

Anna Hudson, Jocelyn Piirainen, Georgiana Uhlyarik, editors. *Tunirrusiangit: Kenojuak Ashevak and Tim Pitsiulak*. Art Gallery of Ontario; Goose Lane Editions, 2018. 160 pp. ISBN: 9781988788029; 9781773100913. <https://gooselane.com/products/tunirrusiangit>

We were trying to get some things in there that challenge the whole system of museums vs Indigenous people. Historically, there's been a lot of tension in that relationship.

– Taqralik Partridge (Commanda)

Tunirrusiangit: Kenojuak Ashevak and Tim Pitsiulak is not your typical Inuit art show, and neither is its resulting catalogue. Even if you are familiar with both artists—especially Kenojuak who has become an icon of Inuit graphic arts—you might not expect to be moved so far from firmly rooted curatorial habits. It's not so much an exuberance in the concept or design, but a quiet, profound, long-lasting epistemological revolution, probably the first of many to come. Don't search for a thematic organization, for it often tends to erase the fundamental interrelations between humans and non-humans by separating beliefs, daily activities and animals. Don't even try for a chronological survey, despite the fact that the exhibition is a double retrospective. And don't yearn for an academic essay that will recount the story of James A. Houston and the beginnings of printmaking in Kinngait [Cape Dorset] for the umpteenth time. While there remain answers still to unearth in this matter, another project is taking place here. The ambition of the curatorial team has consisted of confronting norms and preconceptions by shifting discursive modalities, relocating Inuit art in the spectrum of Indigenous knowledge, values and decolonial thinking. With this in mind, *Tunirrusiangit* is both addressed to Inuit and Qallunaat [white people], celebrating the legacy of two brilliant artists who paved the way for Inuit resilience and whose contribution plays a part not only in Indigenous, but also Canadian and international art history, as the authors underline.

Tunirrusiangit, which means “their gifts” or “what they have” in Inuktitut, was held at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) during summer 2018. The museum is known for its important Inuit art collections, part of them originating from the gift of Samuel and Esther Sarick. Dedicated exhibitions are not rare at the AGO, but they aren't often accompanied by a catalogue for they mainly consist of small focuses on artists or communities. The last major event related to Inuit art dates back to 2011 when Gerald McMaster and Ingo Hessel co-curated *Inuit Modern*. Seven years later, what changes have been brought to the way Inuit art exhibitions are conceived? While the subject of *Tunirrusiangit* might seem conventional—a retrospective of Kenojuak Ashevak (1927-2013) and her nephew Tim Pitsiulak (1967-2016)—its curatorial treatment is not. Indeed, as a sign of their willingness to acknowledge and “commi[t] to Indigenous voices and expertise” (23), the AGO asked four Inuit artists and curators to team up with two of their non-Inuit counterparts.

In the field of First Nations art, the presence of Indigenous curators has become more common. From veteran Gerald McMaster (Cree) to rising figure Candice Hopkins (Carcross/Tagish), who has been involved in the most prestigious international art events, it seems inconceivable today to do without Indigenous actors. The same cannot be said for the Inuit art world where similar standards are taking much more time to be instituted. Even though exhibitions have been curated by Inuit since the late 1990s-early 2000s (by, e.g., July Papatsie, Barry Pottle, Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory), they have suffered from poor visibility—or to be more precise,

unwillingness to give them a sufficient place in the art world. Emerging Inuit scholars and curators such as Heather Igloliorte have been bringing about a major change for the past few years, but an equitable balance between Inuit and non-Inuit involvement still remains to be reached. Put another way, having a curatorial team predominantly composed of Inuit members—a choice also followed by the Winnipeg Art Gallery for its Inuit Art Centre—is a strong ethic and a political commitment, especially when it offers unprecedented insights into the exhibited works. Let us remember that in 1994-1996, when Odette Leroux curated *Isumavut: The Artistic Expression of Nine Cape Dorset Women* at the Canadian Museum of Civilization and asked the artists to work with her on the presentation, description and titles of their works, she was greatly criticized. The Inuit involvement was said to devalue the role of the [Qallunaaq] curator, which says a lot about the low value granted to Indigenous knowledge and capacity to manage their own artistic productions. Fortunately, in 2017, things have changed and are asserted as such from the first pages of the exhibition catalogue: the names of the Inuit curators are put first while the non-Inuit are presented as allies.

