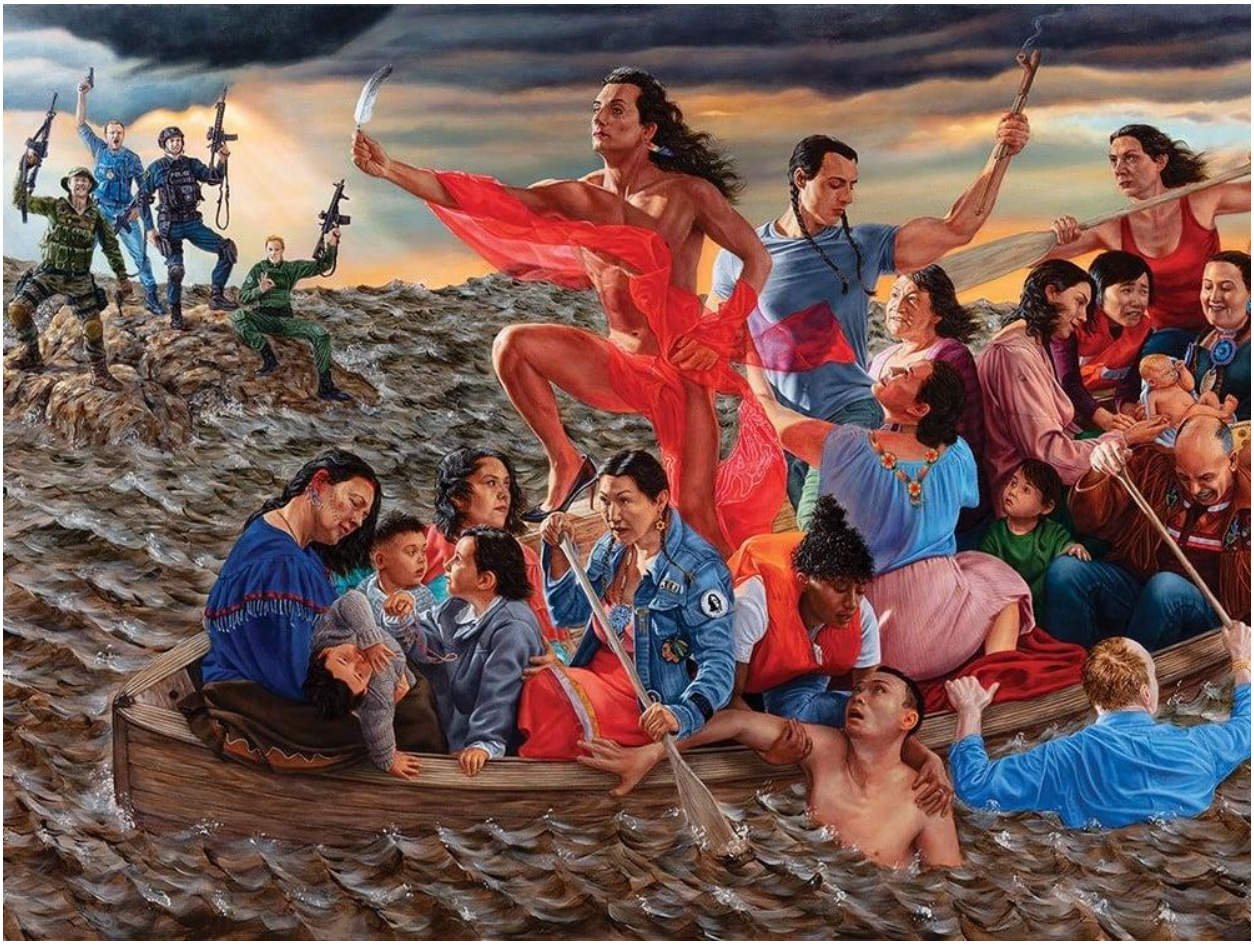
Turning the ‘Old Boys’ Painters Upside Down

