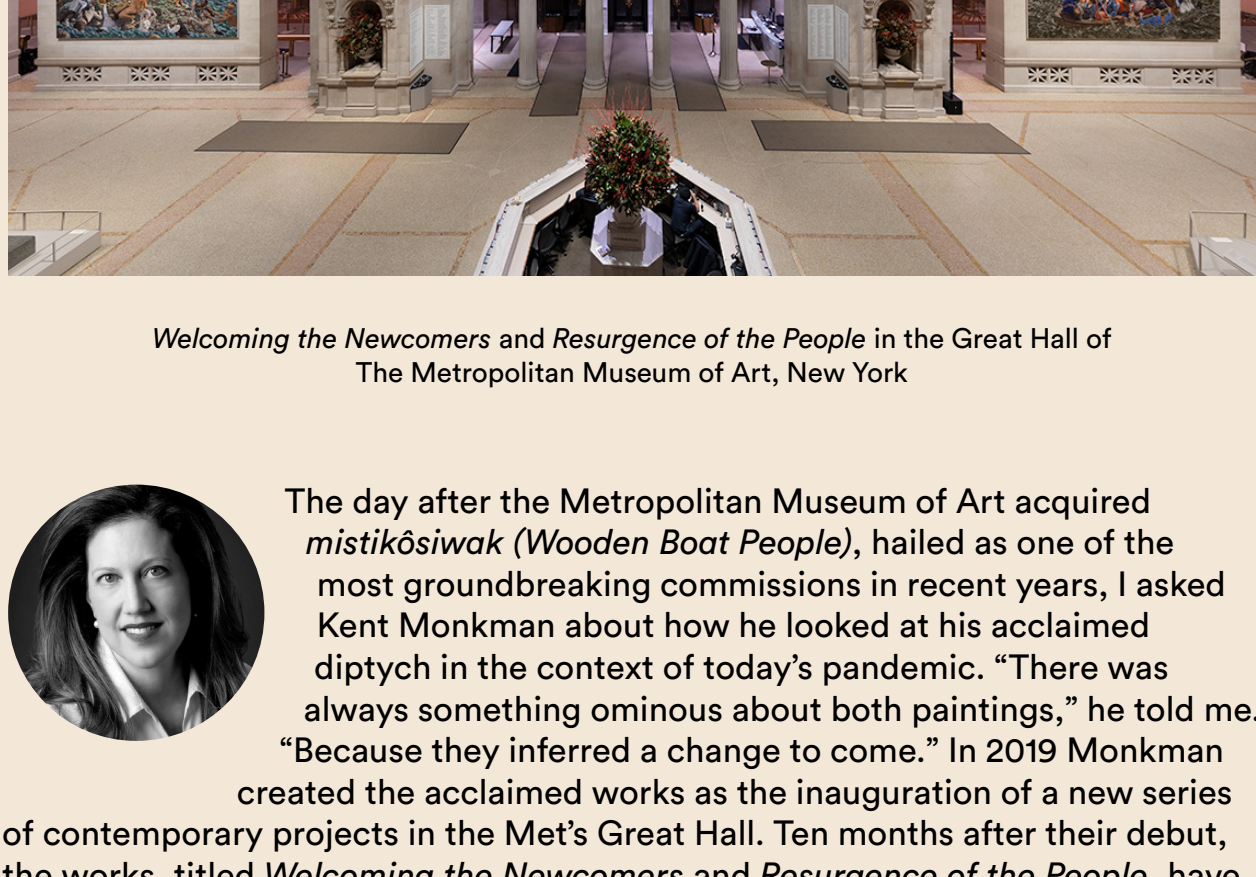


KENT MONKMAN MATTERS WHY *MISTIKŌSIWAK* IS MORE RESONANT THAN EVER

On October 8, New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art announced its acquisition of two monumental paintings by Cree artist Kent Monkman



