

ANCESTRAL, HISTORICAL & LIVING ARTS by INDIGENOUS PEOPLES of the AMERICAS

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**OLMEC COLOSSAL HEADS**  
**WILD WEST IN VENICE**  
**MURALS OF CAUCA, COLOMBIA**  
**BANDOLIER BAGS TODAY**

**KEANU JONES**  
**BRENDA MALLORY**  
**MARTY TWO BULLS JR.**  
**NICO WILLIAMS**



is a role reversal; more often the power dynamics are expressed through wry sexual domination. In *Wild Flowers of North America* and *Saturnalia*, Anglo men and gender-fluid people defy conventional binary dress codes in joyous outdoor parties. Miss Chief runs from extreme weather alongside her Mountie boyfriend in *The Storm*. Even with their historical references, these paintings serve as visions of a future in which trans and queer folk live openly in safety.

Monkman's paintings for his 2023 *Being Legendary* exhibition, commissioned by the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), are included in this retrospective. Several of these (described in FAAM No. 39) depict *mimikwisiwak* (little people) and respond to fossils and items in the ROM collection.

Yet another series, including *Three Women in a Courtyard* (2018), *Female Figures in a Prison* (2019), and *The Madhouse* (2020), speaks to the disproportionately high percentage of incarcerated Indigenous people and the for-profit systems that exploit them. For these, Monkman lifted compositions and figures from religious paintings and works by Francisco Goya.

In a short documentary for the exhibition, Monkman explains his elaborate studio processes. Like the European artists he appropriates, he runs an atelier with numerous assistants, which streamlines and speeds production. He also hires live models but meticulously documents his tableaux so his team can work from photographs. Notably, Monkman prefers acrylics to oil.

*History is Painted by the Victors* is a visually and emotionally exhausting exhibition. Any one of Monkman's series confronts viewers with extremely difficult truths. The current social and political climate adds further pressure to anyone with empathy. As I write this review, colonial and patriarchal violence recurs around the world. Monkman's work underscores the cycle. It is hard to be optimistic. In these times, it is helpful to reflect on the resilience of colonized people, embodied in the unwavering strength of Miss Chief.

*History is Painted by the Victors* was on view at the Denver Art Museum from April 20 to August 17 and will be at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts from September 27, 2025, to March 8, 2026. A fully illustrated catalogue is available.

—Andrea L. Ferber, PhD

MONTERREY, NUEVO LEÓN, MX

## Convergences— Divergences: Two Aesthetics, One Sensibility

Museo de Arte Contemporáneo  
de Monterrey



**W**HAT CAN creations from the Ye'kwana communities in Amazonian Venezuela and Brazil and geometric abstract artworks by non-Native artists tell each other, and what do they reveal about us? This is the central question that the exhibition *Convergences—Divergences: Two Aesthetics, One Sensibility* at Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey (MARCO) explores by alternating Ye'kwana ritual baskets and objects with geometric abstract compositions by non-Native modern and contemporary artists, both part of Venezuelan entrepreneur Juan Carlos Maldonado's art collection. While disparate in expressions, functions, and underlying worldviews, which the exhibition acknowledges, the pairing of these works while respecting their specificities and functions, reveals something more profound: the spiritual quest that is part of the human condition.

The exhibition, now at its final venue,<sup>1</sup> relates directly to Maldonado's collecting practice and features 130 paintings, sculptures, mixed-media works, drawings, baskets, wooden stools, baked clay pots, and other Ye'kwana ritual items. Maldonado began collecting in 2005, expanding from Latin American geometric abstraction to global modern and contemporary art. In 2018 he acquired more than 200 Ye'kwana creations previously owned by Venezuelan naturalist Charles Brewer-Carías, who gathered them mostly in the 1960s and '70s during travels through Caribbean-speaking Ye'kwana communities,

mainly in southern Venezuela near the Orinoco River and a few communities in northern Brazil.<sup>2</sup> Brewer-Carías also authored *Ye'kwana Basketry Symbology: Portal to a Parallel World* (2019), evidencing Maldonado's interest in understanding his holdings; baskets are a focus evident in MARCO's exhibition.

Venezuelan curator Ariel Jiménez brings to the exhibition his expertise in modern and contemporary art and his firsthand familiarity with the Ye'kwana, gained through earlier work with the Kanarakuni community in Venezuela for a photography exhibition in Caracas. "I traveled to this community and have shared impressions and ideas with them since 2011 for other projects, next to devoting decades to studying geometric abstraction," Jiménez said in an online interview.<sup>3</sup> For the Monterrey presentation, the museum's director, Taiyana Pimentel, requested an introductory gallery to heighten recognition of the Ye'kwana people. This introduction presents their lifeways and cosmology to a Mexican audience largely unfamiliar with Amazonian cultures.

Jiménez's curatorial approach is structured in three thematic sections: Technical Functionality and Symbolic Value, Generative Models, and Purity and Economy of Media. In all of them, the line, in its geometric forms and seemingly endless variations, is the protagonist. Many mainstream modern and contemporary artworks in the exhibition by Latin American and other international artists range from

1. This exhibition was first displayed in Miami at the Juan Carlos Maldonado Art Collection (2019) and later at Casa de América in Madrid (2024).

2. Nalúa Rosa Silva Monterrey, "Identidad, frontera y oportunidades: Los Ye'kwana de Venezuela en la frontera con Brasil." *Dossier: Estados e etnias nas fronteiras amazônicas - Fronteira Venezuela-Brasil* 43, no. 2 (2018): 27–54. The Ye'kwana are a Caribbean-speaking people who live on both sides of the Venezuela-Brazil border in the basins of the Orinoco, Ventuari, Padamo, Caura, Paragua, Cuntinamo, and Uricocoera rivers. In Venezuela, they live in the states of Amazonas and Bolívar. Out of the 7,997 Ye'kwana who live in 20 settlements in Venezuela, about 3,280 live in the Caura River basin. In Brazil, they live in four communities totaling 593 people (*População Indígena no Brasil*, 2017, 2018).