The Tyee

By: Adele Weder

August 6, 2024

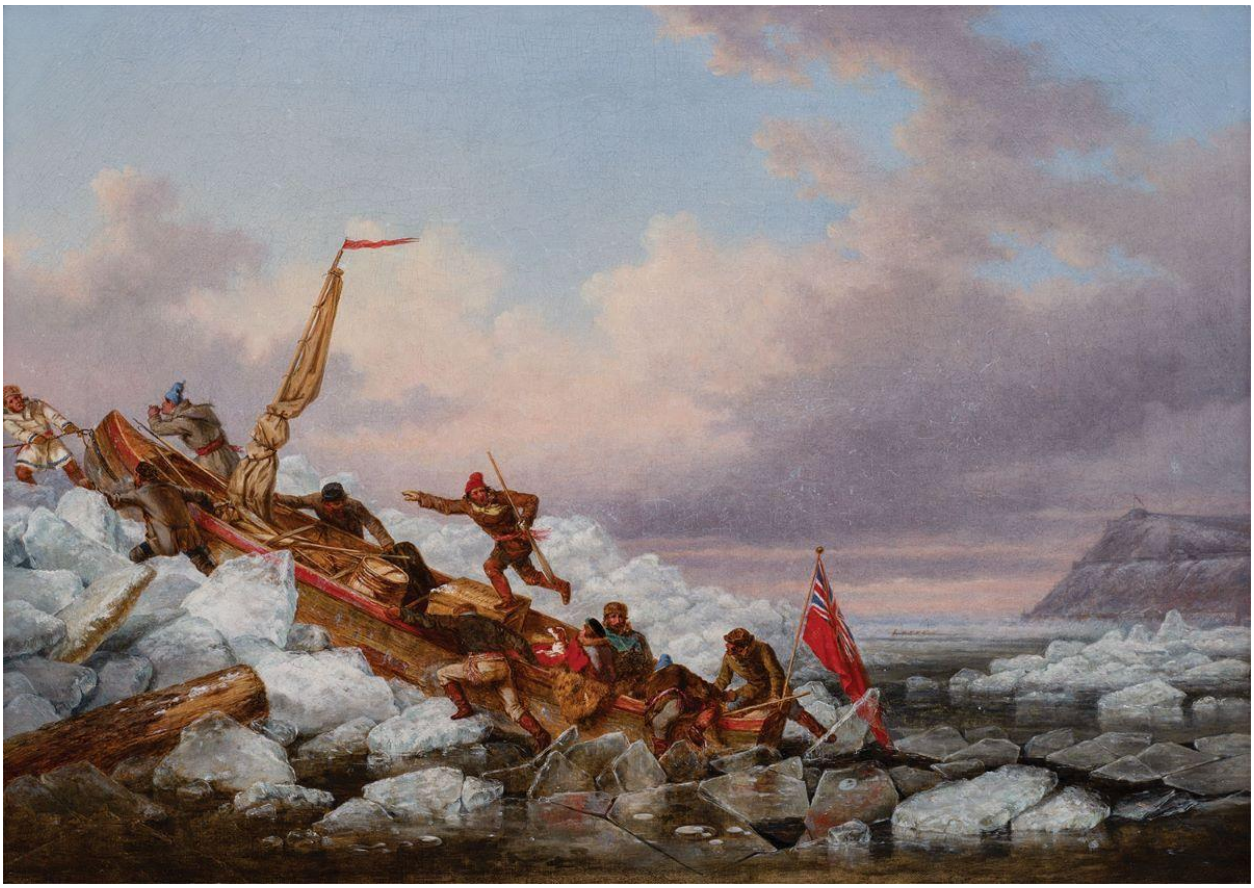
Original URL: Turning the ‘Old Boys’ Painters Upside Down | The Tyee



Kent Monkman’s epic reinterpretations of North American history have made the Cree artist internationally renowned. Detail of *Study for mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People): Resurgence of the People*, 2019, by Kent Monkman. Acrylic on canvas. Collection of the Sobey Art Foundation, copyright Kent Monkman.

You know their work, even if you’re not an art history buff. You’ve seen them on posters, calendars, your parents’ Christmas cards: the Old Boys of Canadian art. Cornelius Krieghoff’s snow-capped cabins. The Ontario wilderness as seen by Tom Thomson, Lawren Harris and the rest of the Group of Seven. William Kurelek’s adorable scenes of children at play. All male, all white, sure, but all brilliant.

The Old Boys' art comprises the bulk of *Generations: The Sobey Family and Canadian Art*, but the exhibition is turbocharged by radical contemporary and Indigenous art, also culled from the Nova Scotia-based Sobey family collections. The exhibition references the two generations of Sobeys (founders of the pan-Canadian grocery store chain) but also multiple generations of Canadian artists who are not often shown together in a single exhibition, and certainly not physically adjacent to one another as we see here. The works of brilliant Indigenous artists Kent Monkman, Annie Pootoogook and Brian Jungen are installed in such a way that they are equal to or more prominent than the Old Boys' works.



