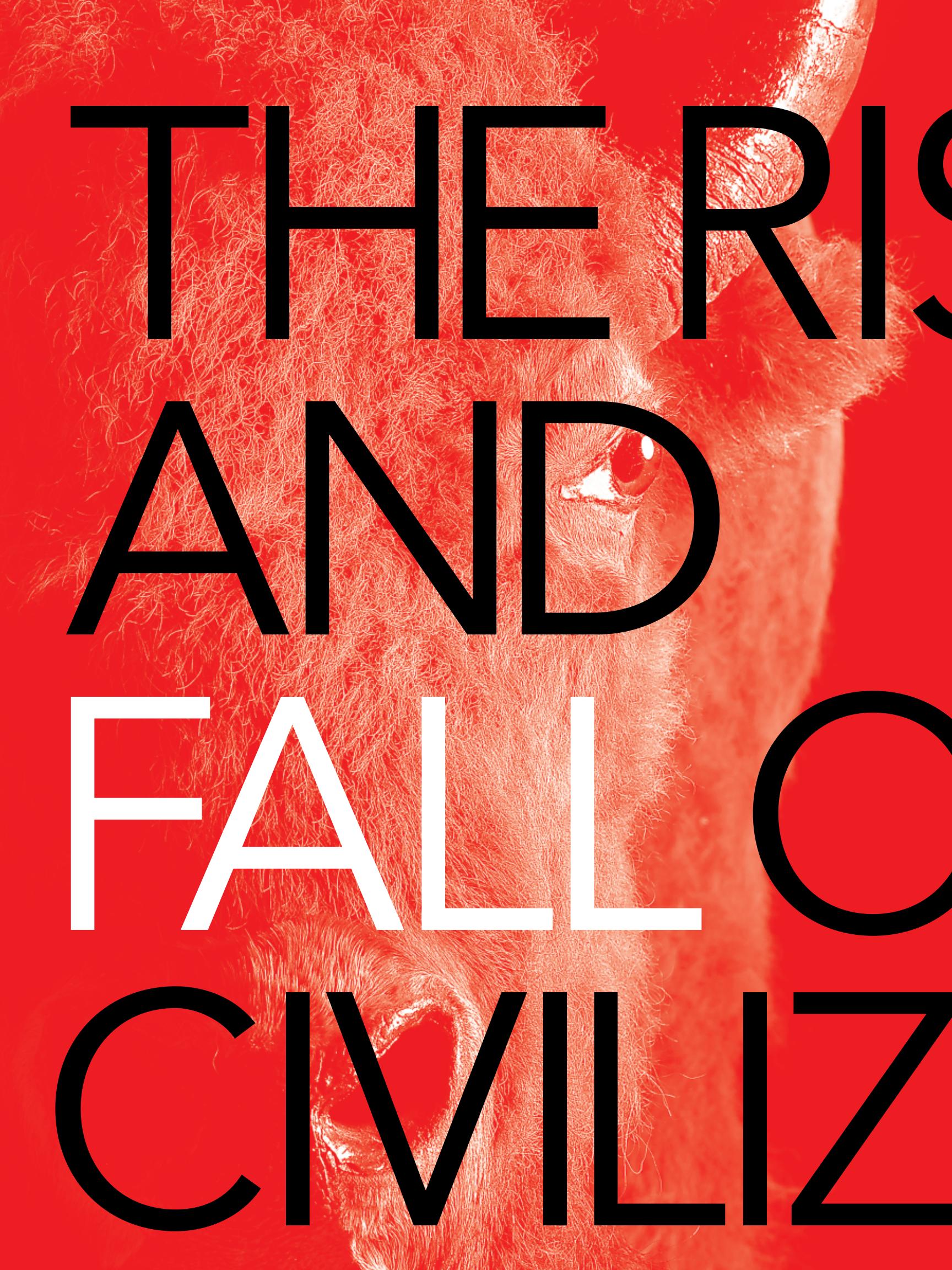


KENT MONKMAN

THE RISE AND
FALL OF
CIVILIZATION



Gardiner
Museum



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KENT
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PREFACE



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A decade ago, I had the opportunity to work with Kent Monkman when I was the Managing Director of the Royal Ontario Museum's Institute of Contemporary Culture, and he was one of the artists in an exhibition called *Shapeshifters, Time Travelers and Storytellers*. This was a show that asked First Peoples artists to respond to artifacts from the ROM's collection. Kent was paired with a painting by Paul Kane, and the result was both powerful and provocative.

Since then, I've followed Kent's career, and it's wonderful to bring his bold, deeply thoughtful vision to the Gardiner Museum. My enthusiasm for Kent's work is shared by Rachel Gotlieb, our chief curator when this project began. While at the Gardiner, she was pivotal in establishing interventions by contemporary artists, such as Kent. While Kent isn't responding to a particular object in the Gardiner's collection, after a visit here he found something that began a thought process that went beyond an artist intervention in a gallery to a complete installation in our main temporary exhibition space. It's certainly surprising where bone china can lead. His vision, and a generous sponsorship from TD Bank Group, have allowed us to mount an immersive exhibition experience that resonates at so many levels. Kent's site specific installation, *The Rise and Fall of Civilization*, references the near extinction of the American Bison by European settlers in the early 1800s, and the related destruction of Aboriginal peoples' way of life. It's a painful history, and one that can't be ignored if we are to move forward, together. It's remarkable to have clay prompt such a bold undertaking, and to feature an artist whose concerns are more poignant and imperative than ever.

