Writing about Indigenous Art with Critical Care

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With arms crossed, a Métis curator contemplates Kent Monkman's *The Scream* (2017) at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. The history painting dramatizes Canada's seizure of First Nations, Inuit and Métis children for incarceration and assimilation in Church-run Indian Residential Schools. The tragedy roils in a sunlit yard between a modest rural house and the viewer. Two black-cassocked priests, a pair of wimpled nuns and seven men in scarlet tunics swarm a Reserve to separate 10 children from their families, homes, language, spirituality, culture and dignity. One of the Mounties is armed with a rifle. Another, supervising from the porch, gestures to a trio of fleeing teens, but his comrades are preoccupied with easier game, smaller kids who variously run, buck or are paralyzed by terror. A bride of Christ takes possession of a toddler who reaches for a sibling clutched by a cop. An anguished mother, restrained from behind by a Red Coat, clings to her nearly naked offspring whose hand is grabbed by a "Sister." A second mother tries to wrest her child from a "Father" who has latched onto the child's wrist and ankle. Two Mounties yank a third woman back by her dress and long hair as she reaches out in frantic desperation to rescue her young kin from a Black Robe. The Reverend has seized the dissociating child around its chest in an awkward grip that reveals underwear and flesh and foreshadows sinister intent. Two men in moccasins lie unconscious in the lush lawn and August heat. An unleashed police dog menaces the scene—or is it a rez dog barking impotent objection? Sympathetic Nature, represented by a crow and two kestrels, witnesses the apprehensions. A second crow intervenes, attacking an officer. Dark clouds roll in.

A friend, a Cree artist, appears beside the curator, breaking their concentration, and asks, "What do you think?" Startled, the curator blurts, "Kent Monkman is the Norman Rockwell of Native trauma!"

Indigenous evaluation of Native art happens, but rarely in print. It's in the side-eye at an artist talk, joking-but-not-joking at an exhibition opening or a seemingly open but provocative question posted on social media, but which really targets you-know-who and you-know-what. More positively, it takes the form of the presentation of a sash, a star blanket, an eagle feather or other form of community recognition. All express judgment. They display approval or disapproval but do not qualify as art criticism. Art criticism is a sustained examination of a work's meanings, merits and deficits. It is a conclusion supported by reasoning. The Monkman quip is an eyebrow-raiser, a harsh opinion crafted to surprise. It's critical but it is not criticism. You wouldn't publish such a thing. The curator opines orally and privately, believing they have enough in common with the listener that their meaning and intent will be understood in context. Such agreement is less certain in non-Indigenous company, and even less forgivable in an indelible and public medium.

Writing about Indigenous art by Indigenous authors has exploded in quality and quantity in the past decade. The best texts are often catalogue and academic essays. They are critical in that they explicate the meaning, intent and context of works of Indigenous art, but they do not offer evaluations of the sort that might trouble their artists. That is the role of the critic. And scholars tend to choose to write about art that supports their claims. It is unusual, for example, for an academic to take a work of Indigenous art seriously, to be in dialogue with it, to be so humbled before a work as to change their minds and to narrate that passage. While Indigenous representation in art magazines and journals has also increased dramatically, settler and Indigenous critical engagement with these works of art has not.

A favoured tactic for settler art magazines, galleries and museums responding to the reconciliation, decolonization and Indigenization surge is to cede display territory—temporarily. That is, they celebrate Indigenous resilience, showcase Native pride, display Aboriginal pain and otherwise "hold space" for First Nations, Inuit and Métis whatever. That is, their concern appears to be with filling the space with anything Indigenous, rather than being concerned with the critical quality of the contribution. These actions are designed to momentarily re-present, but not to engage the Indigenous beyond that moment. Making, holding and sharing space reinforces settler ownership of these display territories; critical engagement jeopardizes authority, on both sides. A lack of critical care reifies settler–Indigenous binaries.

