

FORT GANSEVOORT



Shuvinai Ashoona

Interview by Claudia Steinberg



Portrait courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York

The Inuk artist Shuvinai Ashoona grew up in a matriarchal group of hunters and artists based in Kinngait, Canada, who lived most of the year in an outpost camp near the Arctic Circle. Strapped to a sled during their childhood travels, she and her sisters would stare into the vast sky. Three decades later, Shuvinai began to recreate that icy heaven in coloured pencil on vast sheets of paper, populating them with fantastical, delicately-drawn creatures, sometimes looking down at the toy-like pre-fab houses of her town from high above – like many people of the Far North, she knows the land well enough to envision it accurately from a bird’s-eye view. Her exuberant surrealism

FORT GANSEVOORT

transcends folklore, and she has been able to create her infinitely detailed and enormous drawings of her natural – as well as man-made – environment thanks to a communal art workshop. Kinngait Studios, founded 63 years ago, is one of the most accomplished art-making facilities in the world. A town so remote that travellers from the south reach it only after journeying for days by small plane, Kinngait has the highest per-capita percentage of artists in the entire world – a full quarter of the population makes a living by selling art. As Canada’s representative at the 2022 Venice Biennale, Shuvinai Ashoona is now the best-known member of that far-flung collective.

CLAUDIA STEINBERG You were always attracted to paper more than to the carving or sculpting techniques traditional to your culture.

SHUVINAI ASHOONA Yes, I love drawing and not the kind of work that we used to do – only a few of us were working on paper at home. The others were doing carvings for which they had to go on expeditions by boat to find soapstone, breaking it off with a crowbar or an axe. All summer boats would bring big pieces of soapstone with them, going back and forth.

CS When working on paper, the point of departure is so much more abstract – if you have a piece of wood or stone, it already has a shape or a weight or a physicality that could suggest what to do with it. But paper is pure, white emptiness – perhaps like the landscape around you, for a large part of the year. What prompted you to become the first among the workshop members to make large pieces of paper your medium of choice when most Inuit artists would use domestic-sized sheets, if at all?

SA I went to visit my sister Goota and she had a pile of sheets of paper in the living room. She gave me a bunch of them and brought me to see Jimmy who runs the workshop in Kinngait. It was kind of hard to say no because my sister encouraged me so strongly to go down there: “You might get something out of it,” she said, pushing me down the path to get the paper and draw – “Hey, you can make some money and survive on your own.” I was around 33 at the time, and I was just walking around town – I had nothing else to do.

CS Your sister was right, you did get something out of it. It seems that you enjoy the freedom of the wide empty plane of paper, covering it with family members that you have transformed into animals and other fantastical creatures, as well as with landscapes that seem to speak of a love for every one of its minute elements.

SA We used to go caribou hunting once in a while. We don’t do that anymore but I remember the animals so well – the walrus, the bears. Once a bear was actually chewing on my parka. I drew that scene but with a young boy instead of me.

CS You say that once you start drawing, you remember things. What triggers the memories? Pictures of you at the studio in Kinngait show you lying on the paper on your belly, in the midst of the landscape, the animals, and the people you have drawn. You are very close to your creations as well as to the paper: it’s a very intimate relationship to the material.

FORT GANSEVOORT

SA I started to like drawing because the paper seemed to say, "Relax!" It helps me more than aspirin when the paper tells me that I have the whole day to draw. I walk around the paper, too, but it all flows a little bit more easily when I'm on top.

CS Because you place yourself in the middle of your art and it supports you, like a feedback loop?

SA When I lie on my belly I feel so much closer to the images – I just capture them. It's like the air is made into reality. They tell me whether they want to be created.



© Shuinai Ashoona. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York

CS You draw nature with very delicate, almost tender lines, yet you live in a very harsh landscape. With your careful tracings, you seem to be paying attention to every single little pebble – everything is seen and everything is recorded. Can you talk about your feelings towards these elements of your surroundings that you turn into such a seductive world?

FORT GANSEVOORT

SA There are lots of things out there that I like to nibble – we used to pick blueberries, going back and forth for more. We also used to pick blackberries. We used to find them easily, but not this year.

CS There are still countless things for you to collect with your pencil, in your delicate way – all those pebbles, thousands upon thousands, that you draw so patiently.

SA That is comforting, for sure. It is something to really think about: that there's yet another perfect work for us to make.

CS You have lived in the same place all your life, and in recent years it has begun to change rapidly – you mentioned, for example, that a nearby river that you used to draw has become much smaller. Despite these disheartening changes, do you continue to explore the landscape, recording its changes?

SA Yes, but it is also fun to explore what younger artists are doing.

CS Artists who have grown up quite differently from you, and in a rapidly changing environment? That seaweed you used to collect is changing colour from phosphorescent green to red is just one small indicator of that change.

SA Yes, it's different and it seems that the older children will have to save the younger ones. Maybe they are still having fun, although it will all be harder, and maybe a little bit scary. But probably still fun, fun, fun!

CS Fun is a word you mention often, and your polar bear with the red handbag must be having quite a bit of fun, as is the walrus, tumbling about. Then there is the iPod as an instrument of fun: it seems to play a big role in your imagination. You have drawn all kinds of animals tied to this contemporary device, like bears sitting in people's laps wearing headphones. You even called Earth "the big iPod" – what do you mean by that?

SA The way a person has described to me the movies they have seen on their iPod. There is a whole other world in there, maybe even a real one that can be totally new for each and every one who sees it.

CS Perhaps it's similar to the globes that you so often depict. A small cluster of planets is emerging between the legs of the "Happy Mother," giving birth to new worlds; globes crowding a narrow street in Kinngait; long strings reminiscent of molecular chains or whole clusters of globes that contain a multitude of other globes – worlds within worlds?

SA Yes, something like that.

CS The people in your region were very aware that the horizon line had changed – you could see that alteration because you know its curve so well. The scientists from the South originally said that it could not be. Do you observe other changes that scientists may not have?

SA Maybe I'm not any better than the scientists. I don't think I know scientists at all – I only know my teachers from way back in school. I know which way everything is going, but not like a scientist.

CS That's exactly the point. You don't know climate like a scientist but you know it from being there – from observation, from seeing things with your own eyes and through the lens of memory. The curator of your recent

FORT GANSEVOORT

exhibition in New York talked about your imaginary worlds and your imaginary universe – who are the most important people and animals and plants that make up your universe?

SA Making my universe – maybe there's another, much bigger scheme beyond what we talk about. People used to know more than us – and they're still here, too. ●