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*Annie Pootoogook's Drawings of Contemporary Inuit Life*

National Museum of the American Indian, New York

By Leah Modigliani

This summer's solo exhibition of 39 of Annie Pootoogook's drawings at the National Museum of the American Indian is a rare opportunity to see a large group of this well-known Canadian artist's work in New York. Despite her rise to fame in Canada and internationally over the last three years, this is the largest exhibition of her work so far held in the United States.

Annie Pootoogook's drawings are simple and direct representations of life in Cape Dorset, an isolated community on Baffin Island in the Canadian Arctic. Cape Dorset advertises itself as the "Capital of Inuit Art," a name partially derived from the influence and existence of the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative, an organization founded in 1959 to foster economic opportunities locally by marketing Inuit art to southern buyers, and which has had a gallery in Toronto since 1978. Pootoogook, who comes from a family of artists, began drawing at the Co-operative when she was 28. However, unlike other Inuit artists working there, she was launched into the international world of contemporary art by enthusiastic and influential Canadian dealers and curators touting her work's ability to "challenge conventional assumptions about Inuit art." Upon reflection, Pootoogook's recent exhibition in New York inspires a number of critical questions about the context, display, and critical reception of artists trained outside of the hegemonic domain of so-called Western art institutions.

The drawings on display at the National Museum of the American Indian, which date from 2001 until now, consist of graphite or ink-line drawings filled in with broad planes of colored pencil crayon, and are executed on standard sized sheets of drawing paper. Generally, they fall into four thematic groupings: still lifes of household objects (such as scissors, pens, and in one case a camp stove); social groupings of two or more people inside modest homes; abstracted representations of social morays or spiritual concerns; and acts of

violence, such as domestic abuse and suicide. Of these groupings, the latter has gained the most critical attention.

In *Man Abusing His Partner* (2001–02), a man raises a piece of lumber over his head to beat a screaming woman rising from her bed. They are centered in a sparsely furnished room containing a TV set and a boarded-up window, and everything is coloured in muted tones of brown, grey, and black. In *Hanging* (2003–04), a man in a white parka cuts down the yellow noose that another man has used in an unsuccessful suicide attempt. *Memory of My Life* *Breaking Bottles* (2001–02) shows the artist smashing liquor bottles, the broken glass accumulating in a pile behind a small pink house. The matter-of-fact, child-like style in which these narratives of abuse and self-abuse are drawn speaks to the “everydayness” of the more painful aspects of the Inuit’s long reckoning with the incursion of Western lifestyles, values, and goods into their older ways of life.

Other works present scenes of social interactions between people in their homes that testify to the growing interconnectedness of the world, the passage of time, and the importance of family. In *Toronto Maple Leafs* (2004–06), two men sit on a couch watching television. The image is named after the Toronto Maple Leafs poster and souvenir hockey stick that hang on a nearby wall along with a Canadian flag. These objects hint at a national pride that has been cultivated over time through television and trade. Televisions and clocks figure prominently in many of Pootoogook’s drawings, suggesting a preoccupation with time passing.

By contrast, *Composition (Gossip)* (2006) is one of several drawings that are more abstract in nature. A pair of slightly open pink lips floats in white space, surrounded by a net of zigzagged and curved lines that seem to both feed and restrain the mouth. A small noose is attached to this netting, the implication being that the malicious language of gossip can be the death of a person or a community. Similarly, *Composition (Evil Spirit)* (2003–04) consists of a woman being penetrated violently by the rope-like phallus of a devilish figure as she kneels helpless on a cracking floorboard. In both cases, the artist has created powerful works that express the fragility of self, both physical and spiritual, in a community bound tightly together through social customs and geographic isolation.

Contrasting these peopled scenes are several still lifes. *Scissors* (2006) is a line drawing of an open pair of black-handled scissors floating unceremoniously within the white field of drawing paper, and sharing gallery space with similar drawings of art supplies, such as *Pen, Pencil, and Eraser* (2003–04). In the same room, one also finds *Bagpipes* (2006) and *Balvenie Castle* (2006), images likely completed when Pootoogook attended an artist-in-residence program in Scotland in 2006. The aforementioned drawings all testify to the artist's direct process of recording her immediate environment. However, without the narrative component of her other drawings, her still lifes fall flat—both formally and conceptually—and her use of line, colour, and space is often less dynamic than that of other artists, Inuit or otherwise. This problem is compounded by a seeming lack of editing in both the artist's choice of subjects, and the curatorial selection of the work, which is exhibited in no particular order in two rooms.

It is perhaps for these reasons that the narrative images of people living life in Cape Dorset have been singled out from the rest of Pootoogook's work and praised the most. But this preference is not unproblematic since this critical response seems to rely on some troubling preoccupations—specifically, the increased interest in her violent narratives of abuse—and the expressed surprise of some writers and curators that a contemporary Inuit artist might depict images of TV, porn, and videogames alongside images of hunting, tanning, and camping. Rather than reflecting an enlightened embrace of artists from non-Westernized environments into the fold of the international contemporary art world, the fixation on these particular aspects of Pootoogook's art may signal the ongoing impulse of Westerners to locate an image of themselves through constructing, finding, and/or highlighting an image of otherness in Native cultures.

The lack of curatorial intervention in Pootoogook's work suggests questions somewhat harder to pinpoint or resolve. On the one hand, her inclusion in Documenta 12, her winning the 2006 Sobey Art Award, and her invitation to participate in international artist residencies suggests that her work be considered simply as that of a contemporary artist from a culturally rich region of northern Canada. On the other hand, the texts and biographical videos about her work consistently emphasize her direct drawing style (“I draw what I see”) and her identity as an Inuit woman who been abused but who has triumphed personally

through her work as an artist. As a result, the formal and conceptual aspects of Pootoogook's work are simultaneously protected from critique and elided in favor of a general enthusiasm for her personal story of artistic triumph.

Regardless, one of Pootoogook's chief attributes is her ability to create lively narratives about a community not well understood by an international audience. However commendable, the results are only partially engaging because some narratives are simply better able than others to carry drawings that are formally uneven and often similarly rendered. By contrast, her most interesting drawings may be her *Compositions* series. In this series, the artist's portrayal of universal themes resists preconceived expectations of Inuit life while asserting something concrete about her individual experience. In these cases, Pootoogook's strength lies in her ability to draw what she feels, not what she sees.