

FORT GANSEVOORT



Shuvinai Ashoona

Looking Out, Looking In

Fort Gansevoort, 5 Ninth Avenue, New York, NY

Opening: Tuesday, September 19, 2023, 6-8 PM

On View: September 20, 2023 – November 4, 2023

New York...Beginning September 19, 2023, Fort Gansevoort will present *Looking Out, Looking In*, the first New York solo exhibition by contemporary Inuk artist Shuvinai Ashoona. Hailing from the Canadian Arctic, Ashoona lives and works in Kinngait (formerly Cape Dorset), an Inuit hamlet at the southern tip of Baffin Island in the territory of Nunavut. Born in 1961, she is the youngest generation of a dynasty of celebrated female artists – her grandmother Pitseolak Ashoona, her mother Sorosilutu Ashoona, and her cousin, the late Annie Pootoogook – from whom she learned her craft.

Ashoona began drawing detailed monochromatic landscapes in 1993, eventually transitioning to colorful compositions replete with her distinct iconography comprising fantastical elements mingled with depictions of contemporary Inuit life, historical events, and the northern landscape.

Ashoona works primarily in pen, ink, and colored pencil, constantly honing her draftsmanship through a regimented studio practice at Kinngait Studios, where she draws nearly every day. Much of her artwork references Inuit mythology and popular culture, which she merges with imagery sourced from her surroundings and her imagination to produce otherworldly compositions that have magnetized international attention. Earlier this year, Ashoona's work was featured in the group exhibition *Once a Myth, Becoming Real*, at the 14th Gwangju Biennale in the Republic of Korea. The installation at LeeKangHa Art Museum was the first major exhibition of Inuit art in the country. In 2022, her work was featured in the 59th Venice Biennale exhibition *The Milk of Dreams*, curated by Cecilia Alemani.

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Exhibition details

In the series of new drawings at Fort Gansevoort, Ashoona expresses her personal experience of the sublime. By recording the natural world in meticulous detail, her works capture the beauty, terror, and vastness of the landscape in which she lives—an immensity rivaled only by her own sprawling imagination. In Ashoona's drawn universe, the environment is at times harsh and antagonistic; at other times it becomes a portal through which the mind can wander. Complementing these works are drawings that depict intimate views of daily life and artistic production in Kinngait inflected with elements of the fantastical. With a playful touch, Ashoona explores human psychology through her subjects' physical interactions and creative labor.

Measuring eight feet long, *Moving with our campsites (traditional movers)* (2023) depicts a scene of men, women and children dressed in traditional animal skin Inuit clothing, rowing boats and carrying large packages through the Arctic landscape. The drawing's panoramic format suggests a cinematic style of storytelling, while its torqued and elevated perspective alludes to the omnipotence of a creator. Ashoona's composition appears to be one remembered or invented by the artist, rather than based on direct observation. The drawing manifests as a personal encyclopedia of everyday visual wonders and distinctive cultural references. For example, in a boat on the far-right edge of the drawing, a seated woman is seen from behind, carrying her child in the pouch of an *amauti* parka, a customary Inuit clothing design that allows a mother to move her baby from her back to her front for breastfeeding while protecting the child from the elements. Such imagery conveys the unique habitual experience of confronting the harsh elements of sea and ice. The overall composition of this monumental work resonates as a celebration of human endurance. And while Ashoona's imagery of nomadic existence conjures and celebrates an indigenous lifestyle that has endured for generations, she is conscious of the systems of modern correspondence, here signaled by her inclusion of the postal code signage on the blue sail. At its most literal, Ashoona's scene addresses visceral and temporal human interactions with the natural world. But in a less literal reading, this scene describes the phenomenon of transition—from danger to safety, and from past to present. Thus, Ashoona documents persisting traditional cultural practices while examining the nature of contemporary indigeneity. Her imagery invites contemplation of the relationships between Inuit peoples and their personal experiences of "homeland"—a term often difficult to define and filled with multiple meanings.

In the large, vertically oriented drawing *Sliding down* (2023), two groups of figures are separated by a vast expanse of blue that seamlessly transitions from sea to sky. The physical distance between Ashoona's subjects here suggests a metaphorical division between the terrestrial and celestial realms. Not bound to the land, the figures at the top of the drawing appear otherworldly. A female figure in a pink *amauti* emerges from a cluster of planets while a male figure in a brown animal skin *amauti* appears suspended in the sky. They wave to figures below, who wave back from nearly abstracted patches of snow—an exchange of gestures that perhaps signals the unification of traditional and contemporary Inuit culture. The ambiguity of Ashoona's image welcomes the act of looking into the blue void without the limits of predetermined meaning.

Another highlight of the exhibition is a colorful, monumental work teeming with images-within-images. Titled, *Polar bear sketching people* (2023), it brings together fantastical creatures from Ashoona's imagination with local Kinngait artists, all presenting drawings of their own creation. Here, the boundaries between subjects and creators, interior and exterior, imagined and tangible realities are fluid. Bears, rabbits, and creatures of the artist's invention inhabit the same physical space as humans and simultaneously appear as the subjects of the drawings being presented. While some of Ashoona's figures seem to retreat inwards, the large eyes of others confront the viewer with haunting directness. By framing her drawings-within-drawings, Ashoona leads the viewer deeper and deeper into multiple layers of artifice. In this meta-artistic masterpiece, windows, door frames, and sheets of paper function as portals to other dimensions, reminding us of the power of art to transport.

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About the Artist

Shuvinai Ashoona was born in 1961 in Kinngait, Canada (formerly Cape Dorset).

In 2022, Fort Gansevoort presented its first exhibition with Ashoona—an online exhibition of drawings organized in collaboration with fellow contemporary Canadian artist Marcel Dzama. From 2021-2022 solo exhibitions of Ashoona's work were presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami (*Shuvinai Ashoona Drawing*) and at the Art Gallery of Ontario (*Shuvinai Ashoona: Beyond the Visible*). The 2019 survey exhibition *Shuvinai Ashoona: Mapping Worlds*, organized by the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto, traveled to venues across Canada. A comprehensive scholarly catalog, translated into the artist's native Inuktitut, was published in conjunction with the exhibition.

Ashoona's work is included in museum collections throughout Canada including Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario; Canadian Museum of History, Gatineau, Quebec; Inuit Art Center, Indian and Northern Affairs, Ottawa, Ontario; The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario; and the Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba. In the United States, Ashoona's work is represented in the permanent collections of Denos Museum Center, Northwestern Michigan College, Traverse City, MI; Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI; Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK; Fidelity Investments Corporate Art Collection, Boston, MA; National Museum of the American Indian, New York, NY; Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA; and Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO. Her work has been featured in solo exhibitions including *Shuvinai Ashoona: Drawings*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, FL; *Shuvinai Ashoona: Beyond the Visible*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada; *Shuvinai Ashoona: Mapping Worlds*, a touring exhibition organized by the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, Canada. Her work has been included in group exhibitions including *Once a Myth, Becoming Real*, 14th Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, Republic of Korea, *The Milk of Dreams*, 59th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, and *Three Women, Three Generations: Drawings by Pitseolak Ashoona, Napatchie Pootoogook and Shuvinai Ashoona* at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario, Canada.

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Caption and courtesy information:

Shuvinai Ashoona

Moving with our campsites (traditional movers)

2023

Colored pencil and ink on paper

50.25 x 96 inches

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