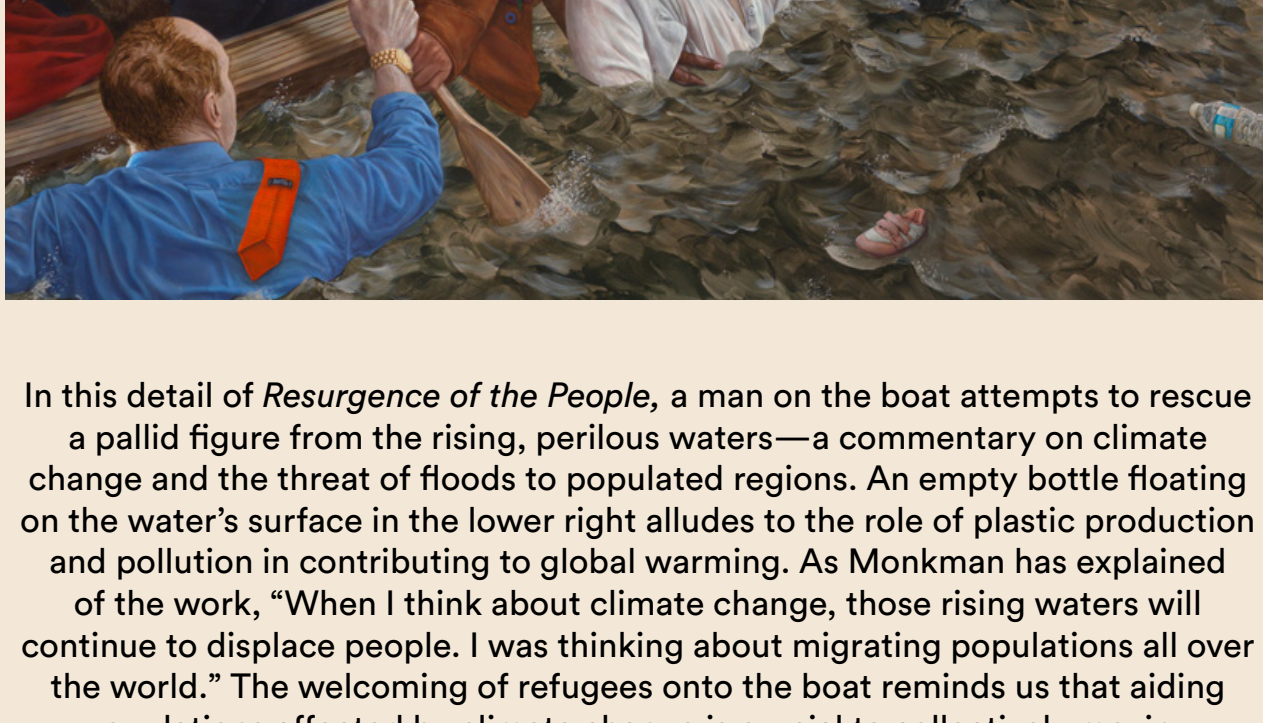
Welcoming the Newcomers and Resurgence of the People in the Great Hall of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



The day after the Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired *mistikŏsiwak (Wooden Boat People)*, hailed as one of the most groundbreaking commissions in recent years, I asked Kent Monkman about how he looked at his acclaimed diptych in the context of today's pandemic. "There was always something ominous about both paintings," he told me. "Because they inferred a change to come." In 2019 Monkman created the acclaimed works as the inauguration of a new series of contemporary projects in the Met's Great Hall. Ten months after their debut, the works, titled *Welcoming the Newcomers and Resurgence of the People*, have become even more compelling. Not only do they revisit the colonial gaze of American and European art, they hold up a mirror to our contemporary reality with startling prescience. Here's how and why.