Kelvin Browne
Executive Director & CEO





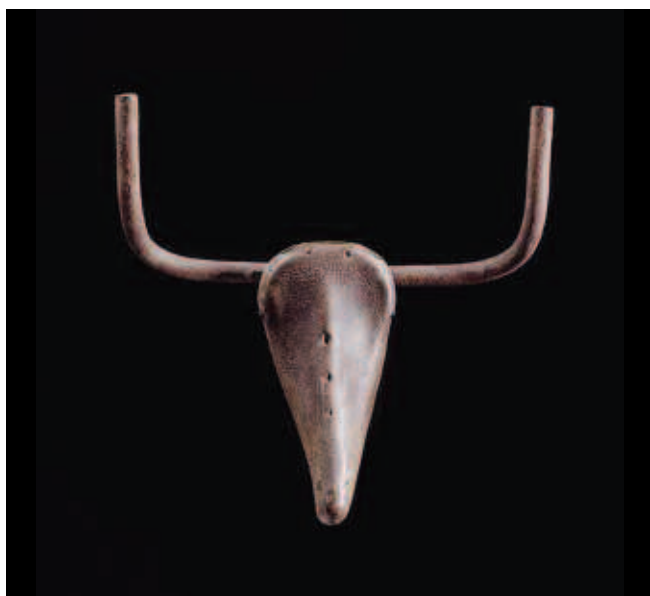
SARAH MILROY

When I was a child growing up in Vancouver in the 1960s, we used to go on our family vacation every Christmas to Banff, Alberta. Boarding the train on Christmas Day at the old terminal on Vancouver's downtown east side, we would be transported, overnight, and wake up in the morning to another world of rock and snow and endless forests, with scattered herds of elk, moose and mountain sheep grazing in the fields beside the tracks. Once we got to Banff, the activity of merit was skiing, of which I was not fond. Instead, when I managed a day of delinquency — usually in the company of my mother, and sometimes alone — I would go to the Luxton Museum, across the Bow River from the Mount Royal Hotel where we stayed. The high walls of this museum were built of vertical peeled logs, like a frontier palisade, conjuring the Old West. I was intrigued.

Inside, the gift shop smelled of rawhide, and there were stuffed bears and moose heads on the wall. Mostly, though, I remember the dioramas, which spelled out the story of the indigenous people of the region, represented by costumed mannequins. These figures were presented as human fauna, somehow more deeply connected to that landscape we had just passed through than I could ever be. With innocent eyes, I took in a smorgasbord of racial caricature and colonial dissembling: the multi-generational nuclear family group around the fire (a kind of brown-skinned *Leave it to Beaver*, with Dad in his feathered headdress smoking his peace pipe), a friendly encounter between cavalry officer and chief (cordially shaking hands), and, most arrestingly for me, the scene of a youth engaged in the Sun Dance ritual. Arcing backward, this half naked boy mannequin was suspended by the pierced flesh of his chest, presumably transported through physical pain into another dimension of experience, though no explanation was given. Instead, the scene conveyed an

IS BELIEVING

Opposite:
Bison Diorama ©The Manitoba Museum, Winnipeg, MB.



underlying sense of Indigenous peoples as barbaric, inexplicable, and, most importantly perhaps, vanished. There seemed to be no continuity with the world I was living in.

In one form or another, this first encounter with indigeneity has been shared by the vast majority of Canadian young people from settler cultures like my own — whether that young person be of English, Korean, Pakistani or Nigerian stock. It's an early schooling in a way of seeing that takes a lifetime to come to terms with. But what if the child looking is themselves Indigenous?

Kent Monkman, who has been one of Canada's leading contemporary artists for a decade now, is a person of mixed Cree and Anglo-Irish descent, and he grew up in Winnipeg during the seventies. Today, he still vividly remembers his encounters with the dramatic dioramas in the Manitoba Museum, where he was often taken on school trips. As was true for other Winnipeg artists of settler descent — Diana Thorneycroft, Marcel Dzama and Sarah Ann Johnson come to mind — these displays would make a deep and lasting impression on him.

"I can remember the very visceral experience of going there with my classmates," Monkman recalls today. "You would go into the museum and see these idyllic representations of pre-contact life in Indigenous communities, and then — when you came outside — there was this dramatic dislocation between that ideal and the catastrophic fallout of colonialization that you could



see all around you. Native people were living on the street; they were falling out of the bars. Those museum visits were inspirational and scarring at the same time."

It is not surprising, then, that Monkman has taken on the diorama form, borrowing the slightly tacky, hyper-real look of these kinds of museum displays and then fracking them creatively to unleash the suppressed truths that they conceal. Rather than being staged as a relic of a vanished way of life, the Indigenous protagonists in Monkman's dioramas are riding high, exercising agency in the persona of Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, Monkman's campy transvestite alter ego. As with his mimicry of historical daguerreotypes (like his 2006 series *The Emergence of a Legend*), of 19th-century Hudson River School paintings of the virgin West (such as *History is Painted by the Victors*, 2013, in which a nude Miss Chief, dressed only in thigh-high drag boots, paints naked Greco-Roman *pueri pulchri* in the wilderness), or early silent film (like his satirical send-up of early documentary cinema in his *Group of Seven Inches*), Monkman takes a vehicle of colonialist representation and turns it inside out, converting it from an instrument of oppression to a detonator of empowerment.

Monkman's work, of course, trumps both racial and sexual repression. In this, he honours the values of his Indigenous forbearers. In many Plains traditions there was not only tolerance but also respect for those who were called "two spirited

Above left:
Pablo Picasso, *Tête de Taureau/Bull's Head*, 1942
©Picasso Estate / SODRAC (2015)

Above right:
Kent Monkman, *Bull in a China Shop*, 2015

people,” those inhabiting a zone between the binary of male and female. The American painter George Catlin, recording Aboriginal communities on the prairie in the 19th century, depicted such figures in his *Dance to the Berdache* (though his journals record his disgust and contempt for its practitioners). In the figure of Miss Chief, however, the two-spirited avenging angel is back, in all her transgressive force.

Atop her cliff edge at the Gardiner Museum, Miss Chief drives the herd of buffalo to the brink of a precipice, as did her native forbearers on the Plains, who would then skillfully harvest the useable parts from those fallen on the heap below. This practice of sustainable hunting was used for thousands of years before the arrival of white settlers in the 1800s, and was integral to Indigenous survival. But colonial misrule led to catastrophic extinctions of the herds, as buffalo were hunted for their durable hides (used for making machinery parts like fan belts) and for their bones, which were used in fertilizer as well as in the production of bone china, all the rage in British upper-class households of the day. The meat, however, was for the most part left to rot. The decimation of the buffalo as a food source, along with the sweeping epidemics that befell Indigenous peoples weakened by the resulting food shortages, meant that the eradication of the buffalo and of Plains peoples proceeded hand in hand. This phenomenon was well understood by white officials, who stayed the hand of potentially life-saving immunization to further their own territorial expansion.

