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Making Art on Top of the World

Near the Arctic Circle, Shuinai Ashoona, a star of the Venice Biennale, and her community of Inuit artists refuse to let isolation stand in their way.

Patricia Leigh Brown – June 01, 2022



Shuinai Ashoona, an Inuit artist and a star of the Venice Biennale, working at Kenojuak Cultural Center and Print Shops, the home of Kinngait Studios. Photo: Brendan George Ko for The New York Times.

KINNGAIT, NUNAVUT, Canada — Just 125 miles shy of the Arctic Circle, in a hamlet etched into an icescape of rock and snow, a tiny figure clutching worn colored pencils sprawls atop a huge drawing, her frame half the size of the paper. Shuinai Ashoona is putting the finishing touches on her latest work, a calendar populated by fellow Inuits, an Indigenous people of Arctic Canada. Some in parkas are communing with a walrus, some are chewing bubble gum.

The artist, whose enchanting and enigmatic drawings recently won special mention at the Venice Biennale, is ensconced in her warm corner of Kinngait Studios, where she works alongside printmakers and lithographers in one of the most influential and challenging art-making spaces in the world: an improbable studio-that-could that has nurtured five generations of acclaimed Inuit artists, many of them Ashoona's relatives.

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A closer look at Ashoona's Calendar. The differing eye colors are typical of her work. Photo: George Ko for the New York Times.

To reach the striking, corrugated blue metal building that houses Kinngait, simply dodge the snowmobiles buzzing with hornet intensity down the street. Try not to think about the day's high temperature — 1 degree Fahrenheit in April. Bushwhack up a steep incline through thigh-high snow. And heed the local advice: "Be careful. There's a polar bear around town."

The geographic isolation of Kinngait (pronounced kin-gite, pop. 1,400) can be difficult to fathom. It is 1,300 miles north of Ottawa, on the tip of Baffin Island, jutting into the frigid Arctic Ocean. The town is part of the vast, largely Inuit territory of Nunavut, which has no roads linking other towns — specks on the tundra hundreds of miles apart. Kinngait is reachable by prop plane flights (at Gulfstream prices) that may or may not show up. Formerly called Cape Dorset, the town reverted three years ago to its traditional name, which means "high mountains" in the Inuktitut language.

That a place of significant challenges, from poverty to suicide, has evolved into a "Florence of the North" is a proud fact of life here. Artists comprise roughly a quarter of the community and largely learn by observation, mentored by elders and family members.

Though the Biennale's air-kissing and clinking glasses of prosecco don't exactly jibe with sealskin mittens and Mukluks, the selection of Ashoona's drawings for "The Milk of Dreams," the Biennale's central exhibition, was a milestone for her and for contemporary art.

She is part of a small group of third and fourth generation artists breaking through overly-romanticized notions of the Arctic that have defined Inuit art in the eyes of Westerners. "Shuvinai is pushing the limits on what Inuit art was assumed to look like," said Nancy Campbell, a Toronto-based curator who has exhibited and written extensively about her. "Her bold, fantastical and

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often inexplicable images bridge the Indigenous and non-Indigenous, the traditional and contemporary, the mythical and historical.”

“And it is capturing the attention of the global art world,” she added, “at a time when locale and nationality have opened viewers up to seeing art practices that exist outside the art world norm.”

Ashoona’s drawings, which the artist describes as “a kingdom with another kingdom under that,” are in the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Canada; Qaumajuq, the new Inuit museum at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian.



Shuvina Ashoona’s “Untitled,” 2021. Her richly detailed artistic universe is rooted in her home terrain. Her richly detailed artistic universe is rooted in her home terrain. Shuvina Ashoona and West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative.

Her richly detailed artistic universe, while rooted in her home terrain, ventures far beyond it, merging the spirit world and the pop culture worlds. In her singular imaginings, mermaids swim up to watch TV news about their planet, ships play tag with giant squid, and humans get up close and personal with a purple narwhal with blue wings.

In a 2021 drawing now in Venice, a bright orange octopus stretches its tentacles in yoga-like fashion and a perky three-headed monster holds hands with an Inuit family. (“They didn’t mention where they were going,” Ashoona said jokingly).

“Surrealism” is a term used to describe her works “because that’s what makes sense in a non-Native world,” said Wanda Nanibush, an Anishabee curator of Indigenous art at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.

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Transformation, in which large rocks could be giants and whales and walrus might sprout human faces, is a theme that looms large in Inuit culture. In a drawing inspired by her memories about skinning a polar bear, shown in an online exhibition at Fort Gansevoort, the New York gallery, Ashoona writes in Inuktitut, her first language, about

*Polar bears coming out of a bat
Polar bears coming out of a duck
Polar bears coming out from an ear
Polar bears coming out from a toe*

One night in Kinngait, the night sky resembled Las Vegas, with the Aurora Borealis streaking neon green. ““The Northern Lights were full of humans and animals,” Ashoona told me the following morning. “Maybe they were having an air school with a rainbow teacher.”