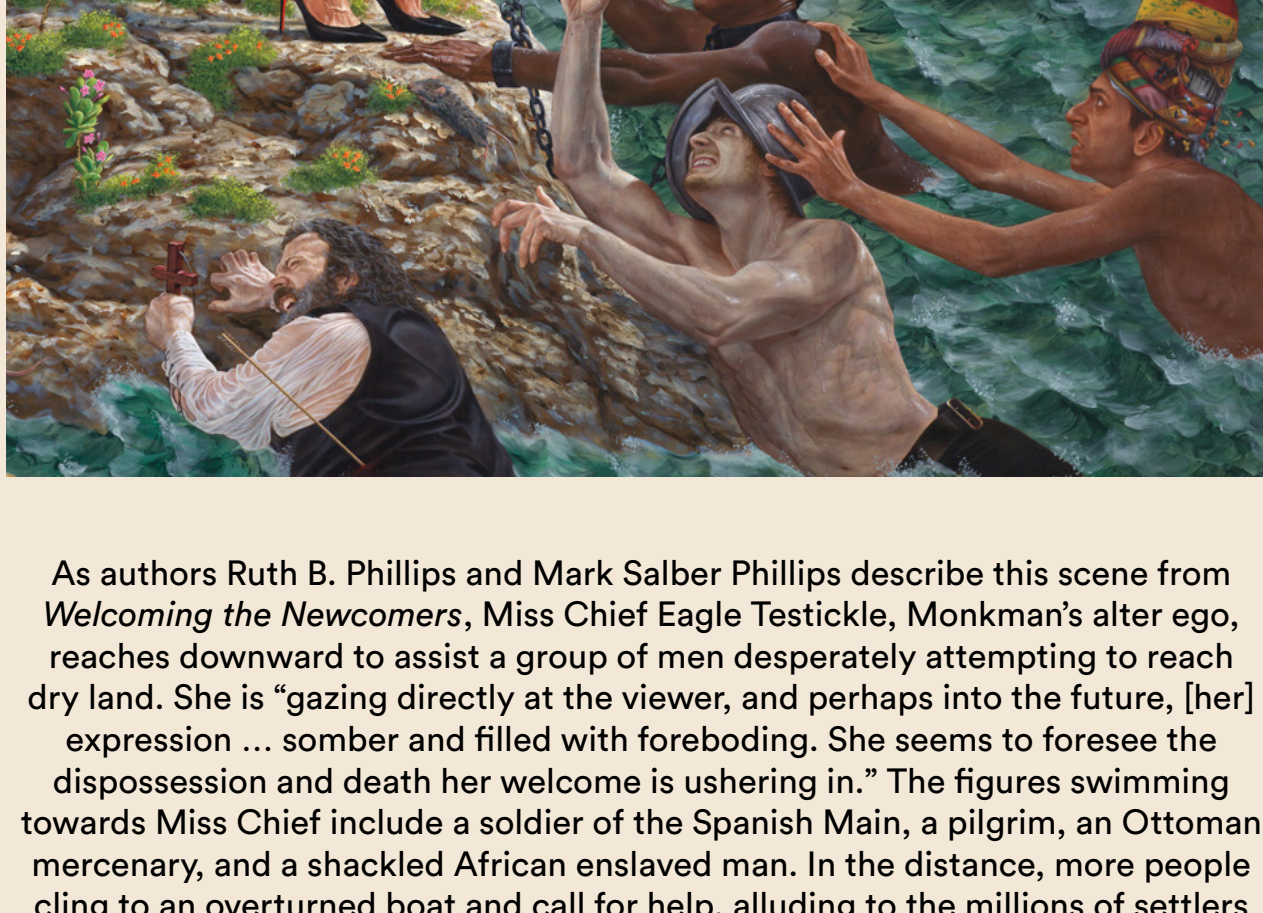
Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

CLIMATE CHANGE COMMENTARY



In this detail of *Resurgence of the People*, a man on the boat attempts to rescue a pallid figure from the rising, perilous waters—a commentary on climate change and the threat of floods to populated regions. An empty bottle floating on the water's surface in the lower right alludes to the role of plastic production and pollution in contributing to global warming. As Monkman has explained of the work, "When I think about climate change, those rising waters will continue to displace people. I was thinking about migrating populations all over the world." The welcoming of refugees onto the boat reminds us that aiding populations affected by climate change is crucial to collectively moving forward through this crisis.