Monkman considers this grim history, littering the base of his buffalo jump with smashed crockery — the byproducts of the colonial enterprise returning to haunt the site of devastation. Yet the installation speaks more of regeneration than lament, referencing the intermingling and hybridization of Indigenous and European cultures. One buffalo leaps from the cliff top in mid-transformation, its hide a crazy quilt of Cubist shapes. Quoting from Picasso, Monkman sheds the light of historical hindsight on that artist’s appropriation of tribal ways of seeing. Among the pottery fragments below he also introduces a number of sculptural homages to Picasso’s famous bicycle-seat-and-handlebars bull, replicated in a white ceramic that evokes bone china. Each one is decorated with scenes of the rampant Miss Chief on horseback. Undefeated by history, she cracks her whip and takes command of her cowboy adversary, who scrambles on the ground beneath her. Buffalo graze contentedly on the prairie, at her side.

Rising from the crockery pile, Monkman has also arranged a herd of Picassoid metal bison, oriented toward the rear wall of the space. Sculpture then morphs into wall drawing, as Amerindian pictographs and Lascaux wall drawings intermingle in a trans-historic stampede, sweeping away to left and right and then circling back again to the cliff top, from behind. “It’s very intentional,” Monkman says, “this sense that you can’t stop the flow of history. This is what happens with art too — people keep mixing and borrowing from each other and the language keeps changing.” This is the story of modernism: a colossus that strides the globe, devouring and then reconstituting in new forms every culture in its path, melding new cultural hybrids in an endless process of transformation.

Remembering other dioramas he has seen, Monkman pauses for a minute to describe those at the Natural History Museum in New York. There, he says, all the Native people have the same face; they were cast from the same mould — “a kind of high-cheekbone, generic Aztec face” — regardless of whether they were to be finished as male or female figures. Also, as in most diorama displays, the expression on their faces is “just incredibly sad. I think they are obsessed in that institution with keeping Native people in the past.”

Monkman, however, is placing Native people in the past, present and future. I like thinking about the school children who will encounter this tableau — the product of a vision so improbably alive and vibrant in the 21st century. These children will understand, in that encounter, how much more there is to history than meets the eye.

Sarah Milroy is a Toronto writer and art critic, and was co-founder of the Canadian Art Foundation, in 1991. She served as editor and publisher of Canadian Art magazine from 1991 to 1996, and as chief art critic for the *Globe and Mail* from 2001 to 2010. Milroy has contributed essays to many scholarly publications, including books on the work of Gathie Falk, Jack Chambers, Greg Curnoe and Fred Herzog, and is a regular contributor to *Canadian Art*, *Border Crossings* and *The Walrus*. In 2014, Milroy co-curated the exhibition *From the Forest to the Sea: Emily Carr in British Columbia* (Dulwich Picture Gallery/Art Gallery of Ontario), and is working on forthcoming exhibitions of British Modern painter Vanessa Bell and Canadian artist David Milne.

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INTERVIEW

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The Interview

Kelvin Browne, Gardiner Museum Executive Director and CEO, in conversation with Kent Monkman, at his Toronto studio, September 2, 2015.

Kelvin Browne: When we began discussing doing an installation at the Gardiner Museum, and when you first visited the Museum after you had decided to consider the possibility, what was your reaction?

Kent Monkman: My first reaction was what do I know about ceramics? How does my practice, and how do my interests connect with a museum that shows ceramics?

Then I thought of bone china and how bison bones were used to make porcelain in the 19th century, and that became the inspiration for the project. The scale of the Gardiner's gallery required a large installation, and that prompted the idea of a life-size buffalo jump. Then I thought of Picasso's series of drawings of a bull that transitioned from a representational image, gradually breaking down the bull through the use of cubist forms, to a pictograph-like image. That connected for me to how Indigenous people told stories with pictographic images, how animals were represented and that connected painting through a trajectory from ancient North America to

the cave paintings in Lascaux. Since I've been drawing inspiration from natural history dioramas for some time, it seemed natural to use this idiom in the installation—especially with the scale of this room, the buffalo jump felt like a good fit.

KB: *The Rise and Fall of Civilization* has a lot of dramatic components. It references the near extinction of the American bison in the 1800's when approximately 50 million bison were killed reducing their numbers to the hundreds. The settlers killed the bison for their pelts, the meat left to rot so the bones could be used for fertilizer and bone china. The destruction of the bison opened the west for cattle ranching, as it removed the primary food supply of the Native peoples who were moved off their land.

