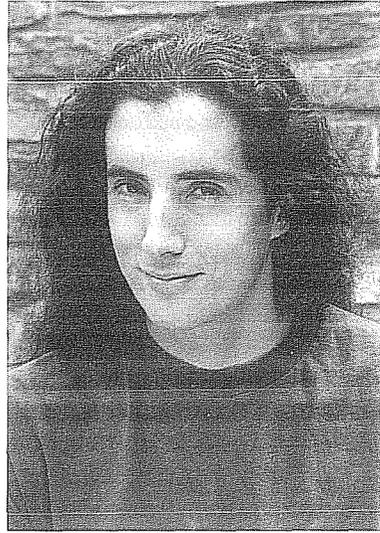


“It’s Time for Something Different:” Kent Monkman on Illustrative Dissent

Marie C. Davis

Résumé: Kent Monkman explique la visée idéologique et esthétique des illustrations très particulières qu’ils a produites pour l’ouvrage de Tom King, *A Coyote Columbus Story*.

Summary: Kent Monkman explains the logic and aesthetic behind his notoriously loud illustrations to Tom King’s *A Coyote Columbus Story*.



Kent Monkman, painter, film producer, set designer, and costume creator, is also the accomplished illustrator of Tom King’s story, *A Coyote Columbus Story*. Born to a Cree father and fourth-generation Canadian mother (of English and Irish descent), Monkman lived most of his life in Winnipeg before coming to Toronto in 1983 to study illustration at Sheridan College. Toronto has been his permanent residence for the last ten years, and though it is in Toronto that he has painted seriously for the last seven years, his exhibitions have been elsewhere: solo shows in Vancouver, Edmonton, Hamilton, and Calgary. He has done set and costume design for Native Earth Performing Arts Inc.; he has designed two dance productions for Michael Greyeyes and Floyd Favel for the Canadian Dance Festival; and, most recently, he collaborated with Michael Greyeyes, a classically-trained ballet dancer and choreographer, on a 24-minute dance film, which just premiered in Toronto at the Moving Pictures Festival (a festival of dance on film and video), and in San Francisco at the American Indian Film Festival.

In this interview about his first children’s book, *A Coyote Columbus Story*, Monkman explains some of the choices he made in fleshing out King’s text and in turning on its head both traditional history and traditional representations of Natives and Europeans. The interview took place on November 9, 1996.

DAVIS: What media did you use in *A Coyote Columbus Story*? The illustrations have a really interesting texture.

MONKMAN: I used watercolour and gouache on paper.

DAVIS: How did you get that look of a woodcut in the backgrounds in the trees and the violet-pink sky?

MONKMAN: By overpainting with gouache. I put down transparent layers of watercolours and then I just overpainted with gouache. I was doing a bit more

illustration then, so I was into developing techniques. I wasn't really working in a specific style. I had to develop a look for the book, and that took a bit of playing around, until we settled on something.

DAVIS: Did you settle on a style with Tom King or with the publisher?

MONKMAN: Well, I arrived at the technique on my own. But I talked with Tom about the development of the characters. He gave me some input early on as to what Coyote might look like. I also asked him what he thought Columbus might look like. He gave me some starting points, and then I took it from there.

DAVIS: I love the way you illustrate Coyote at the beginning — it's as if she is part of the landscape.

MONKMAN: Well, Coyote is able to take different forms and sizes and other beings' shapes. Originally, I thought that Coyote would take different forms and so I'd have to change her size and costume throughout the story. But it turned out that there was so much else going on, that I ended up keeping her in one form and in one outfit. At the beginning, in the landscape, she is much larger than life, lying back in her playground. She looks like an omnipotent creator the way Tom describes her.

DAVIS: You've got her raised up in the air in a lot of the illustrations.

MONKMAN: Yes, she has this ability to defy gravity; she's playful in the way she jumps around and darts here and there. She's the spirit of mischief.

DAVIS: One of Columbus's men is modelled on Elvis. On whom did you model Columbus?

MONKMAN: Bozo the Clown I guess is the closest model!

DAVIS: What about the other men?

MONKMAN: I wanted the men to look comical and just a little freakish.

DAVIS: I want to ask you a number of questions about characterization — the choices you make. Why did you have the characters so heavily armed?

MONKMAN: Historically, they did come armed — they were armed with new technologies. I wanted to really beef up that fact so that people would kind of see the equivalent of what natives back then might have seen. Their swords and early versions of the musket become modern-day firearms and heavy artillery. The whole book is full of anachronisms like that.

DAVIS: The clothing of at least two of the men is highly effeminate: Elvis wears pink stilettos; the figure with the square nose wears pink fishnet stockings and lime green pilgrim pumps. And Jacques Cartier wears those wonderful fleurs-de-lis bell bottoms and pink pumps. What are you doing with these details?