European settlers audaciously braving what they see as the New World, a colonial trope rebutted by Monkman. *Crossing the St. Lawrence with the Royal Mail*, 1859, by Cornelius Krieghoff. Oil on canvas. Collection of the Sobey Art Foundation.

For that, we can thank Vancouver-born-and-raised Sarah Milroy, the director and chief curator of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario, where the show first launched.

It's easy to see how Milroy's West Coast roots have helped shape her approach to art. She grew up in a Shaughnessy household headed by two very progressive parents. Her father, John Nichol, was president of the Liberal Party of Canada in its progressive heyday and the founding chair of Pearson College of the Pacific in Sooke. Her mother, Elizabeth Nichol, co-founded the Equinox Gallery in 1972, a hothouse for emerging

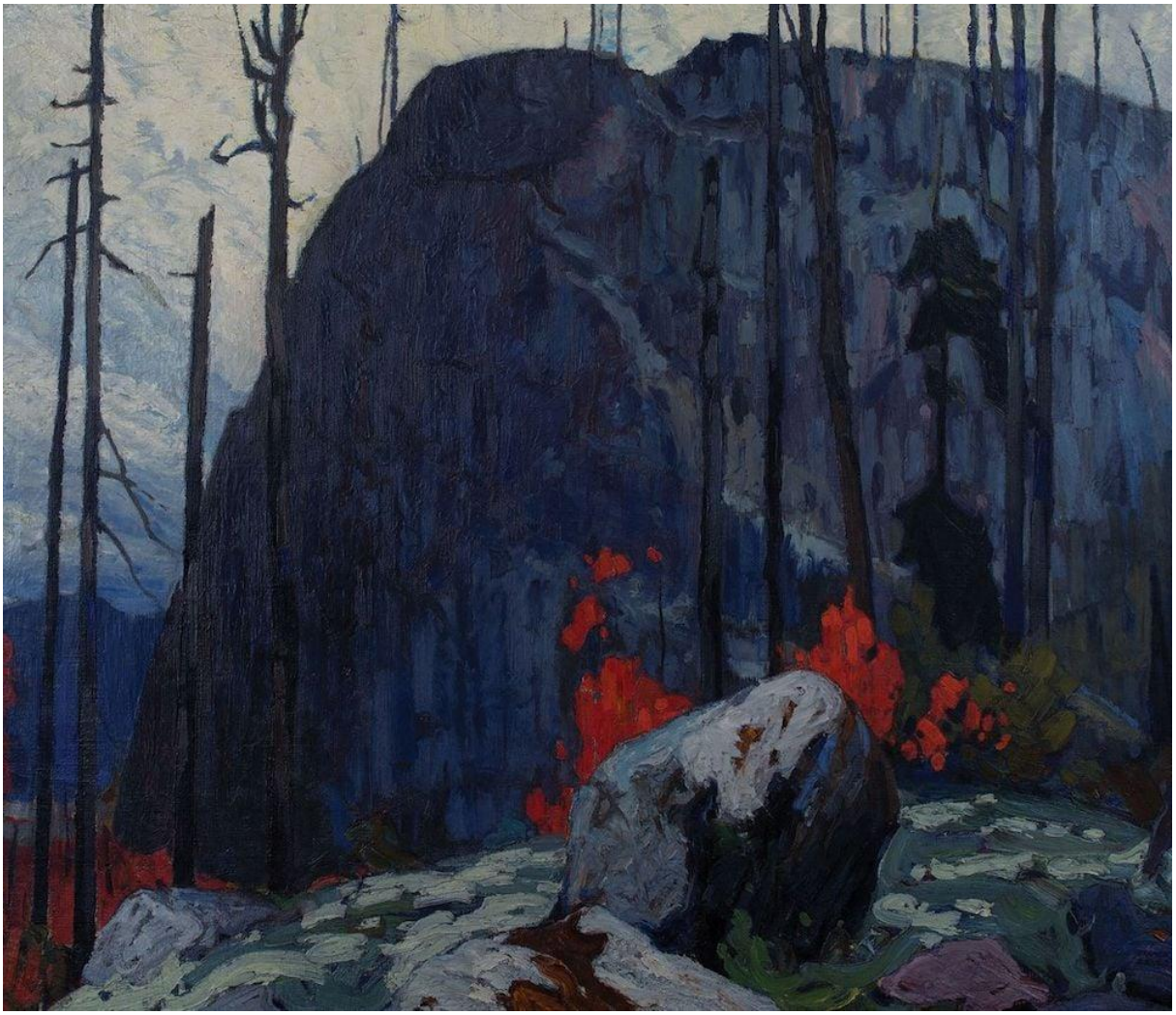
West Coast artists. Artists like Bill Reid used to hang out in the family home, telling stories over tumblers of scotch, and the gallery was a warm space for connections between people from all walks of creative and corporate life.