Before focusing on the content of the catalogue, it is useful to say a few words about the curators. Koomuatuk Curley is a sculptor, director and videographer from Kinngait. He is particularly known for his monumental works and his video interviews of artists. Taqralik Partridge is a spoken word performer, writer, poet and curator from Kuujjuaq who currently lives in Norway. Her work has been translated into several languages and her performances held in several countries. She has recently been named editor-at-large for *Inuit Art Quarterly*. Jocelyn Piirainen is an Inuk curator and artist based in Ottawa. She has notably curated *UnMENTionables: Indigenous Masculinities* in 2015 at the Asinabka Film & Media Arts Festival and *Neon NDN: Indigenous Pop-Art* in 2016 at SAW Gallery. Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory is a Kalaalliq [Greenlandic Inuk] performer, dancer, musician, actor, writer, spoken word poet and curator based in Iqaluit who has been incredibly active for several years—in 2004, she curated *Inuit Art in Motion* and *Ilitarivingaa? Do You Recognize me?* at the AGO. More recently, she has collaborated with musician Tanya Tagaq and co-founded the “Qaqqiavuut! Society for a Nunavut Performing Arts Centre.” Finally, Georgiana Uhlyarik is the Canadian Art curator at the AGO while Anna Hudson is a professor at York University specializing in Canadian art and Indigenous studies who led the Mobilizing Inuit Cultural Heritage project.

The strength of the *Tunirrusiangit* project lies in the complementarity of these multi-disciplinary profiles. Each of the curators mobilized their proficiencies to serve the exhibition and propose a curatorial pattern that differs from most Inuit art exhibitions. Not only did they select and show the works in accordance with what they “liked as Inuit and thought that people should see and appreciate” (Commanda), but they also provided personal works that could both be regarded in and of themselves and understood as “interpretational strategies” (Myers). The exhibition opened with *Silaup Putunga*, a 25-minute immersive film installation by Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory and Jamie Griffiths that plunged the visitor into the vitality of the Arctic land through images of Nunavut, *katajjaq* [throat singing] by Celina Kalluk and *uajeerneq* [Greenlandic mask dancing] performed by Laakkuluk herself. This work, far from being apolitical, set the tone of the show as it contextualized Inuit art in Canadian colonial history and asserted Inuit sovereignty. Taqralik Partridge, for her part, created a *qarmaq* [sod house] covered with old newspaper articles being prejudicial against Inuit. She used it as a place to perform storytelling. As for Koomuatuk Curley, he conducted a series of interviews with Kenojuak Ashevak and Tim Pitsiulak’s relatives

and community members that offered inside perspectives on their artistic practice. Additionally, quotes by all the curators were featured on panels and written on the walls throughout the exhibit space, adding curatorial insight to specific works.

A catalogue, though, is never the same as the exhibition. Translating any scenography into a printed medium and following the original arrangement of the works is not an easy task—considering you would even want to do that. However, the main spirit of the project usually remains while essays complement and extend the curatorial intention. The editors made the choice not to reproduce the installations of the curating artists: probably because they would only help to document the exhibition and not effectively deepen the understanding of Kenojuak Ashevak and Tim Pitsiulak's work. On the one hand, such visual additions would have made the works part of the "catalogue" itself and obscured the focus of the exhibition. On the other hand, it was a stronger gesture to turn the norms of the exhibition catalogue inside out: by replacing academic essays, that often aim at achieving an objective point of view, with engaged essays spoken from one's individual experience, Inuit epistemes are being put on the forefront. Indeed, knowledge, according to Inuit, consists in the sum of diversified expertise rather than generalizing remarks.

Hence, the catalogue is divided into two parts—the first being dedicated to Kenojuak Ashevak, the second to Tim Pitsiulak—punctuated with essays or poems by the curators (some of which could be heard in the exhibition) and equally interesting short comments on the artists' works. All along, the authors endeavour to erode the colonial gaze and stereotypes, exceed expectations of what Inuit culture can be and bring to light the artists' proper concerns. In her opening essay, "Gracious Acceptance of Their Gifts," Jocelyn Piirainen remembers the many discussions necessary for the project to take shape and connect "the old traditions with new conventions of discourse" (21). She particularly stresses how Kenojuak and Tim's achievements have been inspirational to the curatorial team: "We came to a collective realization: these two artists were encouraging us to think about and reflect on our selves, our pasts, and our futures, as well as challenging our ideas about who they were and what they achieved" (21).

