

Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience, McCord Museum, Montréal, February 8 to May 5, 2019, Curated by Kent Monkman

Alexandra Nordstrom

Volume 45, Number 1, 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070595ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070595ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Nordstrom, A. (2020). Review of [*Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience, McCord Museum, Montréal, February 8 to May 5, 2019, Curated by Kent Monkman*]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 45(1), 101–104. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070595ar>

had deeply political implications in Imperial Japan. These implications were further rooted in already existing discourse concerning the need to develop a national style of painting that would express Japan's modernity and cultural authenticity.

While chapters Two, Three, and Four focus on artists who took up more traditional mediums and styles in their works (Chapter Two focuses on Taikan's Mount Fuji paintings, Chapter Three examines a folding screen painting by Yasuda Yukihiko that evokes the historical subject matter and style of medieval *yamato-e* paintings, and Chapter Four examines Shōen's modern *bijin-ga*), Chapter Five further breaks down the binaries between Western-style (*yōga*) battle paintings and modern Japanese-style (*nihonga*) non-militaristic paintings by examining the work of Fujita Tsuguharu, an artist who worked in the *yōga* style. During the war, Fujita was commissioned to produce both large-scale battle paintings and non-militaristic paintings. The focus of Ikeda's analysis is *Events in Akita* (1937), a monumental oil painting depicting scenes from four seasonal festivals in Akita, a northern prefecture on Japan's largest island, Honshū. *Events in Akita* evokes both the change of seasons and the tranquility of life in what was considered a rural periphery at the time. As Ikeda explains, Western-style painters were able to evoke Japanese subject matter in service to state ideology (99). Fujita's treatment of the subject of seasonal change and rural life (which are common subject matter found throughout the history of art in Japan) promoted Japanese colonialism, expressing that the roots of Japan's national identity were located in the cultural traditions of its peripheries. During the 1930s, Akita and the rest of the northern Tohoku region was seen as the least modernized part of the country and therefore the most traditionally and authentically "Japanese." Fujita's painting, along with other cultural works about Tohoku, produced a primitivist gaze

that celebrated the Otherness of rural subjects untouched by modernization and Westernization. This image relates to the discourse surrounding Tohoku, which, as Ikeda explains, went as far as to suggest that its Otherness paralleled Japan's colonies in East and Southeast Asia, understanding the region as an "internal colony" (97). Taking up this primitivist lens through Western-style painting, Fujita's non-militaristic artworks demonstrate that the analysis of wartime art and culture cannot easily be divided along the lines of style and medium.

The Second World War has been a difficult topic to study in Asia and especially in Japan where views on its outcomes are conflicting. Calls to grapple with the nation's violence in East and Southeast Asia are met with silences, and the dominant postwar narrative has centred on Japan's "economic miracle." Ikeda's emphasis on both the global and the national in the context of Japanese wartime art is a major contribution to the field of global modernisms. Her analysis of non-militaristic war art through the lens of fascism provides a methodological toolkit for comparative studies of war art and models an incisive and nuanced study of the artistic legacies of war. Through a focus on the social lives of these artworks, the book offers insights into how Japan constructed its view of the world through its international relationships and through specific conditions of modernity and art that were constantly being re-interpreted and re-adopted to suit political needs. The book therefore offers a more complex understanding of the development of modern art and culture in twentieth century Asia. It contributes to decolonizing and de-imperializing Asian Studies, upturning Western-centrism while also challenging the politics and power structures that resulted from inter-Asian struggle. ¶

Victoria Nolte is a Doctoral Candidate in Cultural Mediations at Carleton University.
—victoria.nolte@carleton.ca

1. As it is standard in East Asia, names are written with the family name preceding the given name. In Japan, it is also customary to refer to well-known artists by their given name.

2. For instance, the Japanese government has never officially acknowledged the Imperial Army's systemic abuse of hundreds of thousands of comfort women in China, South Korea, and the Philippines. The recent closure of the exhibition After "Freedom of Expression?" at the 2019 Aichi Triennale testifies to this lingering silence. For more information about the censorship of this exhibition, which featured a sculpture depicting a Korean comfort woman, see Philip Brasor, "Outrage over Aichi Triennale exhibition ignites debate over freedom of expression in art," *The Japan Times*, August 17, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/08/17/national/media-national/outrage-aichi-triennale-exhibition-ignites-debate-freedom-expression-art/#.XjhkCBNkqBI>.

Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience McCord Museum, Montréal

February 8 to May 5, 2019
Curated by Kent Monkman

Alexandra Nordstrom

The 150th anniversary of Canadian confederation in 2017 was commemorated across the country with activities and events organized by the federal, provincial, and municipal governments, as well as by non-governmental and philanthropic organizations. While the official programming was intended to celebrate diversity, encourage inclusion, and "establish a spirit of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples,"¹ some events focused attention on the Canadian state's treatment of Indigenous peoples, sparking conversations about the many issues Indigenous communities continue to face post-confederation. Emerging from a sesquicentennial project for the Art Museum at the University of Toronto, *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience* made its way to the McCord Museum in Montréal during a three-year national tour. *Shame and Prejudice* engaged in a re-telling of Canadian history through a solo exhibition self-curated by Cree artist

Kent Monkman. The show used history painting, installation, sculpture, drawing, and historical objects to reimagine European and North American art historical canons, as well as Canadian history, with the active presence of Indigenous perspectives.

Together, the creative content and curatorial approach utilized by Monkman throughout *Shame and Prejudice* worked as a critical intervention within the space of the museum. As both artist and curator, Monkman played with the history of museological authority by destabilizing power relations between the exhibitor and the exhibited, also situating his practice within a longer history of racialized artists who have taken on the role of artist-as-curator, either of their own work or engaging with collections, including Fred Wilson, Sonia Boyce, and Monkman with his earlier residency at the McCord. Like other curators and writers working in contemporary Indigenous curatorial practice such as Heather Iglooliorte, Gerald McMaster, and Lee-Ann Martin (just to name a few), Monkman aimed to foreground Indigenous epistemology and ways of knowing. Since museums and galleries have long exerted and reinforced Western colonial power over Indigenous and other peoples, it is especially valuable for Indigenous points of view to take primacy within a major institutional space such as the McCord. As Iglooliorte asserts, reclaiming voice within such spaces has significant decolonial potential.²

Storytelling was used as a central curatorial framework throughout the show. *Shame and Prejudice* was organized into nine carefully researched chapters of historical narrative focusing on key themes of trade, food and drink, and reserve and urban lifestyles, as well as moments and effects of colonization such as the residential school system and the mass incarceration of Indigenous peoples. The show's main protagonist was Monkman's gender-fluid,

time-travelling alter ego, as we learn from wall panels and an exhibition text entitled «Excerpts from the Memoirs of Miss Chief Eagle Testickle.» Margaret Kovach, an expert in Indigenous research methodologies, has remarked that when story is considered “as both method and meaning, it is presented as a culturally nuanced way of knowing.”³ Written in the first person, Miss Chief's voice permits subjectivity and individual agency to enter the exhibition space, privileging Indigenous personal testimony as a source of knowledge within a space where Indigenous voices have been historically denied. Wall didactics and the exhibition text were provided in Cree, French, and English, with Cree preceding Canada's two official languages. In activating the Indigenous voice through story, the show worked to claim and subvert Canadian history since confederation in addition to challenging the museum as a site of colonization.

Monkman's approach to curation was also relational, since his own works were placed in conversation with historical art and artefacts on loan from institutions and collections across the country. Monkman's paintings imitate stylistic techniques and pictorial language championed by Western history and refer

specifically to history and landscape painting masters that have been revered in the Western art historical canon. In this sense, Monkman positioned his own paintings as history paintings in form, execution, and effect, and the presence of history paintings by North American or European masters offered a background of pictorial and aesthetic artefacts against which Monkman's own paintings could be seen and appreciated. Moreover, the juxtaposition between Monkman's own work and the work of historical masters also worked to illuminate the ways in which Indigenous perspectives and subject matter have been misrepresented and/or excluded from the traditional canon. In his foreword text Monkman stated that his aim was to “authorize Indigenous experience in the canon of art history that has heretofore erased us from view.”⁴

In the first section, the viewer is transported into the time of New France and the fur trade. Here, Monkman's beavers peacefully lounge amongst one another drinking wine and eating fruit. In *Watercolour Study for Beaver Bacchanal* (2015) they are likened to the children depicted in *The Fruit Dance* (ca. 1616–1617) from the Studio of Peter Paul Rubens and Frans Snyder, whose flushed pink skin and

Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience at McCord Museum, Montréal, 2019, installation view.
Photo: Marilyn Aitken, © McCord Museum.



plump bodies speak to vitality as they carry a garland of fruit. However, this atmosphere is shattered by Monkman's *Massacre of the Innocents* (2015), a large-scale painting of a romanticized Canadian landscape which recasts Rubens's seventeenth-century biblical depiction from the Gospel of Matthew. In this work Monkman rejects the *terra nullius* mythology perpetuated by landscape artists such as Albert Bierstadt and Paul Kane by rendering a violent battle between the beaver and the early settlers in the foreground of the image.⁵ Similarly, in *Rosary Beaver* (2016), rosary beads and a beaver crucifix made from pewter characterize the over-slaughter and sacrifice of the beaver for the fur trade.