“Our home felt like the core of Canadian art,” recalls Milroy. So from a very young age, Milroy was exposed to a literal dialogue among artists, an experience that would later inform her curatorial approach. As she puts it, “Friendliness is all.”

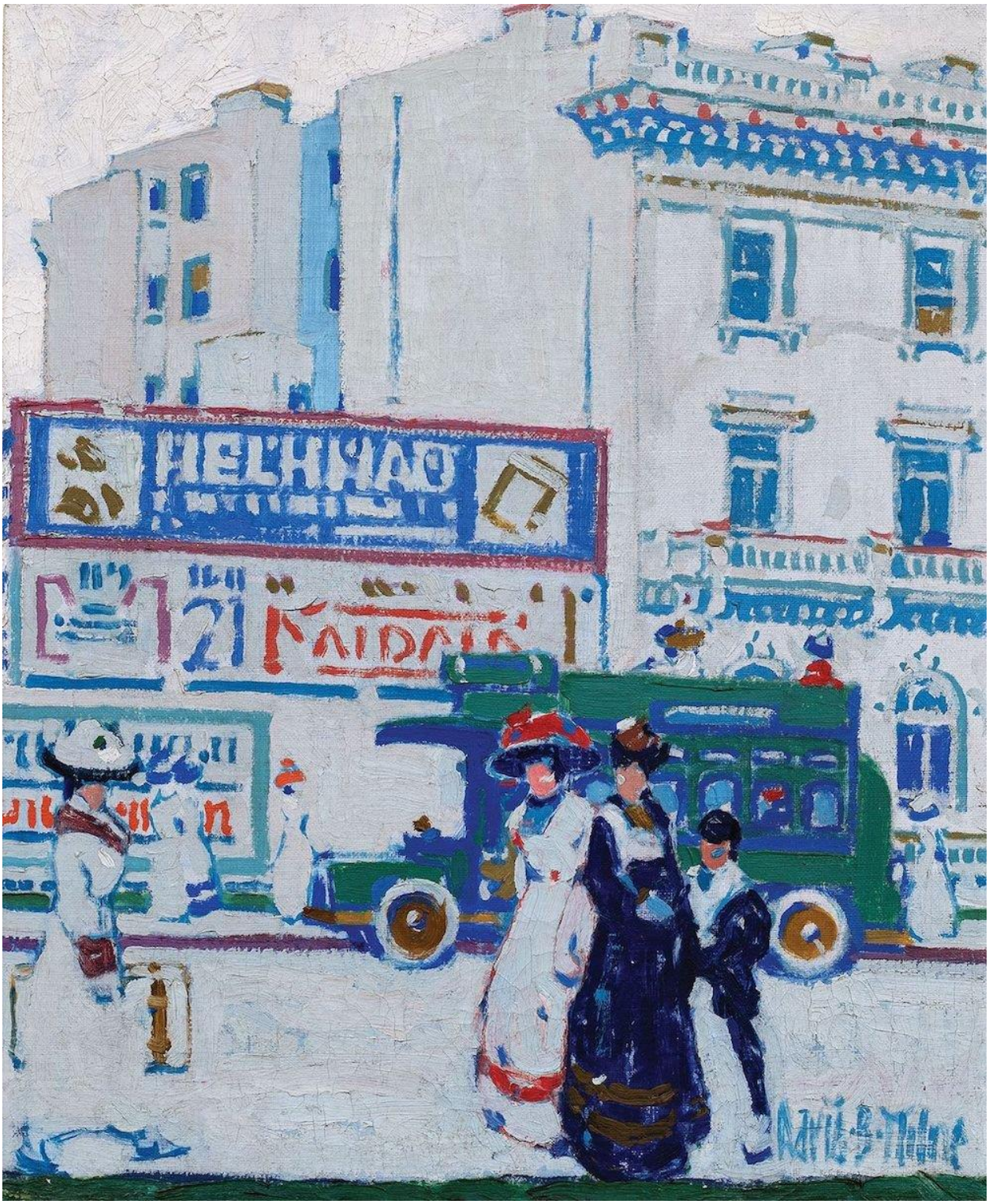
The curatorial choice to hang the two eras’ paintings in close physical proximity creates a powerful impression. “When you put Krieghoff together with Monkman, you’re allowing people to see what Monkman is riffing on,” says Milroy. Instead of a stand-alone rebuttal, you can see a dialogue. And possibly a means of decoding and recontextualizing that fusty old colonial art.