FUTURE WARNING



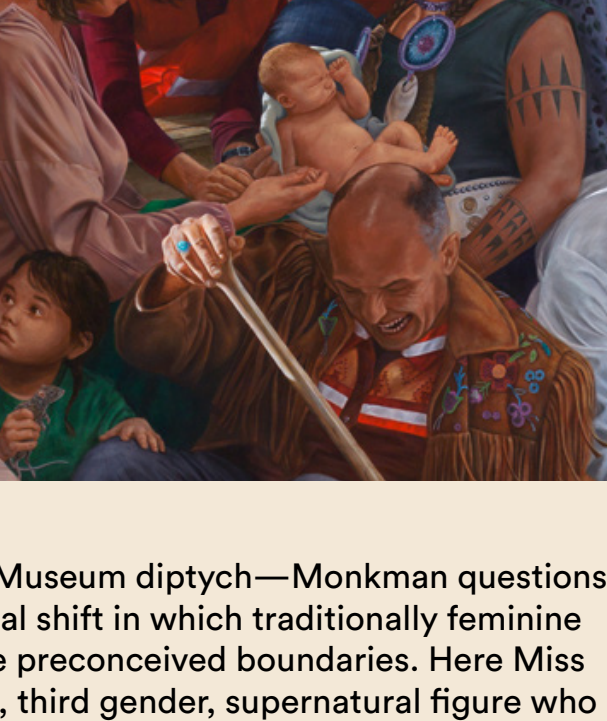
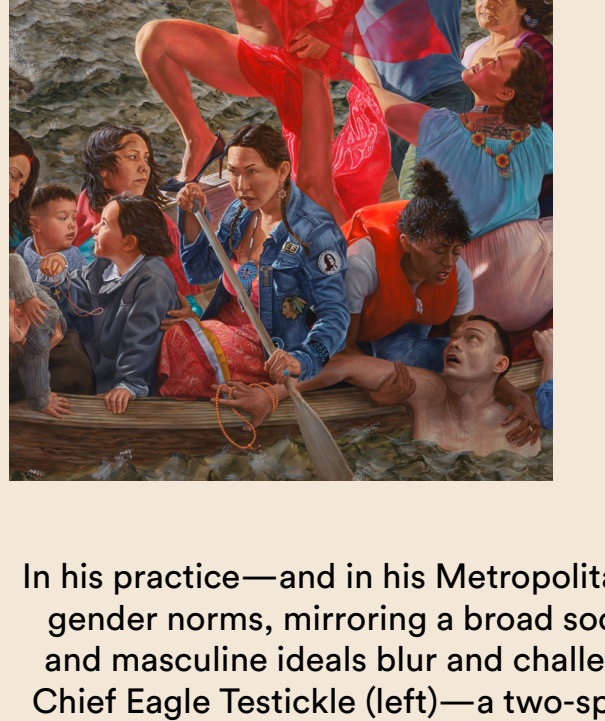
As authors Ruth B. Phillips and Mark Salber Phillips describe this scene from *Welcoming the Newcomers*, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, Monkman's alter ego, reaches down to assist a group of men desperately attempting to reach dry land. She is "gazing directly at the viewer, and perhaps into the future, [her] expression ... somber and filled with foreboding. She seems to foresee the dispossession and death her welcome is ushering in." The figures swimming towards Miss Chief include a soldier of the Spanish Main, a pilgrim, an Ottoman mercenary, and a shackled African enslaved man. In the distance, more people cling to an overturned boat and call for help, alluding to the millions of settlers who have arrived on the shores of Turtle Island since the sixteenth century.