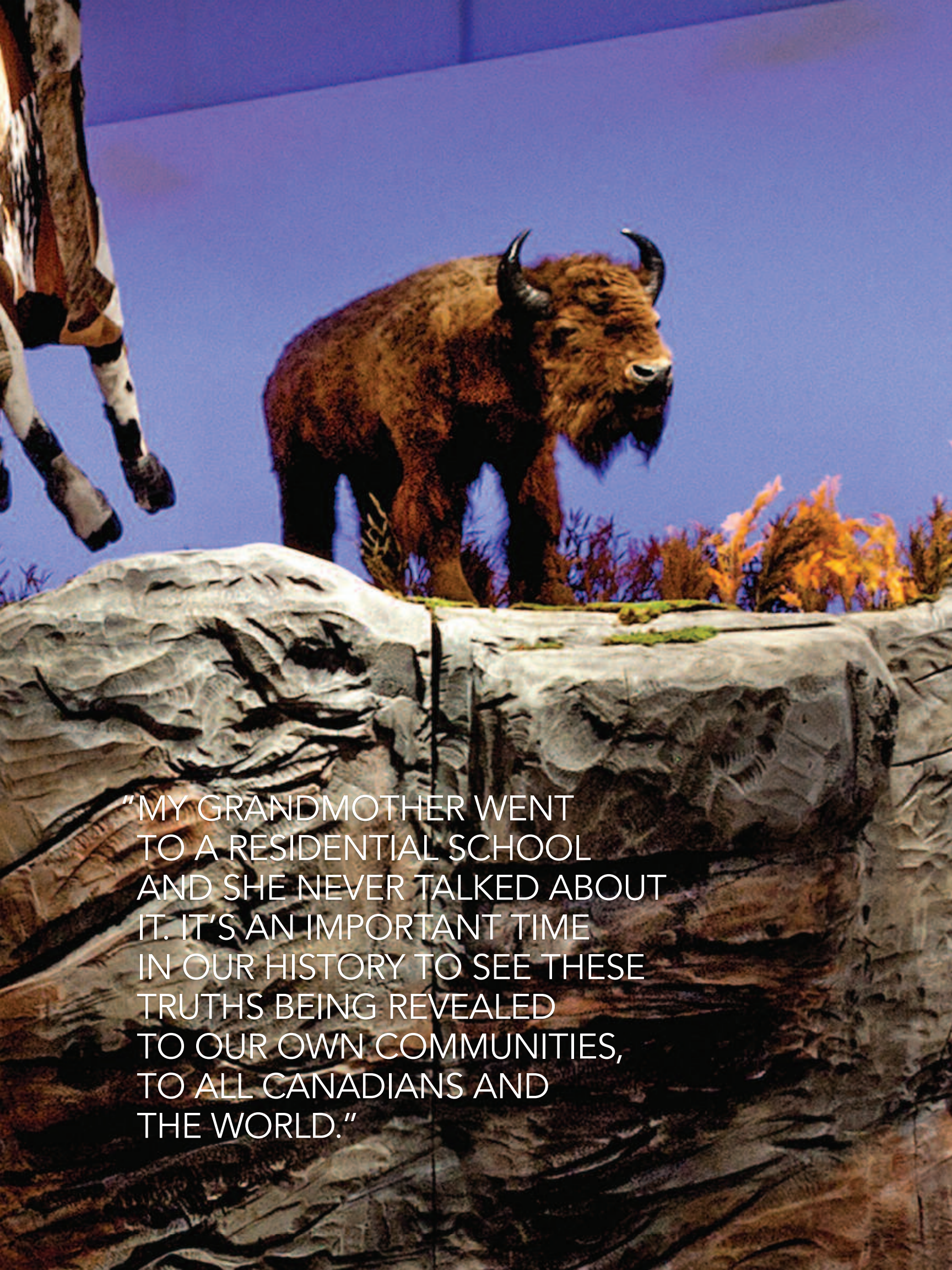
KM: I'm conscious that I'm tackling big narratives, and of the mythologies inherent in these stories we tell about our cultures. I'm interested in the cultural collisions that occur at moments like in *Rise and Fall*, so I'm using a broad mix of imagery to communicate, drawing inspiration from different time periods of history and art history, and from both European and Indigenous traditions. My Cree family didn't reject influences—rather, as a child I was encouraged to explore creatively in any medium that worked for me. The Indigenous approach is not rigid or closed; it's one that allows for varying points of view, incorporating, adapting, and absorbing from other cultures. There's a rightful place for everything, and I attempt to bring this into my work.

The images in paintings, and installations like this, are becoming more complex. In large part, this represents a trajectory that comes with experience. I've never wanted to limit myself, I've always wanted to challenge myself, always wanted to grow as an artist: develop my vocabulary as a painter to create more powerful images, work with film and video to tell moving stories, develop sculptural installation, and combine these mediums together.

KB: There is the intrusion of modernism via the Picasso-like bison sculptures, in contrast to the ancient sense of the diorama and the very real taxidermy bison. But modernism isn't a literal reference in terms of the historical basis of the work.

"Since I've been drawing inspiration from natural history dioramas for some time, it seemed natural to use this idiom in the installation—especially with the scale of this room, the buffalo jump felt like a good fit."





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KM: There's a big difference between First Peoples' relationship to modernity and that of the settler cultures who flooded to North America in the 19th century. European Modernism was emancipation from stifling and oppressive social and political conditions: wars, feudalism and classism. But for the Indigenous peoples here, modernity has been forced on us over the past 150 years, fracturing us from the continuum of our own cultural traditions and languages. When you're the unwilling recipient of this forced amnesia — it's not liberating at all. This modernist notion of "progress" above all else, resulted, for us, in stripping us of our identities and the remaking and attempted assimilation of Indigenous peoples in the image that the colonial government and the church felt was better suited for their society.

I've been making this point by employing the pictorial tropes of Modern Art as a metaphor for what happened to Indigenous peoples. In my work, Cubism, Primitivism, and the Modernists' flattening of pictorial space functions as an allegory for the compression and flattening of Indigenous cultures. Picasso's series of drawings reduce a representational drawing of a bull to a pictograph, an imitation of Indigenous picture making. The bison that was central to Indigenous survival, breaks down and morphs into something unrecognizable, unreal and yet returns to its origins whole again, and the cycle continues.

KB: There's often a gay element in your work. There's Miss Chief in the *The Rise and Fall of Civilization*. She's on the cliff edge, perhaps about to go over with the bison.

KM: Miss Chief is a two-spirited person. This idea of sexuality as sometimes being fluid was an accepted element of Indigenous society that the Europeans repressed. It didn't fit their norm. This fluid sexuality was accepted and often celebrated by Indigenous peoples, and they certainly weren't threatened by it. The notion of a third gender was something Europeans didn't understand. Miss Chief is part of a larger notion of the sacred, that everything is valued. Europeans did not understand Indigenous worldview, and this among many other traditions were outlawed, or cut out of Indigenous life. As Miss Chief has evolved in my work she has become otherworldly —

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somewhat of a trickster figure. In this case, it's unclear if she's running with the bulls and about to fall to her demise or if she's trying to save them from the abyss...