Monkman, a member of the Fisher River Cree Nation, subverts the traditional imagery painted by Krieghoff and his cohort of audacious settlers on the shores of the New World. The art turns the tables, depicting Indigenous people as the heroes and the masters of the land, pulling half-drowned European settlers out of the water, while a gender-fluid Indigenous figure stands regally near the head of the skiff. “I always loved the term *mistikôsiwak* — Cree for ‘wooden boat people,’” says Monkman in conversation with Milroy in the *Generations* catalogue. “That’s how our people identified the Europeans.” As Milroy observes, “He’s taking the language of the oppressor and turning it upside down.

Krieghoff became famous for his highly skilled and idealized renderings of early settler life. In *Generations*, you’ll see his sanitized version of early Canadian winter homesteading as well as his grandiose painting of settlers navigating the treacherous waters of the St. Lawrence River. But in a rare juxtaposition, you’ll see Monkman’s visual response adjacent to Krieghoff’s colonial mythology, larger and domineering. It doesn’t cancel Krieghoff’s relevance in art history, but it sets the record straight. “When you show him together with Monkman, you can understand a little bit better,” says Milroy. “You can see evidence of the colonial gaze and you can see evidence of the Indigenous rebuttal to it.”



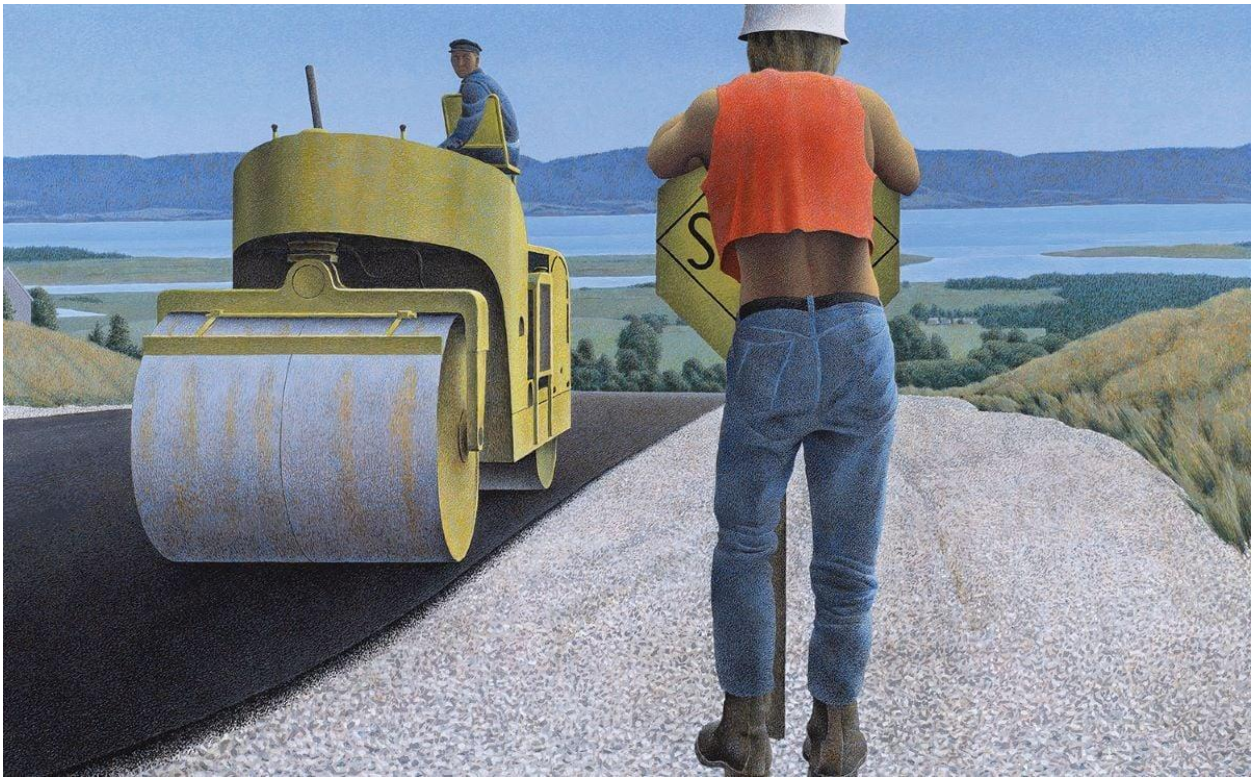
Algoma Hill, 1920, by Lawren Harris. Oil on canvas. Collection of Donald and Beth Sobey, copyright Family of Lawren S. Harris.