INDIGENOUS AUTONOMY



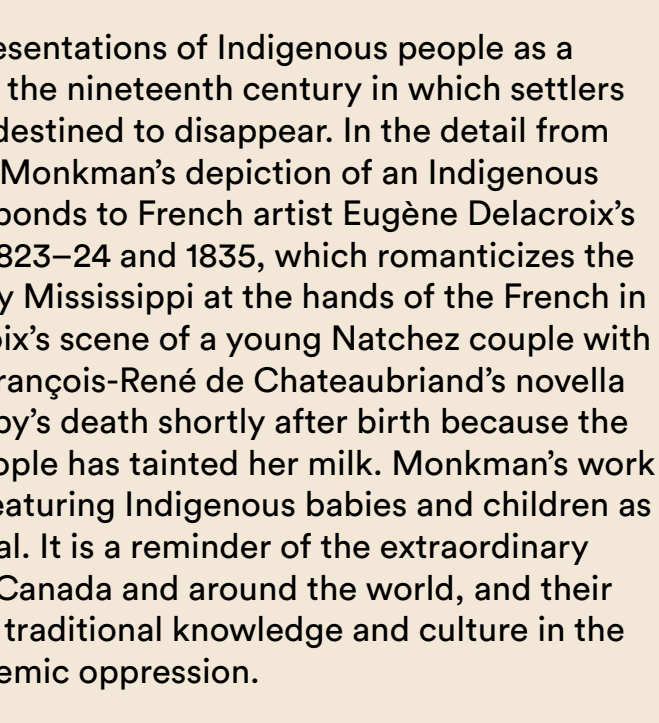
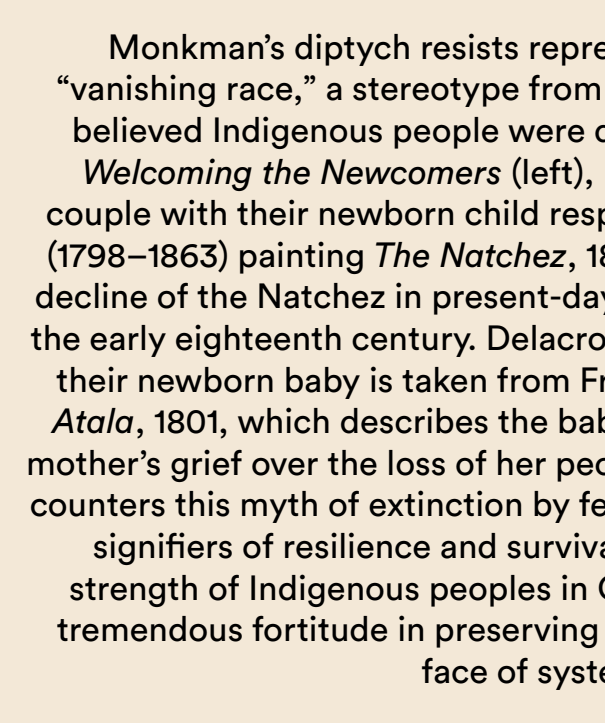
With *Welcoming the Newcomers*, Monkman notes he has depicted the waters that "brought waves of immigrants to the continent. The ocean is allegorical for the flood of settlers that displaced Indigenous people from all over North America." In contrast to the overturned wooden boat occupied by European settlers in that painting, *Resurgence of the People* shows that "it's the Indigenous people who are now moving forward in this wooden vessel." As climate change and other issues intensify global migration and displacement, the Indigenous figures paddling the boat symbolize Indigenous autonomy over their future.

CRISIS OF CONTAGION



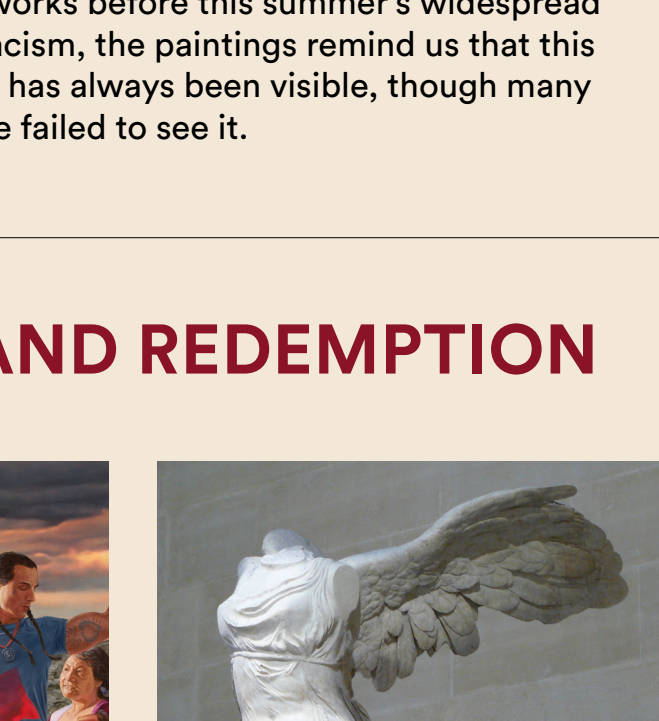
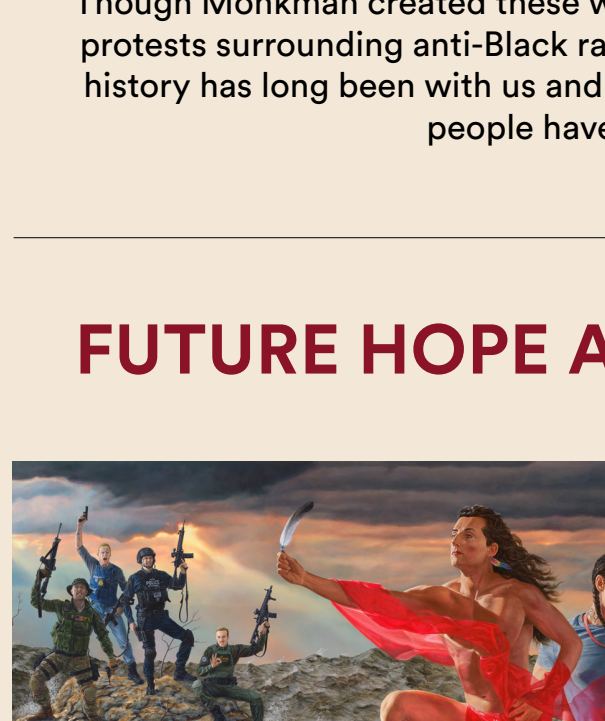
Now, in a pandemic, this scene from the upper left of *Welcoming the Newcomers* has particular poignance. An Indigenous woman reaching towards a European man displays rashes on her upper left arm and chest as a result of measles, a disease that European settlers transmitted to Indigenous people. The pair is based on Peter Paul Rubens's (1577–1640) painting *Venus and Adonis*, mid-1630s. Monkman's Adonis is reimagined as a fur trader, while Venus is depicted as the historical figure Hayne Hudiġhini, the wife of an Oto (Sioux) chief named Shaumonekusse, who died from measles. As we confront the realities of COVID-19, Hudiġhini's death is brought home as is the tragic fate of countless others who perished due to the spread of disease.

