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FRIEZE

Shuinai Ashoona's Visions of Inuit History and Resilience

An exhibition in London features intricate drawings that blend daily life with traditional animism and shape-shifting beings

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Shuinai Ashoona, Untitled (MY GG's CAMP) (detail), 2022, coloured pencil and ink, 1.3 x 1.2 m. Courtesy: the artist and The Perimeter, London, and Fefeley Fine Arts

Crawling with tentacled creatures, flipper-footed beasts and beaked hybrids, Shuinai Ashoona's colourful pencil drawings are playful and fantastical depictions of Inuit life in the Canadian Arctic. *My GG's Camp* (2022) – the first work of her solo show, 'When I Draw', at The Perimeter – portrays a family travelling over the ice on a dog sled, an imagined scene drawn from the nomadic past of the Inuit people of Kinngait, where Ashoona lives and works. Consisting of just over a thousand residents, Kinngait sits in the northernmost territory of Nunavut. It is home to Canada's longest-running print studio, operated by the Inuit-owned West Baffin Cooperative since its formation in 1959. The remote settlement, previously known as Cape Dorset, is considered the most artistic community in Canada and the setting for Ashoona's uncanny compositions.

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Shuinai Ashoona, *Untitled*, 2012, coloured pencil and ink. Courtesy: the artist and The Perimeter, London, and Fort Gansevoort, New York

The people and creatures that inhabit these large-scale works, each uniquely strange with their webbed fingers and lizard tongues, are hardly ever alone in the frozen landscape. As they gather to hunt, dance and pass the time, their striking features stand out against the Arctic tundra and the pale walls of their homes. In *Drawing Like the Elephant* (2023), Ashoona captures the ubiquitous presence of artmaking across the community as a fanged woman is joined by a human-sized green lizard, a boy with bird feet and another who appears to be part walrus, all proudly showcasing their own artworks on paper. An untitled piece from 2021, which received a special mention at the 59th Venice Biennale, portrays two clothed chimeric creatures in curious states of unease and fascination. Ashoona incorporates notions from traditional Inuit animism within her dreamlike scenes of shape-shifting beings, capturing the interconnectedness of people, their surroundings and the other living creatures there found.

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Lucy Qinnuayuak, Eegvudluk Pootoogook, *Large Bear*, carved printing stone, c. 1961. Courtesy: the artist and Tate Collection

Historically, the Inuit were semi-nomadic fishermen, hunters and gatherers that migrated from camp to camp in response to the seasons. This traditional way of life was severely disrupted by colonial policies, however, which aimed to culturally assimilate and forcefully relocate Inuit communities. Though these violent measures alienated younger generations from some of the practices of their ancestors, the Inuit still managed to preserve many traditions into modern life. Several of Ashoona's drawings feature Inuit objects such as amauti parkas, which are sewn with a pouch in the hood where mothers keep their babies warm, and *qulliq* stones, triangular oil lamps originally used to keep igloos and tents warm. People are depicted hunting seals and whales, and young men pose with T-shirts emblazoned with text in Inuktitut, an Indigenous language that is still spoken by more than 50 percent of Inuit peoples in the Arctic. Artmaking itself is also an important native practice – one that long predated its commercialization in the 1950s, when artist James Houston introduced printmaking techniques to the people of Kinngait after having successfully spread traditional Inuit carved sculpture to art markets in Canada and abroad.

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Shuinai Ashoona, *Untitled*, 2016, coloured pencil and ink. Courtesy: the artist and The Perimeter, London, and Fort Gansevoort, New York

In addition to Ashoona's works, 'While I Draw' expands on Kinngait's prolific artistic legacy. Lucy Qinnuayuak's lithograph print *Large Bear* (1961), and its accompanying printing stone carved by Eegyvudluk Pootoogook, are here displayed to the public for the first time. Visitors can also watch *Eskimo Artist: Kenojuak* (1964), John Feeney's BAFTA award-winning short film on Kenojuak Ashevak, celebrated as the first woman to work with printmaking at the co-operative. The exhibition narrates how Inuit art developed into Kinngait's primary economic activity, with a quarter of its workers today employed in the field. Meanwhile, Ashoona's fluid and elaborate drawings embody the expansive approach to cultural production in Nunavut, intricately weaving contemporary scenes of daily life with dynamic visions of Inuit history and resilience.

Shuinai Ashoona's 'When I Draw' is at [The Perimeter](#), London, until April 26