

Surreal: Inuit Game Changer

MARION SCOTT GALLERY/KARDOSH PROJECTS
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by HADANI DITMARS



Kavavaow Mannomee *Untitled (Global Warming)* 2010

You walk out of “Surreal: Eight Artists in the Fantastical Tradition” not only with a different perception of what constitutes “Inuit art,” but also with a changed worldview.

After a few hours of absorbing the work, familiar urban landscapes shape-shift and shamanic visions and arctic imagery still swirl around you.

The fusion of the animal and the human, and the intimate connection between man and his environment, stay with you long after the viewing of the 28 works—mainly drawings, but also including prints and sculptures. In the wake of the Vancouver Art Gallery’s recent exhibition on surrealism, “The Colour of My Dreams,” it is intriguing to take in an Inuit alternative. But it is in the link between the visible and the invisible worlds, rather than in any conscious incorporation of Western styles, that this work is “surreal.”

More than anything, what impresses about this Robert Kardosh–curated show, beyond challenging touristic/ethnographic stereotypes of “Inuit art,” is how it pushes the limits of drawing, breathing new life into the medium.

While there are overarching themes in common—like environmental issues and the collision of “North” and “South”—each artist has a distinctive style.

Many of the artists in the show come out of the Cape Dorset graphic tradition—a movement shaped by the West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative’s Kinngait Studios—but an exception is Nick Sikkuark. From Kugaaruk in the high Arctic, Sikkuark, who resumed drawing in 2003 after 30 years as a sculptor, infuses his highly narrative work with the colours of the northern lights. His drawings read like Arctic Persian miniatures and are marked by a kind of magic realism, with disembodied heads of shamans and animal/human transformations bridging the worlds of the seen and unseen.

Cape Dorset artist Kavavaow Mannomee’s work is whimsical and often abstract, playing with shapes and forms that suggest slightly psychedelic zygotes and cells, as well as human figures fused with



Nick Sikkuark *Untitled* 2005

birds. Spanning scales from the cellular to the monumental, his 2010 work *Untitled (Global Warming)* features an Inuit woman and child outside an igloo, staring at an island of winged humans, seals and polar bears in a sea of melting ice.

The show includes noteworthy works by Irene Avaalaaqiaq and fine older prints by the late Jessie Oonark—whose images fuse human and animal forms—as well as younger artists like Abraham Iksiraq, whose *Dark Call, Light Path* stonecut print of a snake invokes a possibly missionary-inspired yet Inuktitut-lettered ode to good and evil. Lone sculptor Jamasie Pitseolak’s stone carvings, of a high-heeled shoe and an Elizabethan-style pistol with muskox head for a handle, provoke with their contrast between material and object.



Jamasie Pitseolak *Muskox Pistol* 2011

But it's Shuvina Ashoona who is the star of the show. Her visceral and often phantasmagorical drawings are powerful odes to the spirit of place and the collision of worlds that mark modern Inuit life. Playing with different scales—monumental and intimate perspectives, some aerial, some close-up—and different imagery, like traditional clamshells met by airplanes and skyscrapers, her work contains a vitality and relevance that bodes well for the future of contemporary Inuit art.

In one untitled 2010 drawing by Ashoona, a woman in a parka, pregnant with the world, embraces a globe filled with modern images of the North. Eyes hover in the sky around them, offering both witness and doors of perception to the birth of something new.



Shuvina Ashoona *Untitled* 2010

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