VISUAL ART

Works record a culture in transition

Inuit artist Kananginak Pootoogook blazed a trail in depictions of the North

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN

VANCOUVER SUN

Through to 2012, the Marion Scott Gallery is holding a solo exhibition of the drawings of Kananginak Pootoogook, one of the leading Inuit artists of the past 50 years.

Born in Cape Dorset, Pootoogook spent much of his childhood in a small hunting camp on the south coast of Baffin Island. Raised as a hunter and trapper, he lived in a world where Inuktitut was his first language. His life changed when his father's poor health meant a return to the growing settlement in Cape Dorset.

Within a short time, he met James Houston, the man who played an instrumental role in developing the existing carving skills of the Inuit and packaging them in the early 1950s for the market economy. In 1957, Pootoogook and a handful of other young artists were the first ones hired in Houston's new artmaking venture to turn drawings by older artists into limited-edition stonecut prints.

During the Winter Olympics, Marion Scott Gallery brought Pootoogook to Vancouver for a solo exhibition. He continued drawing after returning to the north but by the spring of that year, he was in hospital in Ottawa. He died in November 2010.

Robert Kardosh, gallery curator and director, said Pootoogook's exhibition was one of the high points in the gallery's history.

"At the evening's end, he surprised us all by singing a folk tune in Inuktitut," Kardosh recalled. "It brought the room to tears."

The memorial exhibition at Marion Scott Gallery is composed of 27 drawings made by Pootoogook over the past five years, including several in the last year of his life.

During his career as an artist, Pootoogook was known for a unique drawing style that combined realism with a simpler, less detailed approach than other Inuit artists, according to Kardosh. Compared to his colleagues, Pootoogook was less interested in spiritual themes; instead, he created such naturalistic images of various species — especially of birds — that he was nicknamed the Audubon of the north.

Later in life, his work changed. He still created images of wildlife

Drawing inscribed 'Murres at their island laying eggs' is one of 27 pieces by the late Inuit artist Kananginak Pootoogook in a memorial exhibition at Marion Scott Gallery.

and the landscape — often doing so from unusual angles or perspectives — but he started recording the social and cultural changes that had taken place and are still occurring in the north.

"I think they're the most important part of his work," Kardosh said in an interview at the gallery. "He produced this fantastic portrait of a culture in transition."

One drawing in the exhibition that illustrates that change shows a young man jumping onto a metal oil drum. In a classic example of the artist's skill at foreshortening, the figure's legs are drawn up underneath him to create a compact, coiled figure above an inert, solid shape in orange. Between the figure's feet and the drum is nothing but the white of the paper. But it isn't empty. It's full of anticipation and of the contact that never happens.

Knowing that the drawing is a self-portrait adds another level of meaning. It's easy to see the figure as a metaphor for Pootoogook's life as an artist: He drew close to the modern world but never fully embraced it.
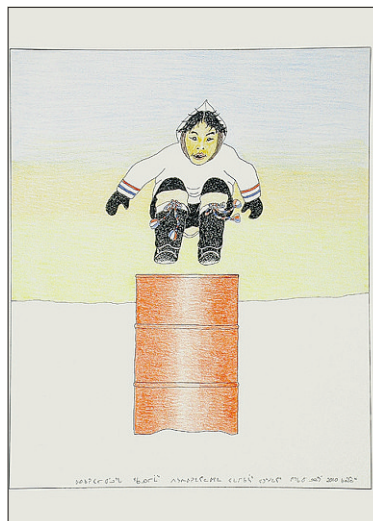
Drawing by Kananginak Pootoogook inscribed 'In my younger years, I would try anything. Here I am jumping to the top of a 45-gallon drum.'

Running along the bottom edge of all the drawings in the exhibitions is text in syllabics, the angular alphabet developed for written Inuktitut. The text along the drawing of the man jumping says:

"In my younger years, I would try anything. Here I am jumping to the top of a 45-gallon drum."

When I first saw the syllabic writing, it struck me as foreign — as something not Canadian. But of course that's a colonial idea. Syllabics as a writing system may have been developed after Europeans arrived, but the language spoken by Pootoogook is an authentic, indigenous language of the north that predates English. The syllabics confronted me with something about Canada: as a fellow Canadian, Pootoogook came from a background and culture very, very different from most other Canadians.

Pootoogook's use of language isn't assertive or aggressive in any way. The syllabic marks are written softly, like they could easily be erased. It's done more as a matter-of-fact descriptive statement about the work and what it represents of the artist's life.

That's the case with several other drawings that appropriate scientific systems of classification to describe the contemporary Inuit way of life. "Men's hunting gear" is a collection of the equipment

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used by men to hunt, ranging from a Ski-Doo and boots to a box of Red Rose tea and a lantern. All the pieces are arranged like a mental map or checklist of what's needed to hunt.

The exhibition includes several more traditional images of the landscape and wildlife of the north. One with the inscription "Murres at their island laying eggs" shows dozens and dozens of black and white murres against the snow. The scores of birds are drawn upright, leaning to the right, and the left, their beaks at various angles on several undulating horizontal lines like ridges in a landscape. Rather than being represented as an anonymous grouping of identical birds, each one is unique. In the foreground, in a hopeful gesture to the future and the next generation, is a murre cradling an egg between its legs.

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At a glance

KANANGINAK POOTOOGOOK: MEMORIAL EXHIBITION

Where: Marion Scott Gallery, 2423 Granville St.

When: The exhibition continues to Jan. 28. The gallery is open Tuesday to Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. For its winter break, the gallery will close at 3 p.m. Dec. 24 and reopen Tuesday, Jan. 3.