REVISITED GENDER NORMS



In his practice—and in his Metropolitan Museum diptych—Monkman questions gender norms, mirroring a broad societal shift in which traditionally feminine and masculine ideals blur and challenge preconceived boundaries. Here Miss Chief Eagle Testickle (left)—a two-spirit, third gender, supernatural figure who is Monkman's alter ego—confronts the normative ideas of gender and sexuality imposed on Indigenous people by European settlers. He appears in black high heels with flowing red fabric loosely draped around her muscular body. A recurring presence in Monkman's paintings, installations, performances, and videos for nearly twenty years, this glamorous and confident character subverts European accounts of Indigenous history and helps viewers to see new truths. Monkman also challenges dominant notions of gender and sexuality by depicting a same sex couple with their newborn child in *Resurgence of the People* (right).

AN END TO STEREOTYPES



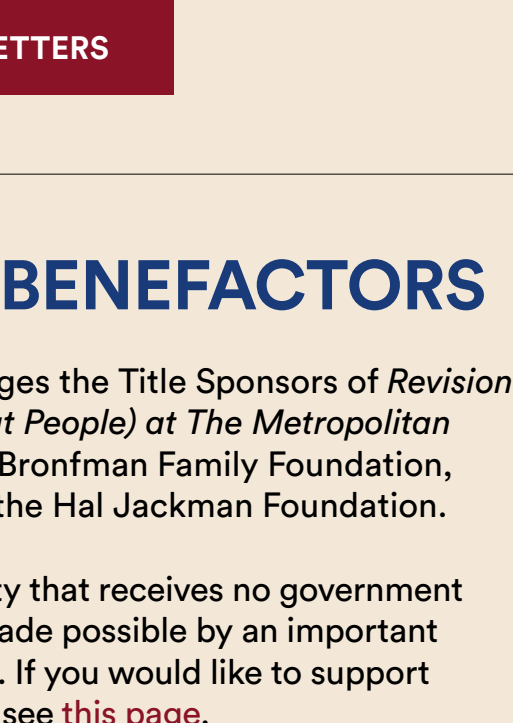
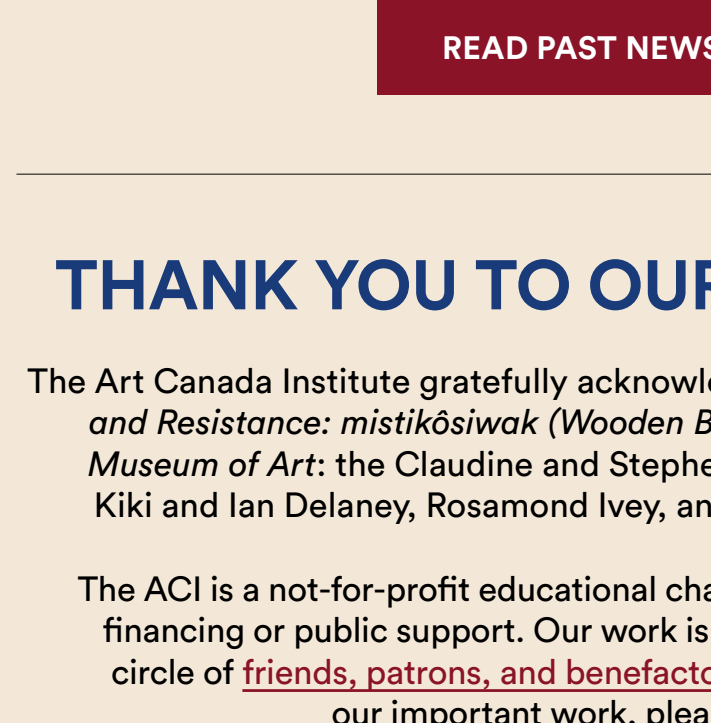
Monkman's diptych resists representations of Indigenous people as a "vanishing race," a stereotype from the nineteenth century in which settlers believed Indigenous people were destined to disappear. In the detail from *Welcoming the Newcomers* (left), Monkman's depiction of an Indigenous woman holding their newborn child responds to French artist Eugène Delacroix's (1798–1863) painting *The Natchez*, 1823–24 and 1835, which romanticizes the decline of the Natchez in present-day Mississippi at the hands of the French in the early eighteenth century. Delacroix's scene of a young Natchez couple with their newborn baby is taken from François-René de Chateaubriand's novella *Atala*, 1801, which describes the baby's death shortly after birth because the mother's grief over the loss of her people has tainted her milk. Monkman's work counters this myth of extinction by featuring Indigenous babies and children as signifiers of resilience and survival. It is a reminder of the extraordinary strength of Indigenous peoples in Canada and around the world, and their tremendous fortitude in preserving traditional knowledge and culture in the face of systemic oppression.