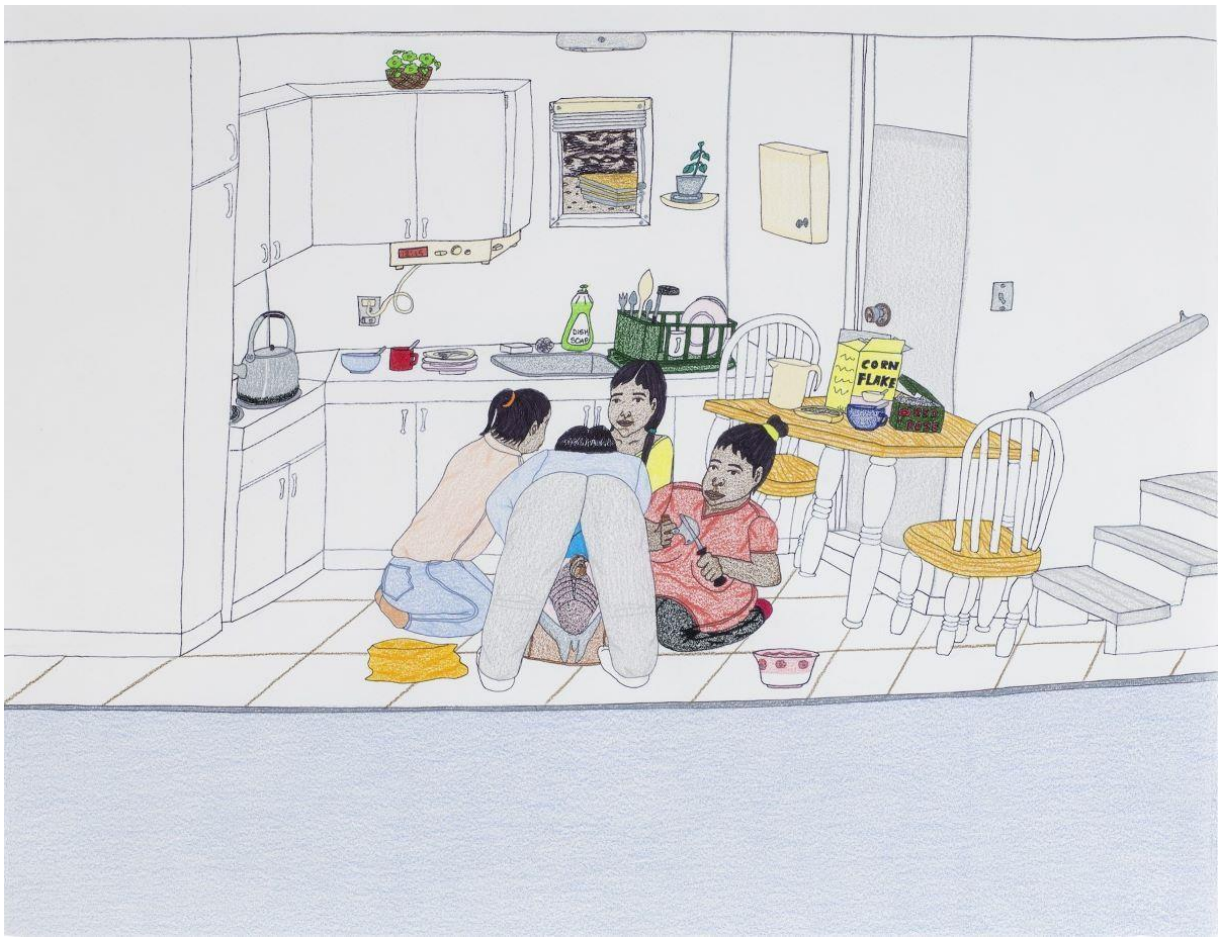
On its own, you might see the rugged Harris landscape, at top, as romantic solitude, and that impressionistic Milne streetscape, at bottom, as bourgeois delight. In the context of this exhibition, it's also easy to see a landscape splashed with blood, and a streetscape that's blindingly... white. *Grey Billboards*, 1912, by David Milne. Oil on canvas. Collection of Frank and Debbi Sobey, copyright Estate of David B. Milne.