3. Jiménez, email messages to author, August 8, 2025.



the 1930s to 2024 and are two-dimensional. Still, tridimensionality is also present with works by American Sol LeWitt, German-Venezuelan Gego, and Lithuanian-Venezuelan Gerd Leufert, and makes a powerful statement in dialogue with the Ye'kwana basketry, formed mainly by strips of a long knot of several hand-harvested plants, including arrowroot (*Marantaceae* or *kána*), long-leaved *Eduróa* cane, *arumá*, and *minñato*, all of which undergo a complex and laborious preparation process.

However, the line not only formally connects the works but also reveals symbols and rituals beyond the realm of the visible. For the Ye'kwana, this means re-creating patterns in their basketry and other objects that manifest their understanding of the world. On the other hand, non-Native abstract artists, inspired by Western worldviews but also by other cultures they encountered such as those from Africa or Oceania—often through processes involving misappropriation—also sought in the line a pathway for their introspective journeys. “Though the Ye'kwana and these artists have no direct contact, I intended to open a conversation between their works, acknowledging both similarities and fundamental differences while respecting each,” Jiménez said in the online interview.

These profound connections emerge in works like *Constructif avec poisson* (ca. 1932) by Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres-García, which features schematic, line-based drawings within a loosely traced grid. Each symbol, whether a house, a ship, or a fish, tells an interconnected story, recognizable only to those familiar with their culture. Similar symbolic intent is seen in Mathias Goeritz's compositions, which point toward the intangible and almost metaphysical, described by the artist as “golden messages.” Ye'kwana symbols also appear throughout their basketry patterns, such as in *Shiríri ahísha-háde* (*The Titi Monkey and Herons*)<sup>4</sup> (acquired in 1980), formed by a rhomboid-shaped grid filled with repeated motifs linked to mythical creatures surrounded by diagonal lines. In more complex examples like *Awídi, amohadóto-yekumédi* (acquired

in 2010), signs are woven together, often suggesting movement related to the cyclic view of time, with the creation of these objects often beginning as a circular form. Though fundamentally different from abstract artworks, they also convey narratives accessible only to community members.

All these aspects are not exclusive to these works but point to how cultural practices and knowledge are transmitted, along with beliefs and adaptations, across time and space. In a way this also adds an introspective layer to the exhibition, where each object and artwork is equally paired in a minimalist arrangement, leaving space open for interpretation.

Importantly, rather than reducing both expressions or forcing connections, the exhibition weaves subtle formal associations. At the same time, it recognizes that each group of works—those that in the West are classified as “fine art” and those of the Ye'kwana described as artistic production and symbolic practices—once labeled mainly by modern Western non-Native artists as “primitive art”—arises from contrasting worldviews. The term *primitive*, however, is problematic, as it bears a Eurocentric ideology, something Jiménez acknowledges. “It is challenging to find a correct term to

refer to these communities. Several have been used, like ‘primitive,’ ‘ancestral,’ or ‘first,’ but all are problematic or can even be disrespectful, especially since many of the works are recent,” Jiménez said in the interview. He added: “We need to learn to acknowledge and respect the differences without diluting them, because these are specific cultures.”

Furthermore, for the Ye'kwana, these symbolic creations, featured in the exhibition labels in the Ye'kwana language (including Spanish and English translations), are also functional in daily activities, embedded within their cosmology and way of life. Variations exist between communities that here are specified through regions, mainly Jiuwihtiña in Bolívar and Cacurí in Amazonas, with artists labeled as “Anonymous Ye'kwana.” Yet despite this diversity, the Ye'kwana share a unifying body of timeless stories, known as the Watunna, a corpus of spiritual narratives that recount their origins, values, territory, and boundaries, and are reflected in their artworks. “The artist, among the Ye'kwana, is thus not a creator of forms but an individual, one among many, capable of keeping alive the suprahuman presence and action that has governed the universe since the origins,” Jiménez states in the exhibition text.<sup>5</sup>

Something else is tangentially at play, as this group of items was mostly produced in the 1960s and 1970s. Younger generations of the Ye'kwana are losing this knowledge likely due to migration, challenges, and globalization. “Members of the Venezuelan Ye'kwana community I am in touch with, Kanarakuni, are familiar with the exhibition's three iterations and take interest in them, as their work is respected and shown in renowned museums,” explained Jiménez.

Overall the exhibition, on view until October 11, 2025, opens a dialogue between the works but also invites the viewer to acknowledge and question preconceptions and paradigms. Lines, grids, squares, and intricate patterns act as meditative threads that, while coming from different latitudes and worldviews, also subtly point to the shared quest for meaning and purpose.

—Constanza Ontiveros Valdés, PhD



ABOVE Ye'kwana artist once known, *Wanádi tonóro mótai* (*The Back of the God Bird*), acquired 1961, *wája tomennáto* (dyed round serving tray for cassava cakes), *Eduróa* (long-leaved *guadua*) splints, natural dye.

OPPOSITE Ye'kwana artist once known, *Awídi amohadóto-yekumédi* (*Remolí de 10 vueltas*), ca. 20th c., *wája tomennáto*, *Eduróa* splints, natural dye. Photo: Rafael Guillen.

4. Charles Brewer-Carías gave the piece this name.

5. Ariel Jiménez, exhibition text, *Convergences-Divergences: Two Aesthetics, One Sensibility*, exhibition at Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey, June 13 to October 11, 2025. Translation from Spanish by author.