The consensus, at least among cultural, intellectual and political elites, is that processes called reconciliation, decolonization and Indigenization must be embraced if one is to be on the right side of history. It is as if critical thinkers must display uncritical, or at least silent, agreement with these processes in order to participate in cultural discourse. At universities, the Canada Council and innumerable other institutions, reconciliation, decolonization and Indigenization are now instituted policy. While there are tactical and analytical aspects to this cultural swell (grant applications, for example), this is primarily a social movement, an affective surge of settler feeling in response to sudden awareness of a personal and collective implication in historic and contemporary injustice toward Indigenous people. It is driven by moral panic in which doing and being seen to be doing, and undoing, is more important than slowing down to consider what is worth doing. Critics caught in this social current try to avoid the rocks as they go with the flow. So occupied, they lack the firm footing required to wonder, publicly, what the desired outcomes of reconciliation, Indigenization and decolonization might even be, and how their products ought to be measured. Non-critical art writing about Indigenous art favours with recognition only those aspects of Indigenous persons that are other to the dominant. It encourages Indigenous folks to occupy the appearance of a position rather than to earn one. The refusal to engage Indigenous art and persons critically positions us as permanently in a representational rather than a dialogic mode, as transmitters rather than generators of knowledge.

Critical art writing is needed if we are to deepen the discourse around Indigenous art beyond private judgement, competent understanding, polite appreciation, the commercial market, grant-writing rhetoric and as illustrations of existing theory. However, if non-Indigenous folks are to do so without instrumentalizing, being patronizing or other flavours of rude, and if Indigenous people are to engage this work at all, we need to develop non-colonial forms of critical art writing. I haven't quite figured this out yet, but I have some inklings.

Criticism may be spurred by intuition, a feeling about some aesthetic thing's rightness or wrongness, but, before it does anything else, the job of criticism is to figure out if this intuition is projected prejudice or an insight arising from our relationship with a special object. The Monkman wisecrack compresses mixed and unresolved feelings into an incendiary device. Its purpose is to release pressure suddenly—an explosion of laughter or an implosive gasp of shock. The joke is designed to ignite a conversation or detonate silent reflection. It only works if its recipient gets the metaphor's gist and some of the critique's implications. A one-liner is a compact intuition that requires expansion and reflection to determine what sense it might make.

Jokes and works of art often express an intuition, which is an understanding arrived at without conscious reasoning. Intuitions are affective solutions; they feel satisfying. Feeling rather than reason is the measure of their truth and value. Gut instincts feel true not because they are "objectively" correct, but because they offer answers we can live with. They are right for us in a particular moment. Most intuitions are sudden recollections masquerading as insight. They are personal preferences, social and experiential learning we naturalize as instinct or spiritualize as intuition. They feel right because they conform to and confirm settled opinion. Racism is an intuition of this sort.

Such intuitions are troubled by deep social attention, including prolonged communion with people whose lives are not reducible to our apprehension. And through introverted attention—which, in the case of critical art writing, is the analytic, empathetic and imaginative consideration through the medium of words of one's own subjective processes when engaging a work of art—this work, consciousness, is exhilarating and exhausting, a luxury and privilege. It requires time, space, quiet and other mental, physical, emotional and psychic resources that few Black, Indigenous and of colour folks have in abundance, and fewer still are willing to squander on such uncertain labour. (This article took 75 of the better hours of my finite life.)

There is another class of intuition. These are true leaps into or from the unknown. Lightning strikes. Sudden illumination is followed by thunderous conclusions and calamitous yet nurturing precipitation. For the receptive, the Dionysian, the romantic, the flash is instantaneous conversion followed by a compulsive drive for disruptive action, intense pleasure and exhaustive regret. For the deliberative, the Apollonian, the classical, such insights are only comprehensible when captured and slowed, shaped by art and craft into beautiful, incandescent forms. Bottled lightning guides our imagination in a considered way, in a manner that hopefully leads to informed opinion, right and constructive action. Intuitions *feel* right, but for the critically minded, testing is required to know if they *are* right—if their rightness extends beyond a single subject and passionate moment.

For the critic, aesthetic unease is sensation seeking sense. The belief is that words can refigure aspects of private feeling into public form that we can consider together. The Monkman crack means to be funny. It means to be true. It does not mean to be mean. Its intentions are critical: to crack, to release through re-cognition, to destabilize habitual perceptions and judgments, and to encourage more interesting, comprehensive, convincing and productive readings. However, it remains a snipe, isn't criticism, until followed by beads of reason strung on the sinew of seductive language. That is, propositions that can be evaluated for logical veracity and poetry that can be sounded for extra-rational, truthful resonance.