KB: You have a larger studio team. Is the Gardiner's project a kind of collaboration?

KM: At a certain point, having assistants is a necessity. It started in 2007 when I hired my first assistant to help with admin. I couldn't answer the phone, run to the art store, stretch the canvases, send jpegs to galleries and so on, and still have enough time to paint. Now having a studio team helps me maximize the creation of work and allows me to keep speed with the ideas and projects I have on the go. Usually there are several projects in different media going on at the same time — video, painting, installation. And at the moment we are working in two locations, which presents some new logistical challenges.

KB: There's much more discussion about First Peoples' issues now, and a widespread interest in reconciliation. Has this influenced your work?

KM: These issues have always been at the core of my work, and my intention has always been to bring these stories, experiences and perspectives forward. It's wonderful to see more awareness growing. For such a long time there wasn't much discussion at all, even Canadians of my generation weren't talking about it. Nothing was taught in school. There was no conversation of residential schools. My grandmother went to a residential school and she never talked about it. It's an important time in our history to see these truths being revealed to our own communities, to all Canadians and the world. Canadians who have been here for generations, new immigrants, or people visiting from all over the world are learning about events that were glossed over and hidden. These stories need to be told. My desire to communicate narratives comes from the simple fact these stories were silenced, that these images weren't being painted.

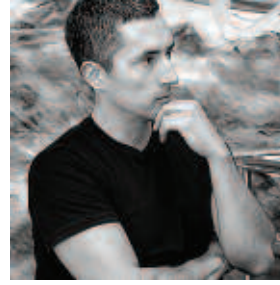
I hope that my work is a small contribution to this discussion. My art is a mix of fact, fiction, myth, and history — that's what makes my practice fun and engaging for me. My work isn't fixed on a conventional reading of history. It is activated through

creativity and imagination, and becomes more compelling, relevant, and draws people in this way. Parts of art history are reactivated with a fresh perspective.

I believe the world's greatest historical paintings are still the best precedents for living artists, and I reference them in much of my work. I'm aware that I'm working outside of what some consider to be the art world's conventions or trends right now. I want to make great paintings and I've studied enough of them to know what constitutes a great painting.

I used camp and irony more in my early works, and that reflected limitations of painting skills at the time. As I've matured I take a more direct approach, in both painting and installation. For the first ten years, I pushed paint around following the tradition of abstract expressionism, and was completely frustrated at the end as it left the audience outside the work. I had to ask myself why I was making paintings in this limited vocabulary, in too personal a language. Abstract paintings felt like decoration to me, I wanted to connect an audience with themes and subject matter that meant more to me, and abstract work failed to do this effectively, if at all. I still want beauty in my paintings or installations, but they have to be more than just beautiful.

With art that has multiple layers and references, it requires time on the part of the viewer to experience the work more deeply. There is always a story that anyone can connect with on the surface of my work, but it helps to have an understanding of history, art history or painting to access some of the other layers. Don't you think that people want this experience in an artwork? To be engaged, challenged and provoked? That's why I do it. It's wonderful to go to a museum and see people of all ages spending time with the art, with a deep appreciation for their museum experience. They're slowing down to examine, puzzle, admire, and question what they're looking at. One of my strategies has been seduction. You see a beautiful painting, it draws you in, and you connect on a visceral or aesthetic level. Then you discover other layers even if the subject matter is difficult: themes about oppression, suffering and resilience. If you want to learn more about what you're looking at, then I've got you.



Artist's Biography

Kent Monkman is well known for his provocative reinterpretations of romantic North American landscapes. Themes of colonization, sexuality, loss, and resilience—the complexities of historic and contemporary Native American experience—are explored in a variety of mediums, including painting, film/video, performance, and installation.

His glamorous diva alter-ego Miss Chief appears in much of his work as an agent provocateur, trickster, and supernatural being, who reverses the colonial gaze, upending received notions of history and Indigenous people. With Miss Chief at centre stage, Monkman has created memorable site specific performances at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, The Royal Ontario Museum, The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, Compton Verney, and most recently at the Denver Art Museum. His award-winning short film and video works have been screened at various national and international festivals, including the 2007 and 2008 Berlinale, and the 2007 Toronto International Film Festival.

Kent Monkman was born in St. Marys, Ontario in 1965, and raised in Manitoba. Of Cree, English and Irish descent, he is a member of the Fish River Band in Northern Manitoba. As a teenager he studied illustration at Sheridan College of Applied Arts in Ontario, followed by courses at the Banff Centre, the Sundance Institute in Los Angeles, and the Canadian Screen Training Institute, among others.

Since the early 1990s, Kent Monkman's work has been exhibited internationally and is widely represented in the collections of major museums in Canada and the United States of America. He has been the recipient of the Egale Leadership Award, Indspire Award and the Hnatyshyn Foundation Visual Arts Award. Kent Monkman is represented by Pierre-Francois Ouellette Art Contemporain in Montreal and Toronto and Trépanier Baer Gallery in Calgary.

"Miss Chief is a two-spirited person. This idea of sexuality as sometimes being fluid was an accepted element of Indigenous society that the Europeans repressed. It didn't fit their norm."



TASHA HUBBARD

HEARTS ON THE GROUND BUFFALO GENOCIDE IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Opposite:
Boneyard, Michigan Carbon Works, Detroit, Michigan.
Glenbow Archives NA-2242-2

August 23rd, Iron Creek.

