

Kevin McKenzie, May 10 - August 22, 2024

# Honky Tonk Chapel

Curated by Dr. Stacey Koosel

Exhibition essay by Dania Warren

Honky Tonk culture refers to a type of country music that originated in the southern United States in the early 20th century. Honky Tonk music is characterized by a strong rhythm, often played on a piano or pedal steel guitar, and lyrics that often focus on heartache, drinking, and other aspects of life in rural communities. Honky Tonk music is closely associated with tawdry bars and dance halls, which were often rowdy and rough around the edges.

A chapel, a small religious building, is often associated with a church or other place of worship. Chapels can be found in a variety of settings, including universities, hospitals, military bases, and jails, as well as in rural or remote areas where a full church may not be available. Chapels may be used for various religious services, including weddings, baptisms, and funerals, as well as daily prayer, meditation, and confession.

In Kevin McKenzie's *Honky Tonk Chapel*, these two domains meet: this exhibition is a space of deeply personal declarations, articulated within artful genres of voice and situation. Whether one is boozing in their cups in a dark, rowdy beerhall sharing information that is particularly personal, or in the sublime solace of a church-like setting, expelling one's "sins": these types of revelations speak to McKenzie's approaches in many recent works. This new exhibition explores, in original combinations, the artist's lived experience, familial situations, and art interests from younger days.

McKenzie is a Cree/Métis multidisciplinary artist and a member of the Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan. He is currently based in the rural/remote community of Brandon, Manitoba, where he is both an artist and professor. He has exhibited his work in galleries and museums across Canada and the United States, and his work is held in private and public collections. His practice reflects Indigenous and pop cultural aesthetics, combined with lived experiences, in a variety of mediums including painting, sculpture, and mixed media. He is known for bold use of colours and striking imagery. McKenzie's work layers lowbrow art, 80's and 90's punk and rock music, Catholicism, and Plains Indigenous art and spirituality, illustrating their complex interconnectedness for the artist.

The purpose of a confession varies depending on the context and the beliefs of the individual or religious group. In some religious traditions, confession is a way to seek forgiveness for sins or transgressions, and to receive absolution from a priest or other religious authority. It can also be

a way to reflect on one's actions and make amends for any harm caused to others. In a therapeutic context, confession may be a way to process emotions and experiences, and to gain insight and understanding about oneself. Overall, the purpose of confession is often to promote healing, growth, and spiritual or emotional well-being. McKenzie's most recent works have enacted these types of confessional for the promotion of healing and growth. His explorations with Cree-Métis art practices in beading, hide processing, and skin drum making over the last five years have voiced what he missed out on in his past. Jenny Western's essay, *Edge of Seventeen*, captures how his artwork has dealt with this:

When McKenzie lost his dad at such an influential age, he missed out on the rites of passage that a father would have walked through with his son. For McKenzie who is Cree/Métis these were not only coming of age teachings on manhood but also teachings centered around Indigeneity, resulting in him being trapped in time for many years. "Edge of Seventeen" exhibits new artworks reflecting the healing and personal growth that has led McKenzie to enter a new stage in his life over recent years.

Most interesting for this curator is having witnessed McKenzie's art career develop over a long time, seeing the trajectory of his art practice shift while maintaining integral interests and concepts from his early career. When McKenzie was in Vancouver in the late 1990s and early 2000s he was heavily interested in an industrial aesthetic, involving early punk, rock music, and utilizing metal and organic materials that amalgamated Indigeneity and popular culture. Interested in the Lowbrow art community that was trending on the West Coast at the time, McKenzie was colleagues with folks like I, Braineater and 12 Midnite, a self-professed "Lord of Low Brow" artist. McKenzie followed their art careers closely, rubbing elbows with them at the Helen Pitt Gallery back in its early days. These artists were, and are, known for their rebellious and anarchist traits that McKenzie has embodied in his performances and works in other media throughout his career.

The Lowbrow art movement, also known as pop surrealism or underground art, is a style of visual art characterized by pop imagery with a dark or subversive twist, drawing inspiration from a wide range of sources, including comic books, graffiti, and tattoo art. Comic books or even more specifically graphic novels tell stories that combine written narrative with visual illustrations. They often cover a wide range of genres, from superhero adventures to memoirs and historical fiction. The unique combination of text and illustrations in graphic novels allows for a rich and immersive storytelling experience that can appeal to a wide range of audiences. Widespread in the early 1980s, many young teens collected them to follow the antics of their adored superheroes, like Conan the Barbarian.

McKenzie's series of acrylic paintings develop the superhero figure into an enigmatic protagonist. Conan the Barbarian is a fictional character created by writer Robert E. Howard in the 1930s. A legendary warrior and adventurer in a prehistoric world, he is known for his strength, cunning, and bravery. Conan has been featured in novels, comic books, films, and other media over the years, becoming a cultural icon in the fantasy genre. The character has

inspired many fans, and artists, including one of McKenzie's brothers. The character in McKenzie's paintings, slightly removed from the original Conan persona, is yet an insuperable being. McKenzie threads Indigenous regeneration and resistance to colonial assimilation with Conan's world and adventures. Through this manifested "Cree Superhero" McKenzie found a new suite of paintings to create. While trying to source ideas for a previous exhibition at the Dunlop Gallery in 2023, the artist spied an old box of comics in his office, a box of contents from his younger brother, Darcy. This box of comics holds extraordinary meaning for McKenzie and his brothers, as its contents originally belonged to their beloved brother, Tim, who passed away in 1996 at the young age of 33. The box, then given to Darcy, was passed on to Kevin. The box and its comics, offering a gift of memory in the context of familial grief, promoted healing, inspiring this show.