MONKMAN: Originally, I just examined some historical costume reference material to get some idea of what those men would have worn. If you look at the history of European costume, there are periods where men's clothing is effeminate, and the Renaissance is one of them. The men wore these frilly lace things and sometimes looked much more effeminate than the women. I want these Europeans to be seen through the eyes of a person from a completely different culture. It can be confusing how one culture identifies gender through dress. So, I

was looking at the situation of Columbus coming to North America through the eyes of someone who is unable to identify how European culture determines the gender of the person through clothing. It works both ways, of course. The Europeans probably didn't understand Native dress patterns. There are ways that each culture identifies the garb for women and garb for men. I was playing around with that and just having fun with the costume of that time which was really over the top. And those collars and flounces were fun things to draw, too! [laughter]

DAVIS: An average reader will identify with the natives because of the "normal" modern way they're dressed, whereas Columbus and his men seem really odd.

MONKMAN: That's just it: one culture perceives another culture and says, "well, we're normal. There's something wrong with them because they're not dressing like us." [laughter] We quickly move from outside to inside in our judgments. People always want to identify Native people as looking like Pocahontas and Hiawatha, or strangely-clothed savages. When you turn everything around, as we did in that book, and have people look through the eyes of the Native person who is dressed normally, the other people — the Europeans — look like they're from another planet.

DAVIS: Yes, so the clothing highlights the foreignness of the Europeans. Why did you put patches on the clothing of the Europeans?

MONKMAN: Columbus's period was also a time in Europe where people would go for weeks without bathing. If you look at the history of the period, conditions were not exactly sanitary. So, I wanted to play up the decrepit side of the culture. The Europeans didn't necessarily arrive in great shape. I also wanted to play up how they would look silly to the Natives, so the more patches I painted, the more they started to look a bit like clowns with the colours and costuming, big red noses, the flounces and frills of circus figures.

DAVIS: Why did you choose to illustrate the book with such bold colours — fuschia, lime green, burnt orange, deep purple?

MONKMAN: Because it's just such an unusual retelling of the Columbus story, it didn't make sense to do it in earth tones or to use romantic characterization. It called for outrageous colours — as bright as I could make them. We were mixing the bag, using things from the past and the present simultaneously, and shifting "history" around — so I think we needed to express that dissent at every level, including colour. It kind of scared people off because bright colours are considered "down-market." In children's books — the upscale ones — people tend to think sombre colours are much more sophisticated.

DAVIS: I don't think people looked at how good the illustrations are technically in terms of consistency of character and variations in perspective. A lot of people went "ick" when they looked at the colours — kind of like the reaction to Van Gogh's sunflowers — and turned away.

MONKMAN: I know, but when I showed the illustrations to the people at Greenwood, they said, "Wow, these colours are amazing!" They actually had the printer put some fluorescent ink into the process colours, which helped hold

the intensity and carry the brilliance of the colour to the printed page. If they hadn't done that, I think the colours would have flattened out a lot more.

DAVIS: Why do the Europeans have purple, blue, or green skin while the Natives have normal skin?

MONKMAN: Well, that's just historical perspective again. I imagined those Natives were thinking "What's wrong with their skin? It's so pale and pasty" when they met Europeans! [laughter] You can imagine — being on a boat for two months, they probably weren't in the best of health, and Europe at the time was dirty and filled with disease. Also, people aspired to a ghostly white skin tone — the whiter you were, the lovelier you were. So, I parodied that, just by turning that white into shades of green and blue. [laughter]

DAVIS: That's especially funny in the scene in Seville where the Natives are tied up as "IMPORTED GOODS" and you see all of these green and blue faces of sickly-looking buyers.

MONKMAN: Yes, I imagined that Natives saw it as an unclean place.

DAVIS: I wanted to talk about the difference between the visual story and the textual story in *A Coyote Columbus Story*. In the text, for instance, there's no indication that beavers transport their wood in trucks; that turtles take a rowboat around a pond; that moose float in inner tubes; or even that Natives wear modern clothing. Why did you choose to add these details?

MONKMAN: When I first started to work on the sketches, I had some beavers that were straight beavers. But when Tom and I looked at them, we realized that the story just wouldn't have as much impact if we played the characters straight. So, Tom said, "Do what you have to do to these animals to fit the tone of the book." It just made perfect sense to me to have them driving and rowing and wearing curlers in their fur. [laughter]

DAVIS: That's where you start introducing anachronisms.

MONKMAN: Yes, in King's story Coyote is the one who created the world and she transcends time — she created television commercials, for instance. Anachronisms make certain stories more relevant to today. I don't see why older tales and traditions can't be relevant today. Certainly, the cultural values imparted by the story of Columbus's arrival are as relevant today as they ever were. It's just how you interpret them. That's what I meant about keeping it in the present.

DAVIS: There is one distinct addition to the text that you make that interests me — it's a scene that some people don't like. King's text reads, "But while that Coyote is laughing, Christopher Columbus grabs a big bunch of men and women and children and locks them up in his ships," but in your illustration you choose to tie up the natives and put them in a motor boat en route to being locked up in the distant ships — the Nina, the Pinta, the Santa Maria. Why did you choose to illustrate that moment? In some ways, it's funny (the guns are comically huge), but it is also profoundly disturbing.