The flesh of art writing is *ekphrasis*, the detailed description of a work of art. Because it is a form of storytelling, because it is grounded in experience, because it is humble before its subject, because it implicates the viewing subject, because it is at once truthful and interested, because it is non-adversarial, because it attempts to understand and show understanding, description is an important element in the future of Indigenous critical art writing. Description is a high form of honouring. I am currently working on two public art projects that include consultation with elders. They will not tell me what to paint, even when I ask. Instead, they tell stories that allow me to see content. We co-produce images; their words produce pictures written in the visual vocabulary of my mind. Descriptive critical writing does the same. It is not quite a form of judgment, more a species of world-building.

Our curator hesitates to write about Kent Monkman's paintings because both are bound within the social matrix called the Indigenous. The curator is an interested, not disinterested viewer. Conventional art criticism is said to require critical distance—well, more of an effort in that direction than a real position. Just as white male critics face a conflict of interest when writing about white male art, so too a Métis critic cannot credibly extricate their Indigeneity from their criticism. And why would they? What project would that serve?

Less conventional art writing, recognizing the fiction of objectivity in aesthetics, swims with the current, luxuriates in the writer's fascinating consciousness—so much so that the artwork often becomes a mere stimulus for the narration of a stream of (self) consciousness. Such writerly strategies often claim to decentre cultural hegemony by failing to bolster dominant hierarchies and narratives. However, the practice continues to center individual sentience, and if that consciousness is tethered to white bodies, then the colonial corpse might be said to have resumed in "woke" form.

A related style is the non-Indigenous writer versed enough in the academic-Indigenous to know which knee to jerk at the appropriate cue. "Yes," our Métis curator exclaims, "That Anishinabeg beaded vest may be 'resistant' and 'resurgent,' but that is true of every Indigenous beaded vest. Because all First Nations people struggle to emerge from genocide, anything they produce is evidence of 'resistance' and 'survival.'" Noting this is not criticism but journalism. While this knowledge is crucial for the critic, their special role is to explain why a particular work of art is worthy of attention beyond how it exemplifies the category to which it belongs. If what you write about a work of art can be said of everything in that work's class, and you can find nothing about its special nature to highlight, you are probably doing anthropology or sociology, not art criticism. Or, the work is not a candidate for criticism. Few critics of Indigenous art are willing to humble themselves before an object. Fewer still are able to evaluate it because they lack a theory of Indigenous art and value.

In short, I differentiate between customary culture, Aboriginal art and Indigenous art. Each operates in its own art and evaluative worlds. Customary creative production follows proscribed codes. While primarily made for internal display, traditional art is often shared beyond the originating community through gifting and trade. While they may incorporate non-local materials, subjects and design elements, these works are said, by traditional makers and knowledge keepers, to lose integrity when these elements become too numerous. Just as non-

Native curators determine what enters their spaces as art, what counts as customary can only be regulated by traditional makers and knowledge keepers. While customary art welcomes appreciation from outsiders, what differentiates it from the Aboriginal and Indigenous is its immunity to their criticism. Customary art and sacred art are non-critical subjects.

Aboriginal art, a.k.a. Indian art, is an epiphenomena of colonialism. When Western art, teachers, agents and markets inform Native creative production to the point that the work, its reproductions and commentary circulate primarily in, and have more meaning for, non-Native consumers than for the artist's own community, it's Aboriginal art. Such art is syncretic, a conceptual, sometimes physical, co-production between First Peoples and settlers. "Indigenous" is the name for contemporary persons, spaces and processes in those moments when they are informed by traditional and Aboriginal aspects but endeavour to operate apart from them. The Indigenous are bodies, places, works of art and ways of being that emerge from customary, Aboriginal and settler cultures but strive to be neither fully traditional nor colonized. Indigenous is a third space—sovereign sites within settler territories. Not places of assimilation, but contingent spaces where the Indigenous is performed, critiqued, produced and reproduced as contemporary phenomena. Discovering how a specific work of art functions among, between or in resistance to these forces is an exciting possibility for future Indigenous criticism. Finding ways to do this without showing off your theory every time might make it a pleasure to read.