An Unconventional Life ‘On the Land’



Shuvinai Ashoona's "Untitled," 2021. Her richly detailed artistic universe is rooted in her home terrain. Shuvinai Ashoona and West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative

Now 60, Ashoona is the eldest of 14 children, three of whom died at birth. Her unconventional upbringing embraced television and horror films in Kinngait but also the traditional life “on the land.”

During her early 20s, she and her family spent a decade in a remote outpost camp, a still-vivid interlude that informs her work. She placed rock traps in rivers to “grab fish with knitted mitts,”

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she says, and gathered wild mushrooms and blueberries in the mountains. The family ate what are known as “country foods” that are hunted, fished or foraged.

In high school, she became pregnant and gave birth to a daughter, Mary, with whom she is close. At around age 30, Ashoona experienced a physical and mental health crisis, in an era when counseling and other support services were rare. She struggled with painful headaches, whispering to them to “get out from the person you’re in.” Her conversations can sometimes be difficult to track, leaping from chocolate to escalators to the fate of the “Big I-Pod,” as she calls the earth. “I believe what she sees in her mind, she puts on paper,” said Chris Pudlat, Sr., who worked with her at Kinngait Studios.



A photograph of Shuvinai Ashoona's grandmother Pitseolak Ashoona, a noted artist herself, sits in Kinngait studios above strips of whale baleen. Photo: Brendan George Ko for The New York Times

Goota Ashoona, a renowned sculptor now living in Winnipeg, was deeply worried about her beloved older sister and suggested that art might help Shuvinai be independent and support her yen for soda and cigarettes. The structure and camaraderie of the studio have been a safe haven. “The pencil and paper make me think better a lot,” Shuvinai observed in a 2010 short documentary “Ghost Noise.” “It probably helps me, like aspirin.”

Jimmy Manning was the manager of Kinngait when Ashoona arrived in the mid-1990s. The studios were in cottages known as “512”s (512-square-foot government housing). “She started right away moving from regular-size paper to big,” he recalls. “Oh my God, she had some kind of energy that we didn’t have.”

She possessed the gene: Her grandmother Pitseolak Ashoona, was a pivotal figure in the Cape Dorset art world. Her family traveled between seasonal camps by dog-sled and sealskin boat, and lived in snow houses, or igloos. When Pitseolak’s husband, a fur trapper and hunter, died in an epidemic, leaving the family close to starvation, she and her children settled near Cape Dorset, founded as a trading post for the Hudson’s Bay Company.

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Entirely self-taught, Pitseolak providentially connected with James Houston, an artist, writer, government field officer and Indiana-Jones-style swashbuckler. Houston inadvertently “discovered” Inuit art when a man ran up to him with a clenched fist, which Houston assumed would lead to “a punch in the nose,” but revealed an exquisite contemporary carving, he recalled in a book of his exploits from 1948 to 1962, “Confessions of an Igloo Dweller.”



Shuvinai Ashoona, “A teenage magic magical magician and a male holding a drawing,” 2012. Shuvinai Ashoona and West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative

Houston proselytized for Inuit art, bringing it to international museum audiences and founding what would become Kinngait Studios. He hit upon limited-edition prints as a way to translate Inuit motifs into marketable art. Pitseolak was an early star, producing more than 8,000 drawings on the “old ways” she grew up with, making prints in widowhood. “If no one tells me to stop, I shall make them as long as I am well,” she wrote.

Pitseolak’s legacy infuses “Ashoona: Enduring Art Stories,” an exhibition curated by Goota featuring 23 family members, at La Guilde gallery in Montreal through July 3. Among her heirs is the 37-year-old sculptor and filmmaker Koomuatuk (Kuzy) Curley, Shuvinai’s nephew, who lives near Ottawa but returned to complete a 30,000-pound granite homage to his great-grandmother. It will be installed at tiny Kinngait airport, where each arrival is a boisterous family reunion and babies poke out from their mothers’ *amauti*, or parkas, like hatchlings in a nest.

Successes Amid Travails at the Top of the World

Shuvinai’s artistic home is the Kenojuak Cultural Center & Print Shop, named for Kenojuak Ashevak, whose celebrated graphic owls adorned Canadian postage stamps. When the expansive \$10.8 million facility opened in 2018, Kinngait Studio moved there. It may be the only studio in

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the world where artists' wet boots share space with artfully-arranged walrus skulls and whale baleen.

Every stone-cut print, stencil, etching, lithograph or drawing produced here is community-owned. Kinngait is operated by the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative, whose shareholders include most of the town's adults. The Co-op and its all-Inuit board also own the general store, a fuel oil delivery business, a snowmobile and ATV repair shop and profits are distributed each year. They provide a financial buffer for the studio in lean years, fortified by a full-time arts manager.