MONKMAN: I didn't set out to make a disturbing picture; that's just how I pictured it. First of all, the book is history seen through the eyes of Natives; so,

how could you see it in any other way? Second, history hasn't been brought down to a level that people can identify with: the "discovery" of North America is still pretty fuzzy and abstract. I show the Natives as real people being taken hostage at gunpoint, and put in a motorboat. It's uncomfortable for people to deal with because it brings the exploitation and confusion into the present. It addresses the realistic aspect of what really happened.

DAVIS: When you take the characters to Seville, there are church-like buildings with gothic windows and smokestacks in the area where the Natives are being sold. Are you implying that church and industry are mute witnesses to the exploitation or ...?

MONKMAN: They weren't mute witnesses to that exploitation, they were clear participants. The church, the archbishop, the Mercedes, and the smokestacks were obvious choices for me when I illustrated what Seville was all about.

DAVIS: What about at the end? Who arrives with Jacques Cartier?

MONKMAN: I wanted a religious figure to accompany him. And a gangster. I wanted the European church — all of its values — to be implicated in this story. Also, King points a finger at the profit motive — Columbus goes looking for things to sell. So, throughout the book there are concrete images of things we haven't seen before that force people to look at Columbus and his context differently. I know this view has been controversial. I also know that our book didn't sell well: it's not saccharine sweet and it isn't into making heroes of anyone. So, it hasn't gone down easily with everybody. I wanted to do it because it was different; I think this kind of controversy is good. In the end, though, people think "this is just a kids' book" and don't bother with the issue anymore. It's a controversy that gets swept away. But I know that kids end up missing out because they could be introduced to a different perspective — a very good thing because it opens up opportunities for questioning things and for thinking on your own.

DAVIS: Apart from the different view of history, perhaps one of the reasons why it didn't go over well is because people didn't think it was like the Native lit they're used to.

MONKMAN: I can see why *Coyote* wouldn't do well in the school library because the schools would have to change their curriculum! I think there are probably a lot of people out there who hated it. I think people find it disconcerting when they are confronted with a different idea or different tone of voice from people whom they're used to seeing in a certain way. Westerners often look in Native lit for beautiful, "spiritual" mythological retellings of Indian tales. Something like *A Coyote Columbus Story* tackles history in a way that is innovative. People are used to a certain kind of image being associated with Natives, such as the victim. They are comfortable with the victim saying, "you can't write about us, and you can't put us in movies to portray us in a certain way," which are issues of misrepresentation and appropriation. But when Native people actually start using their voices, and creating things that are new and different, people find it disturbing because they don't know how to define it and therefore how to deal with it.

DAVIS: Well, it is true that *A Coyote Columbus Story* is one of the first times we've had such hilarious Native lit for kids.

MONKMAN: Well, that's just it. I mean, I wasn't interested in doing a straight story about a little Indian boy in the woods. I was so interested in doing the book because it mixed everything up and I knew it would be fun to illustrate. I think it's important for any artist to present new and challenging perspectives on whatever you're dealing with — whether a kids' book or a painting. Isn't that the role of the artist? So, I'm up against people who want native artists to produce a certain kind of Native illustration and Native lit — earnest, romantic stuff, which has its place. But it's 1996 and it's time for something different.

WORKS, EXHIBITIONS, AWARDS

Solo exhibitions

Indian Paintbrush, Toronto, 1996; *The Creative Process*, Discovery Gallery, Royal Ontario Museum, 1994; *Creation Wheel*, Art Gallery of Hamilton, 1994; *The Museum Show*, Latitude 53, Edmonton, 1994; *The Museum Show*, The New Gallery, Calgary, 1994; *Polarities*, Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver, 1993.

Selected group exhibitions

First Nations Art '95, Woodland Cultural Centre, Brantford, 1995; *First Nations Art '94*, Woodland Cultural Centre, Brantford, 1994; Group show, Workscene Gallery, Toronto, 1994; *The Urban and the Urbane*, Bienal de Poesia Visual, Mexico City, 1993; *Native American Art*, American Indian Community House, New York City, 1992; *Discovering Ourselves Not Columbus*, AICH, New York City, 1992; *The Toronto Mask Show*, Lake Galleries, Toronto, 1991.

Production design and video

A Nation is Coming, a collaboration with Michael Greyeyes, 1996. Screened at the Moving Pictures Festival (of dance on film and video), Toronto, the American Indian Film Festival, San Francisco and the Sundance Film Festival, January 1997.

Night Traveler, Tipiskaki Goroh, Canada Dance Festival, Ottawa, 1994.

Child of Ten Thousand Years, Tipiskaki Goroh, Canada Dance Festival, Ottawa, 1994.

Diva Ojibway, Native Earth Performing Arts, Toronto, 1994.

Lady of Silences, Native Earth Performing Arts, Toronto Collection, Indian Art Centre, Ottawa, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa, 1993.

WORKS CONSULTED

Waboose, Jan Bourdeau. "Setting the Stage: Kent Monkman." *Aboriginal Voices* II (3): 6-7.

Wright-McLeod, Brian. "A Nation is Dancing." *Aboriginal Voices* II (4): 42.

Marie C. Davis teaches eighteenth-century literature and children's literature at the University of Western Ontario.

