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About halfway through the [Marilyn Monroe exhibition](#) — actually, there are two — at the Michael Canadian Art Collection a few days ago, we found ourselves in front of five images from Tom Kelley's "Red Velvet Photos" series, the Los Angeles photographer's famous May 1949 photo shoot, when his subject still called herself Norma Jeane Baker.

Even with the pressure of opening "Life as a Legend: Marilyn Monroe" Saturday in tandem with "Marilyn in Canada," curator Sharona Adamowicz-Clements remained uncertain about which "Red Velvet" images she'd select. But her deeper worry was whether she should let her two sons, aged 6 and 9, see these early Monroe skin shots, particularly considering the boys budding interest in the female form.

"I mean, they still think I draw all the pictures we show here," said Adamowicz-Clements. The firmness in her voice suggested that the boys were going to find themselves out of luck, at least this time around.

I understand her reluctance. The Kelley photos reveal what's concealed by most later Monroe imagery: unfiltered sexuality. Monroe herself repudiated these shots after they found their way into the debut issue of *Playboy*. With a new contract under 20th Century Fox, she knew these images were revealing in a way that was entirely unacceptable to the commodity-forging Hollywood publicity mills. She knew image control was how the game was played. She knew Mae West wasn't kidding when the older actress had quipped, "I've been things and seen places."

Norma Jeane Baker was naked, not yet "a nude," in posing for Kelley. Her pale arms are outstretched behind her head, thrusting out her breasts. Elsewhere her arms are reaching up and above her head to elongate her languid body shape. Her face suggests a post-coital glow. Her ruby red lips are parted ever so slightly, as are her brilliantly white teeth, to suggest the pleasure she feels, not the pleasure she was determined to elicit in the viewer's gaze.

This was Norma Jeane on the cusp of developing the Monroe look, the chilly hauteur killer stare the actress brought to each studio-sanctioned headshot, her eyes looking zoned out, her hair off her forehead except for a well-placed curl. (Only Mel Ramos, king of the pin-up drawings, ever imagined Monroe as happy.)

My uncertainty about the enormity of raw anger in this look, found everywhere in the show, led me to contact Nataalka Husar, the talented Toronto painter and art teacher whose own work has led to her portraying rebellious and often fierce young women.

"MM as a mask of anger makes me think of de Kooning's women, ferocious yet bombshells," Husar replied in an email. Monroe's red lips, "usually open and supposedly a come-on, really seem to be saying f-off. There's attitude masking a pain."

"Life as a Legend" ends its years-long German-based world tour at the McMichael after a recent stint at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. (And yes, we are talking about *that* McMichael Canadian Art Collection, the Group of Seven and birch bark McMichael, otherwise known as the guardian of the great Canadian landscape).

But it's more legend than life that's found here. In Saskia de Boer's *Marilyn Crucifix* (2000), Monroe is splayed lasciviously on a cross as if she was enacting Christ as a cheerleader. It's the besotted fan's ultimate view of her tragic fate. (Monroe died Aug. 5, 1962, age 36, possibly of a barbiturates overdose or too many Kennedys in her life.)

The familiar narrative of the tragic sex-centric legend is reiterated in the exhibition's deconstruction of Monroe. She's reduced to her lips, beefy thighs or even a death mask in Warhol's *Marilyn*, published by *Sunday B. Morning* (1967). Her face appears as a concrete ghost in



Untitled (Marilyn in Canoe), 1953, part of the "Marilyn in Canada" exhibition opening at the McMichael gallery.

Courtesy of the Estate of John Vachon and Dover Publications Inc.

Daniel Authouart's triptych, *Taxi on Broadway* (2002). Her lush figure is reduced to her geometrical components in Canadian artist Claude Rousset's *Hommage à Duchamp et Marilyn* (1975).

With her image chopped and cropped, she's the sum total of body parts ready made for every imagination, her nipples framed for our mind's eye by photographer Bert Stern's *The Last Sitting* shoot in 1962, her bare right shoulder forever fixed in the collective imagination due to its emergence from a tangle of sheets in Toronto photographer Douglas Kirkland's *One Night with Marilyn* in 1961.

For the McMichael, "Life as a Legend" was trimmed down to some 200 works from the original 300. The difference is made up by "Marilyn in Canada," a parallel exhibition curated by Chris Finn that evolves via publicity shots mostly from two films Monroe shot in Canada. *Niagara*, filmed in 1952 on the Canadian side of the border, was her first major part. *River of No Return*, shot in Banff the next summer — and after Monroe had become a huge star — was directed by Otto Preminger who came to deeply loathe his star and her late arrivals.

Finn, for his part, is ready to deflect criticism from anyone shocked by thoughts of Monroe's skirts billowing sky-high before a pristine grove of Tom Thomson scotch pines.

Part of the McMichael mandate says the curator "is to reference ideas about influences on our cultural identity, on pop-cultural influences, particularly the image sources of American culture coming through film and other sources. 'Monroe in Canada' references the legacy she has left within Canada, with visual artists referencing her image and some poets offering their remembrances of her."

Monroe's triumphant bloneness is certainly placed in a Canadian context — a vividly red canoe, actually — in *Voyage 1* (2010) by Bonnie Baxter. As recreated for this staged digital photograph by the American-born Quebec artist, Monroe's signature hairdo — a sign of all Yankee culture? — is the only bright spot against encroaching Canuck gloom.

For the McMichael, Marilyn's enduring tragic bombshell reputation will likely bring an attendance boost to the gallery, which late last year lost its highly regarded CEO Thomas Smart after only four years, and is now enduring a rebuilding program outdoors.

Besides, if the McMichael didn't grab the show, another local gallery likely would have, given the current show-business frame of the collective curatorial mind.

The McMichael's timing also helps its cause. The Monroe estate — controlled for years by Anna Mizrahi Strasberg, the widow of Lee Strasberg, Monroe's acting teacher — is increasingly aggressive in its marketing strategies. At least two Monroe-based movies are in the pipeline: *Blonde*, with Naomi Watts, and *My Week with Marilyn*, with Michelle Williams. And there's seemingly a bottomless treasure trove of Monroe ephemera perfect for recycling. *Vanity Fair* last November publishing excerpts from *Fragments, Poems, Intimate Notes, Letters*, a collection of writing that includes every jotting Monroe committed to paper. ("My feeling doesn't happen to swell into words," goes one of her fragments from *Fragments*.)

"There's a new generation really fascinated with her," says Adamowicz-Clements. "Lindsay Lohan, Angelina Jolie and Gwen Stefani are trying to interpret her. I also think there is ongoing interest in the tragic aspect of her life — my friends and I are still talking about how she died — and there's this sense of wishing to go back and rescue her."

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JUST THE FACTS

WHAT: "Life as a Legend: Marilyn Monroe" and "Marilyn in Canada"

WHERE: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg

WHEN: Feb. 19 to May 15