It is not only Kenojuak and Tim's part in history, but also the role that they will keep playing in the future for generations of emerging Inuit artists, writers, curators, scholars and more, that is thus one of the key ideas of the retrospective: the level of excellence that they set helps Inuit recover a self-esteem that was devalued by colonialism. Anna Hudson and Georgiana Uhlyarik's following essay underlines, in the same way, that in culture "resides a sense of collective identity, social support, and a sense of belonging grounded in positive relationships" (23). They acknowledge then the necessity for Qallunaat to understand that "practices of collection, research, and curation involving Inuit culture require honesty, humility, openness, patience, and a willingness to listen, learn, and experience new perspectives" (23).

Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory's literary contribution introduces Kenojuak Ashevak's chapter. Her poem in two parts, "I am the light of happiness," is named after the words of the artist. Kenojuak was born in 1927 in Iksiraq, Baffin Island, Nunavut and soon became a major artist. She was included in Kinngait's inaugural print collection in 1953, had a film dedicated to her in 1963, received the Order of Canada four years later; this was followed by many more distinctions until her death in 2013. Her iconic *Enchanted Owl* (1960) was sold for \$216,000 in

2018, which is the highest amount paid for a print by a Canadian artist at auction. As an art historian, I often enjoy telling my colleagues how she reversed the gender hierarchies and used to sign her husband Johnniebo's works to make them more valuable—something hardly seen in Western art history. These exploits of Kenojuak's, Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory all knows them too well, and it is with much intelligence and sensitivity that she pays them homage. But she does not confine herself to singing the artist's praises, she most importantly challenges a decontextualized, depolitized, approach of Kenojuak's art. This poem might become one of the new major texts of Inuit art history since it brings attention to several important facts and issues. Laakkuluk recalls the imperialist context in which the works were born and how they contributed to build resilience: "She used art to heal," she writes about Kenojuak (30). She also addresses the occultation of the role played by Inuit art in the assertion of Canada's identity during the postwar years:

*There was no such thing as Canadian art before Qinnujuaq.
Canada is hand-drawn by Qinnujuaq (31)*

Inuit art, indeed, became the marker of Canadian modernity to the rest of the world when the Group of Seven looked too old-fashioned to the eyes of the European avant-gardes. Exhibitions travelled to Ibero-America, Africa, Asia, Pacific, Europe, even crossing the Iron Curtain, from the 1950s to the 1970s. The cultural face of Canada *was* Inuit, and it is a story that tends to be forgotten.

Laakkuluk makes a strong gesture when she writes Kenojuak's name "Qinnujuaq," which happens to be its proper Inuktitut transcription. By doing so, she alludes to the multiple appropriations and deformations that have peppered Inuit history and led to consequences such as the application of the disc number system (due to the incapacity of transcribing Inuit names and regulating the population, the federal government identified every individuals with a number engraved on a medal). Learning how to pronounce Qinnujuaq's name might be a first step towards reconciliation.

The catalogue of Qinnujuaq's works that follows is of interest for any admirer of her style, should they be novice or expert. Prints, ironically, have long been considered more valuable than original drawings in the field of Inuit art and the curators, without ignoring some of the artist's famous works, consequently also chose to draw the attention to her drawings and her diversity of techniques: coloured pencil, felt-tip pen, ballpoint pen, graphite and ink. Rare works from private collections and West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative's consequent loan to the McMichael Canadian Art Collection are also being reproduced. One of them, started in 2012, was even finished by her son, Adamie Ashevak. It is indeed impossible to understand Qinnujuaq's work without seeing her drawings, especially when one knows that she was very careful of the way they were translated into prints. The works are not presented chronologically, but rather by stylistic and thematic affinities which makes the reading appreciable by connecting the dots of her thought. Both the curators' and the artist's quotes, for their part, provide additional insights: how art gave Qinnujuaq the opportunity to support her family, how such a talent in a left-handed person is perceived by Inuit, what the return of the sun after winter means in the Arctic, etc. More still, it is the authors' own fascination for Qinnujuaq that signals her legacy in the Inuit society and contributes to the writing of an Indigenous art history.