HONOURING THE AFRICAN DIASPORA



In the detail on the right from *Resurgence of the People*, Monkman revisits a character from *Welcoming the Newcomers*, shown on the left. An enslaved African man bound by shackles is presented as a medical doctor rescuing a man from the water. Monkman's diptych reminds us of the transatlantic slave trade and its force across North America: centuries of human bondage have left us with devastating legacies today, and entrenched cultures of oppression. Though Monkman created these works before this summer's widespread protests surrounding anti-Black racism, the paintings remind us that this history has long been with us and has always been visible, though many people have failed to see it.

FUTURE HOPE AND REDEMPTION



While Monkman's paintings include many difficult vignettes, the artist also reminds us that there is hope for the future. In *Resurgence of the People*, Miss Chief stands at the helm of the boat as a symbol of hope and leadership. Her pose brings to mind *The Winged Victory of Samothrace*, c.200–190 BCE, revered as the greatest masterpiece of Hellenistic sculpture and a work that embodies struggle, destiny, and divine grace. As well, she recalls New York City's Statue of Liberty, a welcoming symbol of hope for incoming settlers, although Miss Chief holds an eagle feather in place of a torch. Unfazed by the armed white nationalists in the upper left, Miss Chief and her companions offer stranded refugees safe passage.

NOW AVAILABLE



The only book to tell the story of Monkman's epic paintings, *Revision and Resistance: mistikŏsiwak (Wooden Boat People)* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art celebrates the artist and his works that have changed the conversation about Western art history.

[Click here to order your book, signed by Kent Monkman](#)
Limited signed copies available

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Image Credits: [1] *Welcoming the Newcomers and Resurgence of the People* in the Great Hall of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Courtesy of Art Resource, New York. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. [2, 4, 7, 8, 12, 13] Kent Monkman, *Resurgence of the People* (details), 2019, acrylic on canvas, 335.3 x 670.6 cm. Photo by Joseph Hartman. [3, 5, 9, 11] Kent Monkman, *Welcoming the Newcomers* (details), 2019, acrylic on canvas, 335.3 x 670.6 cm. Photo by Joseph Hartman. [6] Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus and Adonis*, c. mid-1630s, oil on canvas, 197.5 x 242.9 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Harry Payne Bingham, 1937 (37.162). [10] Eugène Delacroix, *The Natchez*, 1823–24 and 1835, oil on canvas, 90.2 x 116.8 cm. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. [14] *The Winged Victory of Samothrace*, c.200–190 BCE, Parian marble, 244 cm. Collection of the Louvre, Paris. [15] *Revision and Resistance: mistikŏsiwak* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2020). Courtesy Monkman Studio.