

# FORT GANSEVOORT



## Shuinai Ashoona explores new forms in Vancouver at Granville gallery residency

By Kate Taylor - September 22, 2022



Children looking into classroom by artist Shuinai Ashoona. Ashoona has been in Vancouver for a month, working at the New Leaf Editions print studio on Granville Island.

When visitors dropped by a Vancouver print studio to see Kinngait artist Shuinai Ashoona this week she was too busy drawing to chat. Instead, her recent efforts, dangling from a fishing line suspended above her head, spoke for her. A series of three-dimensional paper forms, hexagons, double pyramids and even a four-armed star, these represent a new direction in her work as she covers the shapes with her mysterious drawings of the planet, people and fantastical beasts.

Ashoona, whose art received special mention at the Venice Biennale last spring, has been in Vancouver for a month, working at the New Leaf Editions print studio on Granville Island, and will return to Nunavut this week.

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Several years ago, at the studio in Kinngait (as Cape Dorset was renamed in 2020), she was introduced to two-dimensional paper templates for geometric shapes. At this Vancouver residency, she figured out how to turn them into workable three-dimensional sculptures. Master printer Peter Braune of New Leaf has fashioned foam-core backing on to which the drawings can be glued, so that the shapes, once as fragile as paper lanterns, are now light but solid.

“This is an out-in-left-field project,” Braune said, as he explained how he and assistant Sarah Madgin, professional technicians more used to pulling prints than making models, found solutions with paper and glue.

To the untrained eye, the paper templates themselves look mysterious: How do all these flat shapes fold together to become anything at all? However, Ashoona clearly sees the finished product as she draws: On one, the tail of a yellow seal flows around a corner that would have been two detached surfaces on the template.

Now, Ashoona’s Vancouver dealer, Robert Kardosh of the Marion Scott Gallery, just has to figure out how to pack the new art she has created: He plans to show it at the Art Toronto fair in October, if he can ship it across the country in time.

Meanwhile, at his gallery in South Granville, he has been showing a selection of Ashoona’s drawings, works on paper – all flat in this instance – that were exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami last year in the artist’s first U.S. museum show, but which had not been seen in Canada. Some date back as far as the mid-2000s, but most are recent and concentrate on interior scenes and portraits, in contrast to the large fantastical encounters that Ashoona showed at Toronto’s Power Plant in 2019.

Not that these works lack iconographic power. The centrepiece is a new work, a large, horizontal drawing of four impish kids pressing their noses against the glass of an empty classroom. In the background a banner declares Merry Christmas, suggesting the children are delighting in a break from school. Inside the classroom, which is where the viewer is situated, there is the standard alphabet chart but Ashoona has marked Inuktitut syllabics in pen over top.

Perhaps the children are rebelling against the imposition of a foreign language but, as the artist increasingly incorporates text into her work, she can also take a generous approach on that issue. In tiny letters around the rim of a bowl in an image of a woman kneading bread, the artist has inscribed various syllabics, their romanizations and then the English words: “MY BAKER, A BAKER, Those who bake bannock or cookies ...”

In the back room at the gallery, there is also one of Ashoona’s unique updates to the theme of metamorphosis that has appeared so often in Inuit art, where human and animal mix. Here, three figures in parkas sit outside a tent cradling in their laps – whether to eat or to cherish is unclear – grotesque creatures that are part seal, part octopus, part whale.

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In this show, there are but a handful of the images of our blue and green earth that Ashoona renders so lovingly, but one is particularly telling. It features black-and-white illustrations of plants and animals – an elephant, a pineapple, a narwhal – with lines attaching them to their respective continents. It might be a geography project except that the animal at the top, like the remarkable artist herself, is a unicorn.

*Inside Out: Shuvinai Ashoona continues at the Marion Scott Gallery in Vancouver to Oct. 8.*