While the Monkman-Krieghoff playoff nudges us to rethink the most obvious 19th-century colonial tropes, the *Generations* exhibition offers new ways of looking at the hallowed Group of Seven giants as well. Take a look at Lawren Harris's *Algoma Hill*: in a traditional installation, with nothing but other Algonquin School paintings in the room, you would probably read that mid-canvas burst of red as a blaze of autumn foliage. Contextualized by Monkman's nearby Indigenous counter-narrative, that red paint can more easily be read as an eruption of blood, or passion.

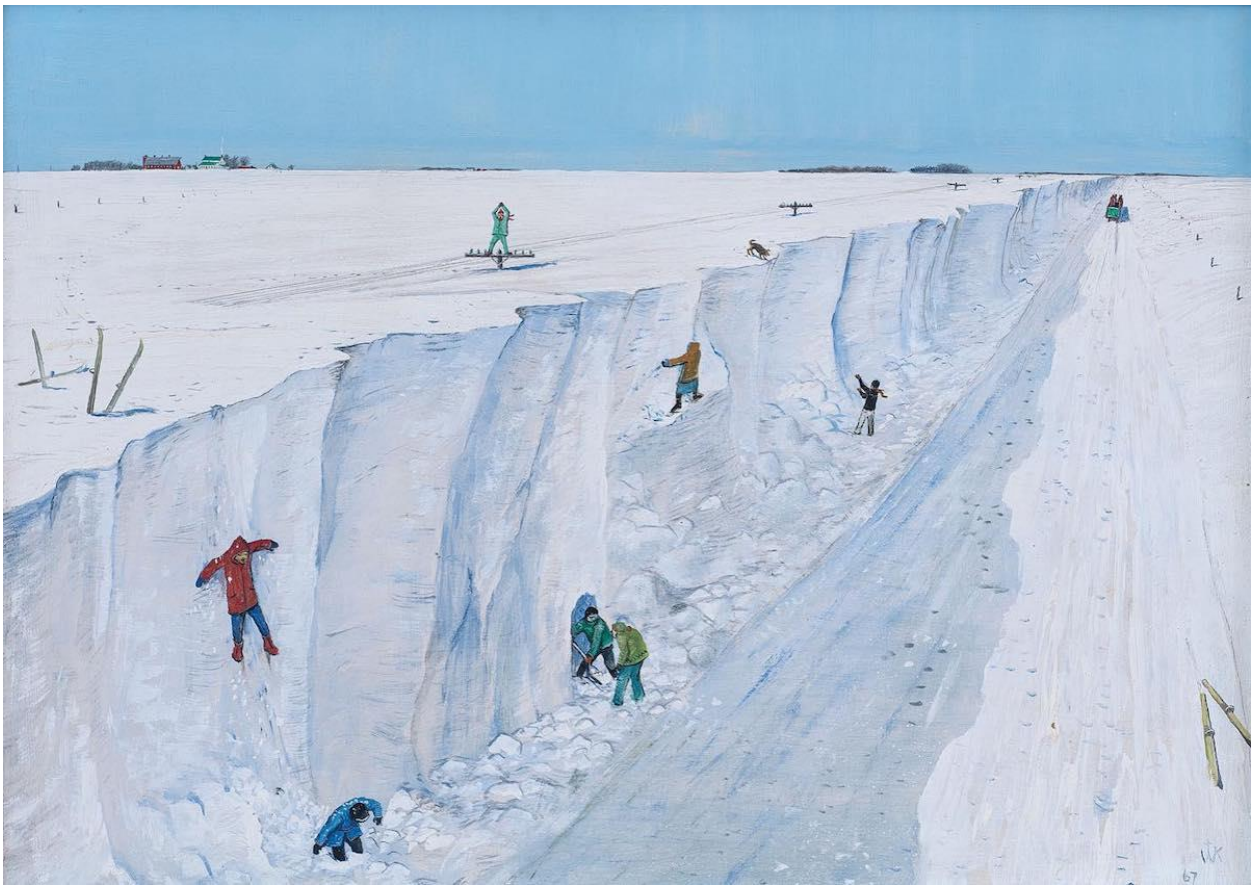
Some of the Old Boy paintings project themselves as isolated from the contemporary works, rather than in dialogue with them. Observe David Milne's *Grey Billboards*, an early 19th-century canvas whose rough brushstrokes and rendering of light would make it right at home in an exhibition of the impressionists. In the *Generations* exhibition, the painting looks uniquely and weirdly and predominantly *white*, and it becomes even whiter after you view the Monkman imagery. It also shows women trussed up in corsets, bonnets and petticoats —making you appreciate how in many ways society has changed for the better.