The Co-op pays artists upon completion of a work — roughly \$300 to \$1,000 for a small sculpture, up to \$3,500 or more for an ambitious, large-scale drawing by Ashoona. They get shipped “down south” to Dorset Fine Arts in Toronto, the studio's wholesale showroom, where gallerists can get up to speed on the latest work and Kinngait's 1,600-strong annual print collection. Ashoona's drawings retail for \$1,500 to \$8,500.

With Pink Floyd on the radio and the smell of varnish in the air, she works alongside accomplished printmakers like Qavavau Manumie, who collaborates with artists on stone-cut prints, an exacting process in which stone is replaced with more malleable slate from pool tables, an idea that he mischievously said originated “at the dump.”

Other stars of the Kinngait Studio include Ningiukulu Teevee, a storyteller and graphic artist known for her striking ravens and owls; Johnny Pootoogook, whose emotionally-charged drawings capture the cycles and storms of life, and the master carver Pudlalik Shaa, who, like his compatriots, works outdoors because drilling stone generates toxic dust. To find carvers in town, just listen for the piercing nails-on-a-blackboard sounds.

At her table, Ashoona's images pour forth “far away from the pillow.” She draws without preliminary sketches, starting at the corners and filling in the details with her eye for vibrant color. It doesn't take long to realize that Ashoona and her creations are one and the same; when I offer her nail polish, she draws little red faces on her thumbs.

At lunchtime one day, she made her way up an icy slope to the town graveyard through the snow drifts, brushing snow off crosses as she tried — without success — to locate the resting places of the artists in her family, including her father, Kiugak, an internationally known carver, and her artist mother, Sorroseleetu.

Then there was her first cousin, Annie Pootoogook, whom Ashoona calls “my number one.” A courageous documentarian, she captured the complexities of modern Inuit life, be it the frozen food section at the Co-op or a couple watching pornography in bed. Her harrowing autobiographical portrayals of domestic violence and alcoholism shattered the silence on taboo subjects.

Pootoogook's early acclaim — a solo exhibition in Toronto, the \$50,000 Sobey Prize for emerging artists, being the first Inuit artist at Documenta in Germany — was heady stuff for a young artist

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from an Arctic community and a culture shock. Seeking new horizons, she left Kinngait for Montreal and then Ottawa, where alcoholism and abusive relationships stalked her. She bounced between shelters and the street, selling drawings for beer money. At age 47, Pootoogook's body was found in the Rideau River in Ottawa. A police investigation found no evidence of foul play.

"Annie is the only person who knows how that happened," said Joemie Tapaungai, the assistant studio manager at Kinngait.

Other artists spoke to me of their battles with alcoholism and a son's suicide. One talked about his two years in federal prison for alcohol-related violence. Still another placed her children in foster care and fled an abusive husband.

Such travails unfold within the context of a broader historical trauma — the forced relocations of many Indigenous people beginning in the early 1900s by the government and religious missionaries. Segregated in settlements like Kinngait, the Inuit were separated from nomadic traditions, making them dependent on a cash economy. The coerced placement and abuse of Indigenous children in Canada's residential schools was the subject of Pope Francis's recent reconciliation discussions with Inuit, Métis and First Nation delegations. His apology came a year after hundreds of children's remains were found on the grounds of Catholic schools.

The reverberations of forced assimilation persist in suicide rates for Inuit that are nine times higher than the non-Indigenous rate; in stubborn poverty (according to census data, Nunavut Inuit median income is less than a quarter of that of non-Aboriginal people who live there), in high rates of tuberculosis, and in severely overcrowded housing that heightens the potential for stress and violence. The nearest major medical center is 1,300 miles away. The cost of basic staples has made food insecurity rampant; as a result, hunting is still prized. ("What do you call a vegetarian in Nunavut?" Tapaungai quipped. "A bad hunter.")

Art can be a countervailing force. The ancestral knowledge and spiritual power embedded in Inuit art survives — it is a mark of "cultural resilience," said the Inuk art historian Heather Igloliorte.

"It's not just an economic driver," said Jesse Mike, director of social and cultural development for Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., which represents 30,000 Inuit. "It helps us stay grounded to our stories and traditions and other things we miss in our lives."

That resilience thrives in textile art, films, ceramics, and, recently, an all-Inuit television network. Artists like 27-year-old Neevee Jaw, Kinngait Studio's first female printer, are forging new ground while steeping themselves in their elders' practices, like throat singing, a deep guttural chanting. Ashoona stops by her table to share chocolate or gum.

On a little slip of paper Ashoona wrote: "Venice/Venus." She lives with two sisters, going back and forth, and is the family breadwinner, "helping the ones around me with phone bills and fruit and couches and bedsheets and everything about the house," she said. She does not have a romantic partner. "Maybe I'm in love with everybody," she said wryly.

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As I step onto the floe edge where waves of snow and uplifts of ice meet the open sea, the artist's description of her seasonal landscape lingers. "The whole month was white, like polar bears dancing," she said. "Adam and Evie created them for sure."