Tim Pitsiulak, Qinnujuaq's nephew, told me in 2010 that his aunt was his "hero": "She's a big part of my life and she's my inspiration" (personal interview). Born in Kimmirut, Tim first started working with jewellery before moving to Kinngait and participating in the annual graphic art collection. His work is characterized by very large, meticulous drawings addressing both the old and modern ways, changes in Inuit history and the legacy of shamanism. As a hunter, animals have a special place in his work. This is not uncommon: many male artists are hunters too and anthropologist Nelson H. H. Graburn has shown the similarities between carving and hunting in the Inuktitut vocabulary (Graburn 49). It is this very closeness that sculptor, hunter and curator Koomuatuk Curley emphasizes in his first-person account: "Carving is like hunting money, hunting food. Carving became my hunting" (89). The reader is led to understand that the talented artist shares the same qualities as the successful hunter: patience, adaptability and capacity of observation. Both men also shared the will to seize "new opportunities" (90) and show unexpected works by Inuit artists. As Tim used to say: "People around the world don't know what we have up North. I want [artists] to show the other people what we do up North" (personal interview).

Tim Pitsiulak's catalogue shows not only his technical skills as a drawer, working notably with pastels or coloured pencils on black wove paper, but also the complexity of his approach. His depiction of animals, especially walruses and whales, is intertwined with hunting scenes and motifs from the Thule culture (which he borrowed from books) from which the spiritual significance cannot be removed. Playing with transparency, multiplying the points of view, going from landscapes to heavy equipment, the body of works chosen by the curators shows the artist's constant audacity and his promotion of Inuit traditional knowledge and values [Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit] such as sharing or being innovative. Tim's work can also be said to be critical, not only because it destroys the preconception of the "barren land" or the loss of traditions among Inuit, but also because it comments on the Western infantilization process that denies Inuit the capacity of derision or irony. *Hero 4* (2015) is a clever pun: the artist shows a tiny camera—his GoPro Hero4—approaching a couple of massive walruses while the photographer is left out of the frame. The whole scene gives the idea of courage a hilarious twist and asserts once and for all the critical intelligence Inuit demonstrate through laughter. Some of Tim Pitsiulak's overtly political works are not included here, but it only gives the reader the occasion to look deeper into his career.

The exhibition catalogue finally closes with Taqralik Partridge's poetic contribution. *Kuujjuatuqaq* and *after an argument* speak of everyday life in Arctic communities and the connection to the land through its most subtle details.

*i can tell you that quiet is not silent
but yields to gentler sounds (153)*

As for *two poems*, it weaves links between allies whose philosophies escape from Western capitalism. Taqralik's work, quite similarly to Isuma Productions' films, forces Qallunaat readers to follow Inuit's rhythm, to give up both their authoritative framework and pace to acknowledge Indigenous ways of understanding, to pay close attention and learn from observation as Inuit education recommends.

In conclusion, *Tunirrusiangit* is a statement, or even better, a manifesto. Like the preview of the show opened with the sharing seal meat to honour the artists in the traditional Inuit way, the catalogue relocates their works into Inuit knowledge and asserts the pertinence of Indigenous expertise. It does not mean, as many have feared before, that non-Inuit are not allowed to study or curate Inuit art anymore, but that the involvement of Indigenous peoples in the museum should become the standard instead of an exception. It particularly means that the Qallunaaq art world should accept to trade its anonymous, hegemonic voice for a situated, biased point of view—one among the others, with no more authority than the others.

Without a doubt, readers' perspectives will be enriched by this catalogue. Not only is it a fine book, beautifully illustrated with reproductions of works, portraits of the artists and photographs by Tim Pitsiulak himself, but it is also an inspiring project that will convince anyone of how strong Inuit culture has remained through time, despite the suffering caused by colonial history. Such a celebration of two major graphic artists in the global art history contributes both to decolonizing minds and spreading a sense of pride among young Inuit, in order to prevent further intergenerational trauma. In other words, *Tunirrusiangit: Kenojuak Ashevak and Tim Pitsiulak* is a necessary book that has probably already gained its place in critical history.

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