

Potent video work turns tables on colonialism

It is the year of Kent Monkman in Winnipeg.

After having one of the best shows of 2008 at the Winnipeg Art Gallery last spring, he is back at Urban Shaman Gallery with a powerful installation, *Dance to the Berdashe*. As his exhibit at the WAG revealed, Monkman's art raises the question of how and by whom Western history has been written.

In this five-channel video installation, he further examines and portrays this subject with poignancy and depth, and in ways that are unlike anything the gallery or city has seen in years.

To understand the exhibit, it might help the viewer to know a bit about the

work of "ethnographer" George Catlin. Like many artists and aristocrats of the late 18th and 19th centuries, Catlin painted and studied the people that were seen as exotic and primitive to wealthy white men — namely, aboriginal people. He published books with multiple images he created while studying these "wild" people who so fascinated him. While many of these records gave the world some insight into the Aboriginal Peoples of North America, they were one-sided and often racist accounts. They were also, of course, excellent (and troubling) examples of recorded colonialism in full swing.

Catlin once observed a tribe doing a dance ritual of the same name as the one in the title of Monkman's installation. The dance honoured what essentially was the cross-dressing member of the tribe. Catlin made many homophobic remarks about the dance and said he hoped that "it might be extinguished before it be more fully recorded." Like so many traditions, it was ultimately lost.

Monkman's *Dance of the Berdashe* recreates this tradition. According to the accompanying writeup, "Through this reciprocal and performative rite, the Dandies and Berdashe renew each other's spirits, thereby refuting their obfuscation by colonial forces and Primitivism's reductive pillaging of



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Dance to the Berdashe
by Kent Monkman
Urban Shaman
Gallery
203-290 McDermot
Ave.
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indigenous cultures."

For this exhibit, the main gallery has been transformed into a darkened installation space. Monkman incorporates several important and significant aboriginal symbols and signifiers in the work, making it rich with history and truth. The colours and placement of the Four Directions, or medicine wheel, are seen through the fringed fabric bison hides on which the videos are projected. Red, yellow, black and white fringe borders the hides in a nod to this sacred component of aboriginal culture. The pulsating soundtrack morphs with each movement of the dancers, and traditional drumming and singing envelops the space.

Dancers — whose movements were choreographed by Cree dancer and choreographer Michael Greyeyes — emerge at the start of the work from symbolic cave-like drawings on screens that hang from the ceiling of the gallery. Greyeyes' combination of ballet and modern steps with aborig-

inal dance makes Monkman's vision even more dynamic. The dancers sway and reverberate in unison across the four main screens, creating their own rhythm through their elegant movements. They rise, fall, jump and stir with grace and strength.

Of course, it would not feel like a Monkman work if his alter-ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, did not make an appearance. Shrouded in sheer red fabric and fringes, this being of sexual and spiritual power emerges from the centre screen at the pinnacle of the work. She rotates and materializes into the centre while the four dancers create an intense energy within the work.

This exhibition is characterized by honesty and weight, rethinking history while maintaining the highest level of artistic expression.

Monkman is able to create a new environment for his subject matter, making it feel fresh and potent.

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Left, artist Kent Monkman as Miss Chief Eagle Testickle; above, images projected on bison hides; below, images from *Dance to the Berdashe*.

