# Art as Resistance: Becoming as Survival

I am visiting the National Gallery archive in a few weeks with some friends. We are going to see the sole Arshile Gorky at the Gallery—*Charred Beloved II*—and a few works from Kent Monkman. I have some familiarity with Gorky's work but Monkman's work is new to me. The internet to the rescue! I didn't realize how similar the background themes were for both of these artists regardless of each artists technique or subject matter and want to share some reflections.

Kent Monkman (born 13 November 1965) and Arshile Gorky (born Vostanik Manoug Adoian April 15, 1904 – July 21, 1948), though separated by time, geography, and cultural context, share a profound engagement with themes of identity, displacement, and transformation. Both artists confront the complexities of navigating fluid identities shaped by historical trauma, whether through colonialism or forced exile. Their work reflects the tensions inherent in lives lived between worlds—Indigenous and settler for Monkman, Armenian and American for Gorky—and offers compelling visual narratives of becoming, rather than being.

Monkman, a Cree artist from Canada, uses his alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, to explore the fluidity of gender, sexuality, and history. Miss Chief, a two-spirit trickster figure, appears in Monkman's work to challenge Western depictions of Indigenous peoples, particularly those shaped by colonialism. Through Miss Chief, Monkman reclaims historical narratives that have often erased or misrepresented Indigenous identities. His paintings and installations engage with both contemporary and historical contexts, showing how Indigenous people have continuously negotiated their identities in a world that seeks to confine them to fixed roles. By positioning his work within the framework of Indigenous boundary identities, Monkman highlights a central theme in his art: identity as a constant process of transformation.

> In *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (see my other post on this), Tom Ripley's constant reinvention of his identity parallels the artistic practices of Kent Monkman and Arshile Gorky. Just as Ripley fluidly morphs his persona to navigate and manipulate his world,

> Monkman and Gorky use their art to reflect an ever-evolving sense of self. Ripley’s relentless transformation highlights a broader theme shared with these artists: identity as a dynamic, ongoing process rather than a fixed state, illustrating how personal and artistic reinvention serves as a powerful response to external pressures and internal desires.

Vostanik Manoug Adoian, who became Arshile Gorky, was an Armenian-born artist whose flight from the Armenian Genocide and subsequent reinvention as a Russian identity, including claims of working with Wassily Kandinsky, highlights his constant state of becoming. Gorky’s artistic evolution—from European modernism to abstract expressionism—mirrors his personal transformation as a refugee grappling with displacement and identity. His paintings, reflecting trauma and survival, reveal a fragmented self where the tension between his Armenian past and American present plays out, illustrating his ongoing journey of self-reconstruction and adaptation.

Both Monkman and Gorky create works that embody the complexities of identity in flux. For Monkman, this flux is shaped by colonial legacies and Indigenous resilience, while for Gorky, it stems from the trauma of exile and the search for belonging in a new land. Despite their differing contexts, both artists reject the notion of identity as fixed, instead embracing a state of becoming where transformation, adaptation, and resilience are central themes. Their work serves as a testament to the power of art to navigate, reshape, and redefine the boundaries of self in the face of external pressures.



Arshile Gorky, *The Artist and His Mother*, c. 1926-c. 1942, oil on canvas, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1979.13.1

The concept of “boundary identities” reflects the fluid and dynamic nature of identity in contexts of displacement, marginalization, and historical oppression. Rather than adhering to rigid, predefined roles, boundary identities exist in a state of flux—continually transforming in response to external forces. In the work of artists like Kent Monkman and Arshile Gorky, identity is not a static or monolithic experience; instead, it is an ongoing process of negotiation, adaptation, and redefinition. This state of *becoming*—where identity evolves in response to cultural, historical, and

personal challenges—stands in stark contrast to the idea of identity as a stable and fixed state of *being*.