For the artist Conan was thus transformed into a vital Cree Superhero, becoming a convoy for McKenzie's thought processes and an expressive outlet. The artist's thought bubble dialogue, common to comic strips, layers the images with quotes from Marcus Aurelius, Aristotle, and Charles Bukowski. Bukowski, an American poet, novelist, and short story writer, is infamous for his raw and gritty writing style often depicting the darker side of life. McKenzie admires Bukowski as a depraved writer, often focusing on themes of alcoholism, poverty, and relationships. McKenzie depicts his own figure questioning contemporary Indigenous relationships with government and popular culture through ingenious quotation.

UBC Okanagan Gallery's exhibit shows four projects. One is a series of neon installation pieces with resin-cast transparent buffalo skulls. These works, *Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*, are quite familiar to me, as I wrote about them in a previous essay back in 2017 for the MacKenzie Art Gallery,

The installation encapsulates three individual pieces and each one is combined with found materials using white paint, large wooden cogs, bright red neon tube lighting, and three of the resin cast skulls. The titling is what really cements the final layer to this piece. What McKenzie learnt from his early education about the Catholic faith is that the triad of the supreme beings of God (the Father), Jesus Christ (the Son) and the resurrected divinity of Jesus Christ (the Holy Ghost) are the fundamentals that make up the sanctity of the Catholic religion. For McKenzie upon learning of the sacredness of the usage of Buffalo skulls within various Indigenous ceremonies it was a natural correlation to incorporate the two cultural beliefs into one art piece.

Other pieces in the show are on canvas; two-dimensional, they follow an animated painterly style. McKenzie cites Roy Lichtenstein as a large influence on these works. Lichtenstein was an American pop artist who gained prominence in the 1960s. Known for his bold, graphic style, he incorporates elements of comic book art and advertising imagery. Both artists use bright, primary colours and thick black lines. Two more works produced in 2023, are titled, *Truth and ... Just Deadly*. These representational images illustrate McKenzie's recent transition to a rapid painterly style, created to "get them out of his head" fast. McKenzie's method of "work and

Kevin McKenzie, May 10 - August 22, 2024

problem solve in the moment,” is a process which he shares with his students. Being present in the moment and releasing inner thoughts onto the canvas immediately, the artist makes a confession of the mind.

The last two pieces *The Gods* and *Holy Fuck* the artist considered as a [JKK1] diptych for the artist. McKenzie wanted the works to bring to life a Bukowski quote from the 1970s. In an interview, he relayed, “The gods have been good to me, they toughen me at the right moment, I don’t think I can be destroyed. Christ, I made it!” In McKenzie’s rendition, he uses the first and third verses from the quote, “The GODS have been good to me. I don’t think I can be Destroyed.” Exemplifying the everlasting nature of McKenzie’s Cree Superhero, in the second part of the diptych the character also reflects on his superpowers. Coming to terms with his immortality he incredulously utters, “Holy Fuck!”

Works in *Honky Tonk Chapel* combine elevated spiritual illuminations with low brow art antics in a gallery space both meditative and playful. A healing, chapel-like light cast from the buffalo skulls combines with a bar scene, with neon lighting akin to drink advertisements. Cree-Métis humour imbues the paintings. McKenzie’s unique Cree Superhero, derived from lived experience and artistic interests, makes statements, uses slang, and quotes pop cultural figures to make Native political references. *Honky Tonk Chapel*, at a bit of a bad boy angle, invites its audience into the intimacy of McKenzie’s artfully layered voicings.

### **Artist Bio:**

**Kevin McKenzie** b. 1969 is Cree/Métis. He is a member of the Cowessess First Nation of Saskatchewan, Treaty 4. He holds a BFA and an MFA from the University of Regina. During his 30-year art practice, McKenzie has exhibited nationally and internationally, notable exhibitions include *Changing Hands: Art Without Reservation II*, Museum of Arts and Design, New York City. He also participated in *Don’t Stop Me Now*, at the National Gallery of Canada, *If We Never Met* at the Pataka Art Gallery Museum in New Zealand, and *Transformer: Native Art in Light and Sound* (2017 - 2019) at the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institute, in New York City. McKenzie’s work was selected as the inaugural exhibition titled *ASAP* at Urban Shaman Contemporary Aboriginal Art Satellite Gallery Santa Fe, New Mexico.

McKenzie's artwork is represented in the collections of; the National Gallery of Canada, the MacKenzie Art Gallery, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada, Manitoba Hydro Corporation, the President's Art Collection University of Regina, First Nations University of Canada, Comox Valley Art Gallery, the Saskatchewan Arts Board and the Dunlop Art Gallery. He has a permanent public sculpture in Whistler B.C. commissioned by VANOC Cultural Olympiad 2010. In 2022 he was commissioned by the President's Office at Brandon University to produce a public sculpture dedicated to Truth and Reconciliation titled *Healing Together*.

McKenzie lives in Brandon, Manitoba and works at Brandon University as an Assistant Professor at IshKaabatens Waasa Gaa Inaabateg (IWGI) Department of Visual Art.