haven't enough skill to sketch a man throwing himself out of a window in the time it takes him to fall from the fourth floor to the ground, then you will never be able to create a monumental painting"?

**The last time we worked together, you summoned me to be a part of your Séances performance at the Royal Ontario Museum. I recall you had a few choice words for another painter that you summoned, Canadian Paul Kane.**

I had been approached by the ROM's Institute for Contemporary Culture to respond to something in the museum's collection, as part of a group show of Aboriginal artists. I came up with Duel After the Masquerade. It was my rejoinder to Kane having such prominence in the ROM's First Peoples Gallery (the ROM holds the largest collection of Kanes in the world). Why was this white man given such pride of place in the First Peoples Gallery? But the First Peoples Gallery curators refused to hang my painting alongside the Kanes (eventually they allowed one Kane painting to hang with mine in the ICC). Then we staged Séances in the museum's atrium where, in honour of Catlin's discomfort over such "disgusting customs," I staged my own version of a Dance to the Berdache. I had three costume changes! Kane and Catlin were nonplussed.

> *In my Urban Res paintings I needed to capture very sophisticated descriptions of the human body in states of grief.*

**While your wicked sense of humour and wit still flashes in your more recent work, you increasingly depict scenes of unadulterated violence and despair and urban desolation... what I call a tendency to *terribilitas*.**

We Romantics share that, too, don't we? I love your scenes from North Africa, the hunting scenes! Violence has never looked so thrilling and beautiful!

**So now you are tackling a wider range of emotions and states of being. You are improving as a painter and, as a result, your paintings have become even more ambitious.**

Why thank you. Praise from the likes of Delacroix is humbling. My work *is* shifting. Part of it has to do with the maturing of my own painterly skills, the maturing of my ability. Before, I chose camp and irony and parody and satire as a way of disarming people. I didn't feel I had the mature skills to effectively tackle mature subject matter straight on. Like you, I constantly study the works of masters in the hopes of improving my craft. In my Urban Res paintings, for example, I needed to capture very sophisticated descriptions of the human body in states of grief. So I looked to Caravaggio, Poussin, and Veronese because they really nailed it.

**All the great problems of art were resolved in the 16th century: Raphael, Correggio, Titian, Veronese. Then comes Rubens. He created a new ideal through sheer force of genius. Strength, striking effects, and expressiveness are pushed to their limits.**

Yes, Rubens! I'm developing a number of works based on the Massacre of the Innocents. Rubens, David, Tintoretto... any number of history painters tackled this biblical story of the mass murder of children. I tie it to the issue of Residential Schools in Canada, the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their homes in an attempt to destroy Aboriginal communities. I paint a mother having a child ripped from her arms. The Mounties are there. It's a very tumultuous scene, very complex. Another painting from the Confederation series is inspired by Caravaggio's Death of the Virgin. My version depicts a hospital scene in reference to all the illness that's in First Nations communities as a result of colonization, including youth suicide. Ostensibly, the virgin has killed herself.

**I admire this newfound ambition and urgency in your work. It calls to mind my feelings when I painted Liberty Leading the People following the rebellion of 1830, when the French rose up against tyranny. I've heard my image of Liberty has become quite popular, even in America. Perhaps I will redo that painting with Miss Chief as Liberty.**

Perhaps *I* will. ▫

*Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience by Kent Monkman (aka Miss Chief) opens at the Art Museum, University of Toronto in January 2017 before touring to Edmonton, Calgary, Montreal, Charlottetown, and Halifax. kentmonkman.com.*