The second room of the exhibition featured Monkman's large multimedia installation *Starvation Plates* (2017). Extending between *Chapter II: Fathers of Confederation* and *Chapter IV: Starvation*, the installation consisted of a long wooden dining table veiled in a lace runner. A large portion of the table was occupied with a luxurious feast set with shiny silverware, candelabras, cigar boxes, exotic fruits, wine, liquor, trays presenting hors d'oeuvres, and dining plates commemorating Canada's centennial with an image of Robert Harris's painting *The Fathers of Confederation* (1884). While enticing, this display of abundance was fully encased in glass, unavailable and unattainable for the viewer. Playing with gluttony and decadence, Monkman emphasized the exclusivity and opulence of colonial profit. In contrast, one end of the table remained uncovered and its delicate lace runner was tattered. Six dining plates depicted towering piles of buffalo bones, some with soldiers standing proudly nearby, drawing attention to the deliberate mass killing of buffalo. These plates remained empty, containing only bits and pieces of bone. Both sets of dining plates signified the starvation of Indigenous peoples. However, one resting at the open end of

the table commemorated "150 Years of Indigenous Resistance" with an image of Monkman's painting *The Daddies* (2016)—a cheeky rendition of Harris's work, which foregrounds Miss Chief styled with pearl earrings and red-bottom shoes as she poses nude on a Hudson's Bay blanket in front of the founding fathers. Monkman declares that the seat taken by Indigenous peoples was one of resistance and resilience, "a progressive tense of action that began in the past, persists in the present, and will continue in the future."⁶

As an Indigenous viewer, I experienced many emotions while journeying throughout the exhibit. I felt the familiar wave of tension that tends to rise when diverse perspectives and interpretations of history are presented side by side. Further, I felt an unyielding sense of unfamiliarity. I was accustomed to the museum as a site of display of the history and stories of colonization. However, this was this first time I had witnessed Indigenous views of history, some the stories of my own community, foregrounded and articulated in a large institutional space. One of the most evocative elements in the show for me was *Chapter V: Forcible Transfer of Children*, where Monkman's massive 84-by-132-inch painting *The Scream* (2017) was displayed in an all-black room. This work depicts a violent scene where children are forcibly removed from their homes and families by clergy members and the RCMP. Cradle boards were mounted on the wall on either side of the image. Some boards were missing and only their outlines remained in chalk, thus eliciting a haunting sense of absence. Near the opposite wall were two displays that housed historical objects. One display exhibited three beautifully carved and painted cradle boards (1810–30, 1900–25, and 1865–1925), while the other exhibited objects such as beaded letter holders and book covers made from hide. These smaller works came from Grouard, Kapawe'no First Nation and were all

made by students at the Grouard Residential School for the principal of the school (ca. 1925–1930). The physicality of these handmade objects directly spoke to lived experience. The empty cradle boards suggested both familial and cultural loss, and the objects from Grouard Residential School alluded to the overwhelming number of Indigenous children placed in the residential school system. With heartache, Miss Chief's memoir stated, "This is the one I cannot talk about. The pain is too deep. We were never the same."⁷ Where Miss Chief was lost for words, Monkman evoked the emotional and corporeal devastation caused by the residential school system by bringing together *The Scream* and the poignantly handmade objects.

Together, the works exhibited in *Shame and Prejudice* reflected upon and challenged historical narratives that have been cemented in history as collective experiences, all the while making space for alternative narratives and voices. The low ceilings and confined space of the McCord required that the viewer be physically close to each work. This created a sense of intimacy and, in some cases, claustrophobia, forcing the acknowledgement of the histories and lived experiences presented throughout the show. Nonetheless, the viewer passed through Miss Chief's memoirs in a way that allowed the content to linger and be reckoned with. Just as memoirs document and reflect upon the high and low points in one's life, *Shame and Prejudice* teased the edges of grief, heartache, and struggle just as much as it evoked a sense of vitality through humour and fortitude, acknowledging resilience as a personal, yet shared experience among generations of Indigenous peoples. ¶

Alexandra Nordstrom is an MA Candidate in the Department of Art History at Concordia University. Identifying as being of Plains Cree and Ukrainian-German descent, she is a band member of Poundmaker Cree Nation in Saskatchewan.
—alexandra.r.nordstrom@gmail.com

1. "Canada 150," Government of Canada, last modified May 7, 2018, <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/anniversaries-significance/2017/canada-150.html>.