Road Work, 1969, by Alex Colville. Acrylic polymer emulsion on Masonite. Empire Co. Ltd., Stellarton, Nova Scotia, copyright A.C. Fine Art Inc.



Family in Kitchen, 2006, by Annie Pootoogook. Coloured pencil on paper. Collection of Rob and Monique Sobey, copyright Estate of Annie Pootoogook.



Notice how Colville's road worker, at top, seems to float on the gravel road, as weightless as the family on the kitchen floor in Pootoogook's distorted perspective, at centre. Then look at how Kurelek's tiny figures seem to be struggling ominously in the snow trench, at bottom, within the same sort of force field as the *Family in Kitchen* drawing. *After the Blizzard in Manitoba*, 1967, by William Kurelek. Mixed media on Masonite. Collection of Donald and Beth Sobey, copyright Estate of William Kurelek, courtesy of the Wynick/Tuck Gallery, Toronto.

What about the banality and relentlessness of everyday work? Some of us find the subdued colours and expressionless faces of Alex Colville to be cold, detached and vaguely patriarchal. In *Road Work*, the lone figure — a highway worker — has literally turned his back to us. When it's around the corner from a drawing by Inuit artist Annie Pootoogook, I can look at Colville's working man a little differently. Pootoogook's drawing *Family in Kitchen* presents the kitchen as a workplace, with the people in the drawing hovering over a seal carcass. Both artists render their subjects as weightless, almost floating above the ground; liberated, or maybe just entirely detached. You might never notice this about Colville's work until you can see it right after looking at Pootoogook's.

William Kurelek's work has a similar kind of illustrative quality as Annie Pootoogook's drawings: graphic novels without any words. But Kurelek's beloved snowscapes of kids cavorting about had always seemed a little *too* happy to convey the conflicts of childhood and the impending misery of adolescence. Yet if you look closely at the Kurelek painting in the *Generations* exhibition, you might notice the metaphoric impending danger: Hey, that little

kid is sliding helplessly down the trench wall, and that other kid is perched precariously on a sliver of ice! Help, help, help!

Do you see solitude or a frenzy of human spirits in Thomson's night sky? See if anything changes when you glimpse it after gazing at the Monkman painting. *Moonlight*, circa 1915, by Tom Thomson. Oil on canvas. Empire Co. Ltd., Stellarton, Nova Scotia.

Renowned for his rich colours and unpopulated wilderness renderings, Thomson is beloved not only by critics but also by crowds, evidenced by the popularity of the current exhibition at the Audain Art Museum in Whistler. *Moonlight*, the Thomson painting installed in the *Generations* show, is a characteristically brilliant work: behold a quiet moonlit night in a rugged wilderness with no trace of people. And yet as The Tyee's Dorothy Woodend wrote of Thomson's other works now exhibiting in Whistler, the painting shows "an in-the-moment vibrancy, as electric as a live wire."

But look at any one of Monkman's works, and then look again at Thomson's sky: the dark, undulating clouds seem not just electric but alive and connected to something or someone else. Seafarers? Invaders? A fish frenzy? Spirits of the age-old inhabitants? The painting becomes your own private Rorschach test.

So do the contemporary artists trump the 19th-century Old Boys? By contextualizing the "colonial tropes" with modern and Indigenous perspectives, Milroy encourages bridging the generations, rather than remaining divided. As she writes of Krieghoff's works — but it applies to all the Old Boys — they offer us a time machine, so that we can better understand how we got to this point: "Confections of fact and fiction, they still invite us to enter a world that is not our own."

'Generations: The Sobey Family and Canadian Art' exhibits at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria until Oct. 27.