The jarring juxtaposition of Rockwell and Monkman offers intuitive shape to what our Métis curator perceives is a shared (Indigenous) discomfort with some *Shame and Prejudice* paintings. The comparison is, initially, uneven. Rockwell is criticized for sentimentality, for icing over his turbulent times with utopic confections of small-town life. While Rockwell sought refuge in an expurgated America, Monkman, hijacks this aesthetic to recover and display some of what that conservative imaginary edited out. The curator's intuition, however, is that the style itself undermines the content, rendering Native trauma a spectacle for white consumption.

Monkman has made a brilliant career from cannibalizing the Western canon. He subverts, for example, the 19th-century terra nullius American landscape tradition by reproducing these paintings with the addition of ribald scenes of prior occupation. The copies display his mastery of dominant cultural forms, while his subversions exhibit what those forms have failed to master. Monkman defies the colonial erasure of queer Native bodies by restoring them into the dominant visual record in a form they can digest. These gestures go beyond correction and recovery, however, and include Indigenous fantasies to compete with Western ones.

The paradox of parody is that it requires competency in the medium you choose to subvert. Irony is one of the few protections preventing the artist from being mastered by mastery. Mastery shifts to servitude, and critique to participation, when the medium becomes transparent. Painting well in the realist Western tradition is not just about veracity, it is about being absorbed by and portraying a way of seeing the world. When parodic, Monkman uses dominant culture's own visual tools to picture that tradition's repressed contents. For example, his reimagining of the American West(ern) tips that genre's homosocial into the homoerotic unmentionable already there. In these works, Monkman is literally both inside and outside the picture: inside through self-portraiture, and outside as the painter. Viewers know that even though he mimics 19th-century Romantic landscape painting, he does not subscribe to that genre's ideologies of terra

nullius, manifest destiny, homophobia and so on. Quite the opposite. He paints with his tongue firmly in his cheek. However, when Monkman deploys conventional, conservative Western picturing on a sincere subject, as he does in *The Scream*, when he constructs an unironic window on Indigenous experience, the form conquers and contains the painting's possible affective and radical content.

The Scream is rendered in a neo-classical, camera-based, illustrational realism of the sort employed by Rockwell. The painting is neo-classical in that the figures are dramatically arranged in a shallow space between a wall (the house), which is parallel to the picture plane. Following the neo-classical tradition, this is not a picture of how these raids actually went down; not a depiction of a particular place, event, or persons. It is true-ish fiction, an exaggeration designed to generate a sympathetic response. The adults are idealized: all are young with a similar, lean and fit body type. The house style and the clothes worn by the Indigenous folks suggest the scene takes place in the mid-20th century. The regalia of the other actors, however, is less certain; they might be from an earlier era. It is conceivable, though impractical and unlikely, that priests of the 1950s would go out on such a call in their dress cassocks and nuns in wimples; but it is a certainty that the RCMP officers would not be there in dress uniform. The priests, nuns and Mounties are less people than they are characters displaying the uniform power of the state and Church.

The Scream is a hyperbolic compression of multiple past horrors into a single, fictional tableau. While aspiring to the visceral operatic violence of a Peter Paul Rubens, or a Géricault, it lands closer to the sober play-acting of a Jacques-Louis David, or the sentimentality of Richard Redgrave. Unlike its namesake by Edvard Munch, this scream does not try to show how terror feels, only how it may appear. *The Scream* is also Rockwell-like in that it lacks interiority. The figures appear to be models collaged in from photo sessions—as was Rockwell's custom. The painting is generic. It lacks style and character. There are numerous awkward or indifferently painted aspects (especially the faces, and poorly controlled colour and lighting). Any or many hands could have painted it. While some of the figures make a show of passion, the illustrative gaze renders them actors. Picasso's inventive, abstracted and expressive style allowed him to paint the unrepresentable in *Guernica* (1937). Imagine the same subject painted by Rockwell. It would be a travesty. Compare *The Scream* with Robert Houle and Alex Janvier's anxious attempts to capture and convey their experiences at Indian Residential School. Their paintings are ruins, expressive glimpses and partial traces of trauma they dare not fully flesh. Their paintings are rough and incomplete embodiments of the pain they gesture towards rather than summon into being. *The Scream*'s wholeness, brightness and staginess feel awkward, intrusive and superficial. Our Métis curator wonders who and what the painting is meant to satisfy.