This beautiful stream derives its name from a strange formation, said to be pure iron. The piece weighs 300 lbs. It is so soft you can cut it with a knife. It rings like steel when struck with a piece of iron. Tradition says that it has lain out on the hill ever since the place was first visited by Na-ne-boo-sho after the flood had retired. For ages the tribes of Blackfeet and Crees have gathered their clan to pay homage to this wonderful manitoo. George McDougall¹

Sitting on the highest hill in an area near Hardisty, Alberta, the Manitou Stone had another name: Grandfather Buffalo stone. It was one of the most sacred sites in Cree and Blackfoot geography, where the people asked the vast buffalo herds to return to the territory so life would continue on. After being on a journey of exile, Grandfather Buffalo returned to the northern plains in 1973, and currently sits in the Royal Alberta Museum in Edmonton. While in Edmonton last winter, I decided to visit it along with my Cree-speaking father. Together, we walked quietly towards the exhibit hall, where the stone sits in front of a famous photo of piled-high buffalo bones, and gave our respect. Earlier that year, I went to the area near Hardisty where the stone had originally existed. I had coffee with two elderly amateur historians, and they remembered the settler family who had purchased the land where the stone had sat. They told me that even after the stone had been stolen, Cree people would still come to the site and leave offerings.

In 1870, Lieutenant William Butler travelled through the same region as I did, as part of his trip to report on the conditions of the northern plains Indigenous peoples to the Canadian government. He wrote about the stone in his memoirs: "No tribe or portion of a tribe would pass in the vicinity without paying a visit to this great medicine: it was said to be increas-

ing yearly in weight. Old men remembered having heard old men say that they had once lifted it easily from the ground. Now, no single man could carry it."² However, by the time Butler was writing about the stone, it no longer sat in its place high upon a hill. George McDougall, a Methodist missionary, removed the stone in 1866 and took it to his mission near Lac St. Anne, in an attempt to draw his potential worshipers away from their own traditions. Butler recounts the reaction from the Cree to their Grandfather's removal: "When the Indians found that it had been taken away, they were loud in the expression of their regret. The old medicine men declared that its removal would lead to great misfortunes, and that war, disease, and dearth of buffalo would afflict the tribes of Saskatchewan."³ Written accounts speak of the scarcity of the buffalo in the years following, as well as a smallpox epidemic that came through the area in 1870. The following year, in March of 1871, McDougall, while unwilling to make the connection to the stolen stone, wrote the following: "The buffalo having left the Saskatchewan, the Indians have had to follow them on to the bare plains, and we fully expect to hear of great suffering, if not death, from starvation."⁴ Within five years, the predictions of the Cree medicine men had come to pass.

Previously, the buffalo had existed in abundance for millennia. Peter Erasmus, a Métis guide and translator from Ontario, travelled with the Palliser Expedition in the 1850s. Despite his familiarity with the buffalo hunt, he couldn't help but be overwhelmed by the numbers of buffalo on the Great Plains. Scholars debate the exact number of buffalo that ranged from what is now central Saskatchewan and Alberta down to Mexico, but a generally accepted number falls between 50–70 million. Their sheer numbers made buffalo a keystone species, influencing almost every other living being that inhabited the plains, humans included. Palliser and Erasmus travelled on the northern edge of that ecosystem:

Our journey was frequently interrupted by the need to wait for the huge herds of buffalo that blocked our passage. These vast herds were the greatest I had ever witnessed. I only then realized that we had been in the extreme northern edges of the great herds that grazed along our borders and away south into American territory.⁵

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When newcomers began to eye the Great Plains as part of the imperialist project, they identified two major obstacles to claiming the land: Indigenous peoples and the buffalo. Through philosophers and ‘thinkers’ of the mid-nineteenth century, the foundation was laid for colonial genocide; they used the language of progress to promote the inevitability of extermination of the buffalo. In some cases, Indigenous peoples and buffalo became conflated, both categorized as brutes that needed to be erased. Colonel Nelson A. Miles discussed the buffalo extermination: “This might seem like cruelty and wasteful extravagance but the buffalo, like the Indian, stood in the way of civilization and in the path of progress.”⁶ According to the ideals of western progress, savagery, represented by the Indian and the buffalo, must give way to civilization, represented by the Euro-Western man and his agrarian ideal.

The loss of the buffalo was catastrophic for plains Indigenous peoples and is often characterized as part of Indigenous genocide, along with massacres, starvation tactics, forced relocations, destruction of camps and domestic animals, and the spread of epidemics. On the plains, the removal of the integral life-giving buffalo meant perpetrators largely succeeded in removing Indigenous peoples from the land. The late Narcisse Blood, a Blackfoot historian, described the loss of the buffalo as a major wave of trauma. Many people starved to death after the herds were extinguished and survivors suffered from malnutrition, which made them susceptible to diseases. The loss of the buffalo resulted in mass death of Indigenous peoples, and contributed to the overall genocidal colonial project in North America.

Solidifying a definition of genocide is the subject of numerous scholarly and ideological positions but a commonly accepted definition is an attack on a group or nation of people that results in their destruction. For some Plains Indigenous peoples, buffalo are known as the first people. Lakota knowledge keeper Arvol Looking Horse explains this concept: “With the teaching of our way of life from the time of being, the First People were the Buffalo people, our ancestors which came

from the sacred Black Hills, the heart of everything that is.”⁷ According to Indigenous ways of knowing, humans do not hold exclusive title to personhood, and therefore neither to genocide.

If the buffalo slaughter is an act of genocide, then who are the perpetrators? Returning to Peter Erasmus and his memoir, he writes of the buffalo slaughter as a topic of conversation with Palliser and others on the expedition: “Both the captain and Dr. Hector believed that a policy of buffalo extermination had been adopted as the quickest way to break down Indian resistance to American authority.”⁸ Governments wanted the buffalo cleared to make way for settlers’ cattle, and knew they needed assistance to accomplish this. If the late nineteenth century Western U.S. history is examined specifically, recent research does draw a firmer line between the army and the slaughter of the buffalo. Sarah Carter suggests that the army’s involvement in the buffalo extermination was part a deliberate plan to subjugate Indigenous peoples, which meant providing assistance to white hide hunters, including civilian hunting parties, all of whom killed buffalo on an immense scale. It also included encouraging troops to kill buffalo with army artillery.⁹ The army engaged in the genocidal process through policy and action, providing direct support to government wishes to clear the land for settlement.

