

Interior complexity at odds with Cape Dorset tradition

ART | Drawings are 'psychologically charged'

**SHUVINAI ASHOONA:
DRAWINGS 1993-2007**
Marion Scott Gallery
to Nov. 25

BY LLOYD DYKK
VANCOUVER SUN



Top, untitled (aerial view of Cape Dorset), 2007; left, untitled (people fleeing polar bear), 2005/2006; below untitled (woman with small figures), 2004/2005

All works depicted were done in ink and coloured pencil.

Shuvinai Ashoona is reportedly an eccentric but sweet-natured person, given to averting her gaze, rarely looking at a person directly. She'll sit in a chair with her body turned away and look at you askance, says gallery owner Judy Kardosh. And she tends to wander away if left alone.

She's 46 and her collection of drawings at the Marion Scott Gallery is the work of a very private person and a very gifted one. This is an important show. The first time I saw her work, piled loose on the floor of the gallery, her images disturbed my dreams for about two nights. In particular there are her underwater scenes, a female figure with her arms shackled and her hair bolt-upright, like the heavy kelp plants growing from the floor. Her face is calm and expressionless as strange water creatures swim placidly by.

What supports these phenomena is the density of water, just as sleep supports occurrences that would collapse in the lesser density of wakefulness. Many of Ashoona's images seem to come from the fantastic realm of dreams and sleep. They are "psychologically charged," in the words of Robert Kardosh, the curator.

In this way she is very exceptional for a Cape Dorset Inuit artist, dwelling with an interior complexity that is at odds with the tradition of narrative description, and differing very much from the work of her famous grandmother, Pitseolak Ashoona, a graphic artist, and her father Kiawak Ashoona, a sculptor.

As well, her work couldn't be more different from that of her younger cousin, the highly awarded Annie Pootoogook. Though far more famous, Pootoogook's work is considerably less interesting, dealing with sociological issues (wife-beating, a couple in bed watching pornography on the television, and things like that). You can tire of looking at

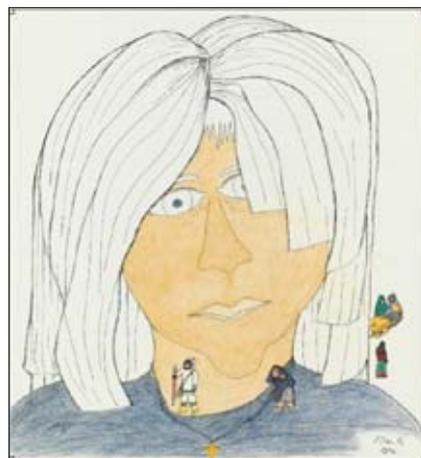
these images. They are exhaustible of interest whereas you don't tire of looking at Ashoona's work, which documents only what's in her head and its infinite landscape.

In the scant 14 years of her career, working with ink and coloured pencil, her style has taken varying turns, ranging from beautifully depicted documentary scenes of her life in a Baffin Island village to the obsessively detailed renderings of "pieces that defy rational interpretation," as Kardosh puts it. Many of her works have already sold, but only one of the really dark pieces, astutely grouped together on one austere wall.

These are incredible Escher-like landscapes that could only exist in the imagination, one fevered by visions of the impossible, their minutiae detailed with the attention of an obsessive-compulsive. They are literally almost black with finely realized detail, the hand of a real craftsman. They evoke her execution of the tiny stones as actually observed on the ground and densely encircle the tents and buildings of the less foreboding works in the show. Each stone is drawn with a breathtaking concentration down to the minutest pebble. These scenes are quite different from the two six-foot panoramas that depict with Breughel-like detail life as it is lived every day in Cape Dorset.

There's also something filmic in her perspective of certain images: the expressionistic angle she takes in her depiction of a tent with a pair of blue socks hanging from one of the guy-ropes, and the panicked flight of a group of Inuit children from the charge of a yellowing polar bear, seen only partially on the left side as it moves fearsomely into the picture.

This is quite different from the radiant



oil-burning lamp, the kudluq, an icon in Inuit culture, its concavity wonderfully rendered by pencil strokes in an exquisitely dense mixture of colors.

Still there's a secrecy about her work: the only partially seen faces looking out from behind a tent flap, the alleged self-portrait of Ashoona with its intensely shingled white hair and its troubled expression, and especially, the disturbing large image of a two-headed figure which again suggests something about entrapment.

This is of a woman, the second, smaller, head apparently that of her child carried in the hood of her amautiq, or parka. Judy Kardosh questioned her about that image and Ashoona apparently made light of it, saying there was nothing sinister in it at all. But could she have been deliberately evasive about that smaller figure with its yellow eyes and its distinctly malefic-seeming peaked hairline? Or did Ashoona even know what she'd drawn?

To entertain her one day, Kardosh took Ashoona to the current Georgia O'Keeffe exhibit at the Vancouver Art Gallery. She paused in front of one painting, of a barn. "There are people trapped in there," Ashoona said. There are no people in an O'Keeffe painting.

Later, Kardosh asked Ashoona to draw something from her head about the O'Keeffe show. Ashoona produced an image of two figures on a horse. It was related to that barn. "They got out," she said simply.

ldykk@png.canwest.com

entrée

THE VANCOUVER SUN | Definitive Guide to Food & Drink

This Saturday in the Arts & Life section