2. Heather Igloliorte, "'We were so far away': Exhibiting Inuit Oral Histories of Residential Schools," in *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places*, eds. Erica Lehrer, Cynthia E. Milton, and Monica Eileen Patterson (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 36.

3. Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 94.

4. Kent Monkman, *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience*, exh. cat. (Montreal: McCord Museum, 2019), 50.

5. M. Melissa Elston, "Subverting Visual Discourses of Gender and Geography: Kent Monkman's Revised Iconography of the American West," *The Journal of American Culture* 35, no. 2 (June 2012): 182–183.

6. Kate Morris, "Crash: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Indigenous Art," *Art Journal* 76, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 77.

7. Kent Monkman, *Shame and Prejudice*, 62.

Andrew Burke
Hinterland Remixed: Media, Memory, and the Canadian 1970s

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019

264 pp. 15 b/w illus.

\$29.95 (paper) ISBN 9780773558595

Matthew Purvis

In January 1975, *Maclean's* took a backward glance at the shift from the 1960s to the 1970s, proclaiming it a slip from "hoping to coping." According to the magazine, any rebelliousness that may have existed in the previous decade had given way to a robotic generation who were apathetic when they were not concerned with conspiracy theories and the energy crisis. TV had become a way for people to tune in while dropping out of politics. Andrew Burke's *Hinterland Remixed: Media, Memory, and the Canadian 1970s* complicates this sketch of a still ill-defined decade by offering a provocative look at this period through its media forms. Structured

in five chapters with an introduction and coda bookending them, the text is broken into a set of case studies. The first three concentrate on material from the 1970s, while the last two examine ways material from the decade has been re-purposed and re-imagined by contemporary artists. Burke's book offers an intriguing way into the decade, suggesting it has never come to a clean end. Situating his text between the two Trudeaus, from the afterglow of 1967 to the shadow of 2015, Burke suggests that the residues of the 1970s endure to subtly influence the present and help shape how it is understood. He advocates for a "hauntological" approach that highlights the way that the desires and forms of the past persist to unsettle the present. The results, I would argue, are uneven.



Relying on the "incidental rather than the blandly representative," (4) Burke's book promises to study the circulation, remembrance and remediation of these artistic residues to "extrapolate" what the decade was like. He goes on to state that the "guiding principle of this book is that a fuller sense of any national cultural formation can be gleaned from experiments rather than exemplars" (4). This principle also seems applicable to the contemporary artworks that he selects to help filter the remains of the 1970s, through. The problem of mediation then stands as one of the basic pillars of his analysis, filtered to a substantial degree via

formal and structural discussions that catalogue the aesthetic models and materials Burke has chosen, whether it be Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale* (1971), SCTV (1976–84), Glenn Gould's *The Idea of North* (1967), or the regional television footage re-purposed for *Death by Popcorn* (L'Atelier national du Manitoba, 2005).

While there have been books, in art history as well as cultural and political history more generally, fleshing out the divergent facets and debates of what defined the Canadian 1960s, the 1970s remains a more enigmatic period. Books dealing with the Canadian 1960s often cast the era in terms of more general (counter)cultural shifts, such as the collected essays of *The Sixties: Passion, Politics, and Style* (2008), or in terms of the effects of media in the time leading directly to Burke's period, such as Paul Rutherford's *When Television Was Young: Primetime Canada, 1952–1967* (1990). Burke's approach is quite different from these, concentrating strongly on media forms as indexical moments of material history and their subsequent remediation. However, the book also does not provide the reader with much detail about the socio-political history of the Canadian 1970s. There is scarcely a gesture at establishing what the Canada of the period was beyond something leading to Mulroney. As a result, the Canadian 1970s operates in the text as a somewhat abstract theme as much as a historical period. The hazy situational detail Burke does provide is taken almost exclusively from an adoption of English cultural theory (Raymond Williams, Mark Fisher), a little Derrida, and an overtly autobiographical engagement with his curated materials (5–8). The historical vagueness produced from this strategy is essential to the hauntological approach that Burke adopts, allowing him to figure the 1970s as a trauma that has left its traces but no clear sign of its events.

Borrowing from Raymond Williams, Burke argues that art has the role of preserving a "structure of