

SHUVINAI ASHOONA: MAPPING WORLDS

FINAL DIDACTICS

From One Cape Dorset to Another

The West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative (est. 1959) and its art-making arm, Kinngait Studios, has been instrumental in developing a thriving arts community in the region capable of managing the international export of its artistic production. Like her grandmother, Pitseolak Ashoona, Shuvinai Ashoona sought an income through artmaking at the co-op, submitting her first drawing at the age of 25. This was the beginning of a prolific international career and ardent relationship with the studio and its many makers—a community that is the subject of many of Ashoona's drawings. William Ritchie, who has been a master printer at the studio since 1987 and became studio manager in 2010, recalls his wonder at the intricacy of Ashoona's early work, comparing the illusion of depth created by her numerous fine hatch marks to those found in the works of Renaissance artists Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516) and Pieter Breugel the Elder (1525–1559). The repetition of fine lines remains a signature of Ashoona's work today.

Describing her early landscapes—which portray infinite rock ledges retreating like stairs—Ashoona has said, “They led from one Cape Dorset to another.” The expressive, circular composition of many of her drawings reflects Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit, a body of knowledge that rests on a belief in the interconnectedness of all life. This idea has found expression in a number of her repeated motifs from eggs, tents and globes (not geographically accurate but “earth like and/or suitable for life”) to rings of figures and faces with different skin tones and hair colours, represented hand in hand with animals and monsters alike.

Points of View

Shuvinai Ashoona has described her process as open-ended and intuitive, as “not knowing what [a drawing] really means. Just making it appear.” Superimposing drawings within drawings, she combines different viewpoints to show the past within the present or worlds within worlds. Her drawings approach subjects head-on or at an angle from above, causing the land to tilt across the page while figures on the ground often appear both as if seen from above and in profile. Only subtly playing with forced perspective, Ashoona creates the idea of distance through close cropping or through a figure in a crowd who looks up at us.

Satellite television came to Kinngait in the 1970s and immediately had a noted effect on local artists. Though Ashoona rarely offers a personal point of view on social or political conditions in her artworks, on occasion she has illustrated global and local crises seen in the media, which have impacted her visually and emotionally. The globe motif first appeared in her work around 2010 as an object birthed or embraced by peoples and tentacles alike. Shown as both an extension of bodies as well as food for consumption and the home of many beings, the globe signals a worldview that does not see nature and culture as dichotomous realms but as enmeshed. In 2011, Ashoona placed this globe icon in direct dialogue with environmental duress in images made in response to news coverage of the tsunami in Japan. Such works in her oeuvre show sensitivity to human fragility and an apt understanding of the connection between social and environmental crises.

International Recognition

Inuit art has been slow to hit the radar of international curators and is often segregated from other Indigenous art in Canadian and international museums. Gradually, through the work of artists like Shuvina Ashoona and Annie Pootoogook, whose drawings and prints challenge outdated expectations of what Inuit art should look like, Inuit artists are gaining international attention beyond the spheres of ethnography and anthropology.

Ashoona's collaborations with two Canadian artists highlight this shift in the spaces and discourses in which Inuit art is participating. In 2008, Ashoona collaborated with the painter John Noestheden, who lives and works in Hamilton, Ontario. Their project, *Earth and Sky* (2008), created for Art Basel in Switzerland, is a 50-metre-long banner reproducing a collaborative mixed-media drawing that combines Arctic landscapes and astronomical bodies. Ashoona also has an ongoing collaboration with the painter and sculptor Shary Boyle, from Scarborough, Ontario, who travelled to Kinngait Studios for a three-week residency in 2011.

Ashoona's work has been included in survey exhibitions such as *Oh Canada* at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (2012), curated by Denise Markonish, and Candice Hopkins' *Unsettled Landscapes* as part of the SITElines biennial in New Mexico (2014). Her artwork also features in publications like *Vitamin D2: New Perspectives on Drawing* (Phaidon, 2013). These recent inclusions of Inuit art in contemporary art conversations speak to the increased accessibility of material online and Inuit arts' presence in international exhibitions. Inuit art is constantly changing and adapting, like Inuit culture more broadly, and Ashoona's practice is pivotal to this change.

West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative

When the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative and its art-making arm, today known as Kinngait Studios, was established in 1959, its members hoped it would become a vehicle for establishing locally owned businesses independent of the Hudson's Bay Company and Baffin Trading Company, which had been the area's sole importers and exporters for over five decades. The co-op was the result of an arts and crafts program initiated in Kinngait (Cape Dorset) by the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources (Indian Affairs and Northern Development after 1966). The program was intended to create economic incentive for Nunatsiarmiut (Baffin Island Inuit) to make the transition from subsistence hunting and trapping to a wage economy in settled communities.

Artist James Houston (1921–2005) and his wife, Alma (1926–1997), first travelled to the Arctic in the 1940s, returning to Montréal with carvings. Encouraged by the Canadian Handicrafts Guild and grants from the federal government, the Houstons moved to Kinngait in 1956 to open the first studio, with the intention of developing a thriving arts and craft studio capable of exporting its own work. The Ashoona family is among the co-op's original members, and the subsequent generations of artists who have worked there.

A history of drawing within Inuit art may be found in incised patterns in stone, ivory and bone, however there was no precedent for printmaking in the region, which was introduced by the co-op and has been a staple of its program since its inception. Whereas the occupation of "artist" did not previously exist within the community, today a quarter of Kinngait's labour force works in the arts.