General Phillip Sheridan can be understood as one of the engineers of buffalo genocide. His biographer Paul Andrew Hutton calls Sheridan, “the perfect frontier soldier” who had “elastic ethics.”¹⁰ As a man willing to undertake gruesome tasks in order to fulfill frontier goals of elimination of Indigenous people, Sheridan encouraged extermination of the bison in order to starve Indigenous peoples to make them vulnerable. He and other military leaders fostered an atmosphere where killing buffalo was understood to be patriotic practice. For example, the infamous Seventh Cavalry General Custer is known to have taken his troops out to use buffalo as target practice for his new recruits. Some scholars now understand the buffalo slaughter as unwritten official army policy. And indeed, when one officer admitted that he had indiscriminately killed buffalo while out on a hunting party, his superior responded: ‘Kill every buffalo you can! Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone.’

Buffalo feel grief for their dead, according to both my traditional teachers and the long-time buffalo warden at the Grasslands National Park, Wes Olsen. Rather than abandon the body, buffalo will sit with the deceased, attempt to revive their family member, and make audible sounds of grief.

The military had an ally with which to enact buffalo genocide: hide hunters. Records exist of a speech Sheridan delivered before the Texas legislature, which was contemplating a bill to protect the buffalo in 1875. He said:

[The buffalo hunters] have done in the last two years and will do more in the next year to settle the vexed Indian question, than the entire regular army has done in the last thirty years. They are destroying the Indian's commissary, and it is a well-known fact that an army losing its base of supplies is placed at a great disadvantage. Send them powder and lead, if you will; for the sake of a lasting peace, let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated.¹¹

The words "kill, skin, and sell" are an appropriate mantra for the hide hunters, whose efforts had begun in earnest in 1871. According to William Hornaday, a hunter-turned-conservationist, "the buffalo country fairly swarmed with hunters, each party putting forth its utmost efforts to destroy more buffaloes than its rivals."¹² While buffalo had been hunted in significant numbers prior to 1871, what focused the efforts was the development of an industrial tanning process in that year. Hides suddenly became a commodity, used as factory machine belts and as a source of leather for armies. Once the flesh rotted, the bones were collected and sold and used as fertilizer for agriculture. Ironically, the genocide of the buffalo helped fuel the overall project of colonizing the entire Western territory.

The numbers are stunning. Richard Irving Dodge, a colonel in the U.S. Army, gives his version of events in his work *Our Wild Indians*:

[B]y 1872 the buffalo region had been penetrated by no less than three great railroads, and the Indians had been forced from their vicinity. About this time too it was discovered that the tough, thick hide of the buffalo made admirable belting for machinery, and the dried skins readily commanded sale at three to four dollars each. The news spread like wild-fire, and soon the Union Pacific, Kansas Pacific, and Atchison Topeka and Santa Fe railroads, swarmed with hunters from all parts of the country, all excited with the

prospect of having a buffalo hunt that would pay. By wagon, on horseback, and a-foot, the pot-hunters poured in, and soon the unfortunate buffalo was without a moment's peace or rest. Though hundreds of thousands of skins were sent to market, they scarcely indicated the slaughter. From want of skill in shooting, and want of knowledge in preserving the hides of those slain, one hide sent to market represented three, four, or even five dead buffalo.¹³

Another tactic had repercussions in the northern plains: fire. Sarah Carter explains that there is evidence which points to the U.S. military setting fires along the Canadian border in order to prevent Sitting Bull to take refuge in the aftermath of the Battle of Little Big Horn. She maintains the fires may also have been set by hide hunters trying to move the buffalo herds to a more advantageous hunting spot.¹⁴

Buffalo feel grief for their dead, according to both my traditional teachers and the long-time buffalo warden at the Grasslands National Park, Wes Olsen. Olsen has observed the behavior of the wild herd and their reaction to a death. Rather than abandon the body, buffalo will sit with the deceased, attempt to revive their family member, and make audible sounds of grief. The hide hunters' practice of "still hunts" or shooting from a hidden location, with a high-powered rifle, did not give warning to the buffalo about the coming danger. Olsen's observations are echoed by hide hunter accounts of what happened after they shot down their first victims: "When one of their number was killed the rest of the herd, smelling the blood, would become excited, but instead of stampeding would gather around the dead buffalo, pawing, bellowing and hooking it viciously. Taking advantage of this well-known habit of the creature, the hunter would kill one animal and then wipe out almost the entire herd."¹⁵ Hornaday also observed buffalo bereavement: "They cluster around the fallen ones, sniff at the warm blood, bawl aloud in wonderment, and do everything but run away."¹⁶ He concludes in his work that the buffalo were stupid, rather than understanding the strong family bonds that exist in buffalo herds.

As a result of the slaughter and disruption of buffalo movement and reproduction patterns, by 1883, the buffalo were effectively removed from the Great Plains. The herd of millions was

Over:
Buffalo Bones, circa 1889, along the Northern Pacific RR.
Charles Spencer Francis, photographer, #945-968
Montana Historical Society Research Center Photograph
Archives, Helena, MT





reduced to remnant orphan calves, a few animals in captivity, and a refugee herd in Yellowstone National Park. Estimates put the buffalo's numbers as low as a few hundred animals by 1889. This is the year that Hornaday, supported by the Smithsonian, went to Montana and shot 29 of the last remaining buffalo in his search for perfect specimens. These animals' frozen bodies were displayed until 1957.

There is dissent from some scholars about the primary cause of the buffalo's near extinction. There are those, including Shepherd Krech and Dan Flores, who posit that Indigenous peoples share equal (or more) responsibility for the destruction of the buffalo herds because of wastefulness, thereby minimizing the actions of government, armies and hide hunters.¹⁷ However, Georgia Sitara researched the origin of the Indigenous wastefulness narrative and finds that it started after the buffalo were extinguished. She also finds that Krech and Flores did not give enough weight to primary sources: "implicating Indians reflects more on the interpretations of historians than on contemporary primary sources."¹⁸ Further to this, Indigenous hunters have been estimated to have killed half a million animals annually, not enough to cause the wide-scale extirpation seen in the later decades of the 19th century. The sustenance and trade hunting done by Indigenous peoples pales in comparison to the systematic slaughter carried out by the government-supported hide hunters discussed earlier.

