

WHAT'S IN THE AIR



KENT MONKMAN BY DAVID FURNISH

THE CANADIAN ARTIST WHO IS EXPLODING THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE WEST—ONE BRUSHSTROKE AT A TIME

DAVID FURNISH: What I find so striking about your work, in terms of the beautiful colored backgrounds and landscapes, is it has a very old-fashioned, burnished, comforting quality to it. At the heart there's a depiction of what you would initially interpret to be a classical scene, but when you look closely you see something completely modern and surprising within that environment. It's that juxtaposition of what appears to be a painting that

could have been hanging on someone's wall for a hundred years, and yet it has this incredible jolt of modernity whacked right into the middle of it.

KENT MONKMAN: This whole body of work is about revisiting these early images that represent the very safe and secure foundation of the mythology about the exploration of the West. When you look at these paintings as an aboriginal person, you realize how subjective they are.

So when I make these paintings I'm not necessarily repainting history, but I'm nudging people toward seeing that there are these big missing narratives. A lot of painters at that time were projecting Christian ideologies onto the North American landscape. So with my paintings, I'm

Above: Kent Monkman's *Artist and Model*, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 24 in. Courtesy of the artist.

looking at the same land—the mountains, trees, sky—and inserting elements of our own sexuality as well.

DF: So it's taking your contemporary reinterpretation of aboriginal culture and reinventing it in a classical setting?

KM: Yes.

DF: Tell me about your personal journey. You come from an Indian background.

KM: My father was Cree and my mom is English-Irish-Canadian. So my work very much responds to that intersection and often undefinable space between cultures in flux. Whenever you have different people coming together there is a give and take, and the dominant historical narrative is really a one-sided perspective. I'm interested in communicating all of the nuances and complexities that happen between the two cultures. You know, native cultures are not static and never have been. So, when I am looking at historical work, what I am seeing is a very European

perspective on aboriginal cultures, and it's a limited point of view, obviously.

painters make copies of master paintings and learn through that process. So what I'm doing is taking the most spectacular landscapes that I can find and painstakingly reproducing them in a way that conceptually reclaims those landscapes. I paint the narrative in last so I have a couple of months to imagine what it's going to be. There are "historical figures" in the scenes, quite often including my alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, who is a drag queen. This flamboyant character is a reference to the fact that there was homosexuality in our tribal cultures that was accepted and even revered. It has existed in all cultures in all different times; it has been called different things and expressed in different ways; but it's just a natural human occurrence that everybody has to acknowledge as part of being human.

DF: Looking at your work, I am reminded of the amazing support this year both culturally and critically for films such as *Brokeback Mountain*,

***Mountain*, which basically explores a pure relationship between two men who genuinely care for each other. But by taking it and putting it in the world where people don't expect it to be, clichés that people associate with that world are broken down. As a result, I think it will have a more profound effect on shifting people's attitudes about sexuality overall, by showing that something this true and this real can happen in a world where such a thing is never supposed to happen.**

KM: I hope so, because the cowboy mythology has been used for some very destructive American imperialism and aggression. Even before there were names for cowboys, or Indians, or gays, there were just people who lived and had relationships with each other. I think a lot of people fled society for the frontier not just to have sex, or same-sex relationships, but to escape oppressive societal norms.

DF: That's what America was all about when

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DF: Do you think people tend to see native cultures in old-fashioned terms?

KM: Yeah, there's a tendency from the outside to look at aboriginal cultures and see them as inauthentic. We can be easily reduced because we don't measure up to the outdated model. That happens constantly. People have all of these perceptions about who an aboriginal person is supposed to be, and quite often it's about a comparison to this model that emerged from the 19th century that was carried through all the Hollywood westerns and all the clichés and images that you still see today. There's a reluctance to accept aboriginal identity in its current state. So I am trying to break that apart, too.

DF: Have people been anxious to chuck preconceived notions onto you?

KM: Absolutely, but I was fortunate enough to have parents and grandparents who were very confident in knowing who they were and who were confident in their own culture. They knew that you can exist in the modern world and still carry your values and your roots and your culture with you.

DF: These paintings are real labors of love. Tell me about your process.

KM: For me, it's about following a tradition in painting that has existed for centuries in which

***Transamerica*, *Capote*, and *Breakfast on Pluto*. There's been a very wholehearted response from Hollywood, which often tends to be more homophobic than anything else in terms of embracing these sorts of themes. What's your feeling about that?**

KM: I think it's just a big push coming from the American people, who are saying, "We are ready to accept gay people as equals." It's a significant turning point in time.

DF: I agree with you where some parts of America are concerned, yet there is as much disapproval and negativity as there is support. I often think that the negative response is based on the fact that people fear what they don't understand. They just sort of cling to the past and to old prejudices and outdated ideals, because there is a level of comfort or security in that.

KM: Americans are in a comfort zone with their personal beliefs about who they are, and I think this goes back to the origins and the evolution of their mythology. That's what I am touching on in my paintings—that there are flaws in this mythology that they are still hanging on to.

DF: The genius in your work is that it's subverting something—the West and the frontier—that people traditionally view as being absolutely masculine and heterosexual. It's similar to what's happening with *Brokeback*

it was founded—the separation of church and state. Yet here we are, 200-plus years later, right back where we started.

KM: That's really what I am responding to in my work. More than just the Indian cardboard cut-out that has been created through the narrowing down of mythology, it's about what a country wants to believe about its own origins. The Bible is at the root of that, and it had a profound effect on aboriginal peoples. In Canada, aboriginal children were taken away from their families and put into residential schools that were run by the church and the state together. It was a way of disrupting the culture. When you remove a child from the parents or grandparents, you are really cutting off that line.

DF: So in essence your work is really about reclaiming what was taken away.

KM: Yes, and expressing an empowered point of view about the fact that we are still here, and we are not victims. We're capable of evolving as cultures. It's about expressing the beauty that's there.

DF: Well, let's just hope the rest of the world can catch up.

David Furnish produced the forthcoming *It's A Boy Girl Thing*, starring Kevin Zegers and Samaire Armstrong. He is a contributing editor at *Interview* magazine.