

Kananginak Pootoogook: Such a long journey

MARION SCOTT GALLERY/KARDOSH PROJECTS
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by ROBIN LAURENCE



Kananginak Pootoogook *Untitled* 2009 Courtesy Marion Scott Gallery | Kardosh Projects

Kananginak Pootoogook, who died in 2010, is commemorated in this fine exhibition of drawings at Marion Scott Gallery. The work on view, executed in ink and coloured pencil on paper, serves as a sequel to a retrospective of the artist that the gallery mounted two years ago as a complement to Vancouver's Cultural Olympiad. A pioneer Cape Dorset printmaker (he trained with James Houston in the late 1950s) and member of the highly creative Pootoogook clan, Kananginak pursued a graphic style and subject matter that the Scott Gallery's Robert Kardosh describes in conversation as "narrative realism." This is a genre, Kardosh says, quite distinct from the "fantastical/spiritual" aspect of modern Inuit art. From early in his career, Kananginak was identified with detailed images of birds, and always evinced a strong feeling for the wild creatures whose lives were deeply intertwined with Inuit culture and survival. In recent years, however, he was also a keen observer of his community's social interactions and daily tasks, along with the tools and equipment that served them. He became an accomplished self-portraitist, too.

Having lived it, Kananginak was an astute chronicler of a culture in transition. Born in 1935, he spent his childhood on the land, based with his family in a small hunting camp on the south coast of Baffin Island. It was not until 1957 that he settled in Cape Dorset with his parents, wife and first child. Soon thereafter, Kardosh recounts, Kananginak was recruited by James Houston to participate in establishing "the North's first printmaking operation." As Kardosh describes it, he translated the drawings of older Inuit artists into stonecuts before developing his own interest in drawing.

Kananginak's images range from sealskin boots to all-terrain vehicles, and from seal oil lamps to kerosene tanks, all delivered in what could be described as a folk realist style, one that gives equal weight to every form and detail, although often with characterful distortions of scale. His graphic art manifests an ethnographic fondness for visual inventories of material objects, each of his drawings inscribed by hand in Inuktitut syllabics with explanations such as "What we use for hunting nowadays in the North", "Men's hunting gear", and "Stone-cutting tools in 1959." Lovingly detailed, the hunting equipment includes boats and kayaks, paddles and outboard motors, gasoline containers, fishing rods and nylon tents. It also includes snowmobiles and wooden sleds, rifles and spears, handsaws, biscuit boxes, kettles and thermoses. The stone-cutting tools comprise files and chisels, hammers and axes, gloves and protective glasses, all arranged alongside a representation of a piece of green stone with the image of a walrus and its reflection carved into it.



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This image-within-an-image speaks to the "traditional" subject matter originally associated with Inuit art, subject matter that Kananginak has continued to produce, quite naturally and without any apparent self-consciousness. Among the animals represented in this exhibition are walrus, murre, snowy owls, polar bears and caribou. A highly abstracted composition of what seem to be eider duck pelts and feet is inscribed, "Birds are not just birds, they're beautiful and help others look nice." The split imagery and

repetition combine to create an almost kaleidoscopic effect, while also being highly suggestive of the design motifs that occur almost archetypally in other hunting cultures as a result of skinning animals, preserving their pelts, and employing them in the making of both utilitarian and ceremonial clothing.



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The closely observed images of tools and equipment, tents, sleds and Ski-Doos may also be integrated into detailed scenes of hunting and fishing. Here, the social dynamic is as important as the elements of material culture: the co-operation and conviviality that Kananginak conveys in his drawings reveal something of both his culture and his character, and they suggest the warm regard with which he was held within his community and beyond. One untitled drawing, inscribed "When the tide went down, they did some clam digging. After, they stopped for tea and a snack," depicts two people in hooded jackets, leaning towards each other, talking animatedly and drinking tea out of mugs. A thermos, bucket of clams and a small fish chopped into bite-sized pieces are set out around them. One of the figures holds a metal ulu (a round-bladed scraper traditionally used by Inuit women), and together with the Yamaha all-terrain vehicle parked in the background, it suggests the hybrid state of contemporary Inuit culture. That the baseball-hat-wearing man facing the picture plane is Kananginak himself reinforces our understanding of the metaphysical distance he travelled during his long, productive lifetime.



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