As for instances of Indigenous overhunting of the buffalo during the trade era, there is some evidence of the breakdown of the intricate relationship between buffalo and Indigenous people due to colonization. Blackfoot scholar Betty Bastien explains a shift from what she calls *lhtsipaitapiiyop* (balance) to materialism, calling it an era "of imbalance and colonization."¹⁹ However, these kinds of incidents are understood to be recent developments, in contrast to the centuries of Indigenous self-regulation to avoid over-hunting, explained by Osage theologian George Tinker:

In the hunt most Indian nations report specified prayers of reciprocity involving apologies and words of thanksgiving to the animal itself and the animal's spirit nation. Usually this ceremonial act is in compliance with the request of the animals themselves as the people remember the primordial



From the film *Buffalo Calling*, 2013, directed by Tasha Hubbard

negotiations in mythological stories. Thus, formal and informal ceremonies of reciprocity are a day-to-day mythic activity that has its origin in mythological stories in which human beings were given permission by the animal nations to hunt them for food. The resulting covenant, however, calls on human beings to assume responsibilities over against the perpetration of violence among four-legged relatives.²⁰

Some tribes did attempt to assume their responsibility to protect the buffalo, such as the Cree during the Treaty negotiations of 1876 where several chiefs spoke of their need to protect the remaining herds. There are also narratives of assumed responsibility for the buffalo's disappearance due to the rejection of Indigenous values, but these need to be taken in the context of that responsibility of reciprocity. Yet most Indigenous peoples understood that they only held a small portion of the blame for the loss of the buffalo. For example, Cree Elder George Cattleman gave an interview with the Indian Film History project in the 1970s: "the buffalo wasn't dealt with in a good manner by the white man, so he has left us. There aren't too many buffalo left with us anymore. He too [the buffalo] was dealt with unjustly."²¹

Several Indigenous accounts of the buffalo slaughter describe buffalo genocide as a war fought by the buffalo, which they eventually lost. Note the account told by Old Lady Horse in "The Last Buffalo Herd":

There was a war between the buffalo and the white men.... Soldiers were not enough to hold them back.... But then the whites came and built the railroad, cutting the people's land in half. The buffalo fought for the people, tearing up the tracks and chasing away the whites' cattle. So the army was sent to kill the buffalo. The army brought in hunters, who killed until the bones of the buffalo covered the land and the buffalo saw they could no longer fight.²²

Indigenous peoples like Old Lady Horse saw the buffalo as their protector, one who took a position on the front line in the genocidal war against Indigenous peoples. Winona Laduke, in her exploration of buffalo genocide, has discovered that some Indigenous people understand the extermination of the buffalo as, “the time when the buffalo relatives, the older brothers, stood up and took the killing intended for the younger brothers, the Native peoples.”²³

Indigenous peoples of the plains keenly felt the loss of the buffalo. Pretty Shield was a Crow medicine woman who was born in the last half of the 19th century and died in 1944. Her biography contains her reaction to witnessing the aftermath of buffalo genocide:

*“Ahh, my heart fell down when I began to see dead buffalo scattered all over our beautiful country, killed and skinned, and left to rot by white men, many, many hundreds of buffalo Our hearts were like stones. And yet nobody believed, even then, that the white man could kill all the buffalo. Since the beginning of things there had always been so many!”*²⁴

Similar words were spoken by Plenty-Coups, a major chief of the Crow people: “But when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened. There was little singing anywhere.”²⁵ Both Pretty Shield and Plenty-Coups are expressing a kinship with the buffalo that intertwines their respective and interrelated genocides, one that effectively removed both of them from their territory.

The destruction of the interrelated bond between buffalo, Indigenous people and the land is proof of Paul Waldau’s claim that cultural imperialism affects both human and nonhuman animals,²⁶ and that there is a legacy to the kind of loss experienced from buffalo genocide. Laduke explains it in this way: *When you take a buffalo, there is a Lakota ceremony, the Buffalo Kill ceremony. In that ceremony, the individual offers prayers and talks to the spirit of the animal. Then, and only then, will the buffalo surrender itself. That is when you can kill the buffalo. That was not done for the 50 million buffalo decimated by U.S. agriculture and buffalo hunters To kill incorrectly, many would say, affects and disrupts all life. (148).*

The suffering and loss foretold by the Cree elders after the removal of the Manitou Stone in 1866 came to be, and the loss of the buffalo continues to reverberate on the plains.

Some Elders say that until the buffalo is back, the natural balance of the land will not be restored. Almost 150 years after the Grandfather Stone was stolen and the buffalo were removed through genocide, efforts are now underway to return the buffalo to the land, such as the creation of an International and intertribal buffalo treaty in 2014. New nations are signing on to commit to having communal herds on tribal lands. The Cree are demanding the return of the Grandfather Buffalo stone to the land it was taken from. Like the cycle Monkman portrays in his important new installation, the buffalo, once plentiful and abundant, then targeted and erased, are waiting to come back. Now is the time for artists to clear space for the buffalo’s return, raising what Blackfoot Elder Leroy Littlebear calls “buffalo consciousness.” Renewing our relationships to the buffalo and to the land needs to happen if we want to make a shift to restoring balance.

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Notes

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24 / Colin G. Calloway. *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground: Plains Indian Views of How the West Was Lost*. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1996. 131.

25 / Frank Linderman. *Plenty-Coups: Chief of the Crows*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. 169. He also said the following which demonstrates the disruption of life that occurred: "our bodies were strong and our minds healthy because there was always something for both to do. When the buffalo went away we became a changed people. Meat-eaters need meat. Other food is strange to them. Idleness that was never with us in buffalo days has stolen much from our minds and bodies."

26 / Paul Waldau. "Pushing Environmental Justice to a Natural Limit." In *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science and Ethics*. Eds. Paul Waldau and Kimberley Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. 636.

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