Monkman's exploration of boundary identities is grounded in his engagement with Indigenous traditions and colonial histories. His alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, blurs boundaries of gender, sexuality, and historical narrative. By positioning Miss Chief within both Indigenous and colonial contexts, Monkman challenges the rigid definitions imposed by settler society on Indigenous peoples. His art suggests that Indigenous identity, far from being fixed or singular, is in constant motion—a process of becoming that involves resilience, resistance, and adaptation to ongoing colonial structures. Through this lens, Monkman reclaims Indigenous histories, presenting identity as something that shifts and grows, resisting the colonizer's attempts to define it.



Kent Monkman, mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People) – *Welcoming the Newcomers* (2019). Photo by Anna Marie Kellen, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Similarly, Gorky's experience as a refugee profoundly shaped his exploration of boundary identities. Displaced by the Armenian Genocide and navigating life as an outsider in America, Gorky's sense of self was in constant flux. His work captures this fragmented identity, marked by trauma and exile, where past and present intertwine. Gorky's integration of elements from Armenian manuscript traditions—such as intricate patterns and vibrant colors—into his evolving modernist style underscores his negotiation between the loss of his homeland and his adopted

American identity. This fusion of traditional Armenian visual culture with abstraction and figuration reflects his dynamic process of becoming. Like Monkman, Gorky's art does not present a fixed identity but rather engages with the ongoing transformation of boundary identities on his canvases.

In both Monkman and Gorky's work, boundary identities embody an art of becoming rather than being. Their work resists the notion of fixed, singular identities, embracing instead a vision of identity as fluid, evolving, and responsive to the complexities of displacement and historical trauma. By placing these boundary identities at the centre of their artistic practice, both artists underscore the idea that identity is not something one simply *is*—it is something one continually *becomes*.

Kent Monkman and Arshile Gorky, while emerging from distinct historical and cultural contexts, converge in their exploration of identity as a fluid and evolving construct shaped by external pressures. Monkman, a Cree artist from Canada, and Gorky, an Armenian refugee in America, both address how their respective experiences with colonialism and displacement influence their artistic representations of self. Despite their different backgrounds, their work illustrates a shared thematic concern: the negotiation of identity in a world that imposes rigid boundaries and definitions.

Monkman's art navigates the complexities of Indigenous identity under colonial oppression. Through his alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, Monkman creates a powerful commentary on the fluidity of gender and historical narratives. Miss Chief's role in Monkman's work—often as a trickster figure—serves to challenge and subvert colonial narratives that seek to confine Indigenous identities within fixed categories. For instance, in *The Triumph of Mischief* (2007), Miss Chief confronts the colonial forces with a mixture of audacity and resilience, reflecting an Indigenous identity that resists simplification and maintains its dynamism despite centuries of oppression. Monkman's art reveals a constant process of becoming, where Indigenous identity is shaped by ongoing interactions with and resistances against colonial structures.

In contrast, Gorky's experience of displacement due to the Armenian Genocide and his subsequent forced emigration positioned him in a state of perpetual transformation. His work reflects the trauma and

fragmentation of identity that accompanies forced exile. For Gorky, the process of becoming is intimately tied to his experiences of loss and adaptation. In *The Artist and His Mother* (1926–1942), Gorky channels his memories of Armenia into a fragmented, abstracted form that conveys a sense of identity in flux—caught between the past and present, between the familiar and the foreign. His art illustrates how the refugee experience necessitates a continuous redefinition of self, shaped by the interplay between his Armenian heritage and his American context.

Despite their different contexts—colonialism for Monkman and displacement for Gorky—both artists explore how external pressures shape and redefine identity. Monkman's portrayal of Indigenous identities as dynamic and resistant parallels Gorky's representation of identity as fragmented and evolving through the lens of exile. Both artists reject static definitions of self, embracing instead a vision of identity as something that is perpetually in the process of becoming. This shared thematic exploration underscores the universality of their experiences: both are engaged in a continual negotiation of identity in response to the forces that seek to define or constrain it.

Thus, Monkman and Gorky, through their respective contexts, highlight the fluid nature of identity shaped by historical and personal challenges. Their work provides a compelling narrative of becoming—a reminder that identity is not a fixed entity but a dynamic and evolving process, deeply influenced by the contexts of colonialism and displacement.

Source: https://www.idonthaveacoolname.com/art-as-resistance-becoming-as-survival/