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At the Vancouver Art Gallery, monsters and magic mesmerize in Shuvinaï Ashoona: Mapping Worlds

At the Vancouver Art Gallery until May 24

By Robin Laurence – February 25, 2020



Shuvinaï Ashoona, *Composition (Creature Invasion)*, 2017, Graphite, colored pencil, and ink on paper.
Courtesy of Shuvinaï Ashoona and Vancouver Art Gallery.

Shuvinaï Ashoona is that most magical of artists, one whose distinctive and often fantastical vision of the world—monstrous creatures with bulging eyes and curling tentacles, a human ear transforming into a swan, giant eggs from which alien forms emerge, green and blue planets spinning across the tundra—reaches out to an audience far beyond her small northern community. Beyond the usual curators and collectors of Inuit art, too.

Born and based in Kinngait (formerly known as Cape Dorset) on the southern tip of Baffin Island, Shuvinaï is a graphic artist focused primarily on drawing, her usual media being coloured pencils, ink, and graphite. Her increasingly large and ambitious works have been shown across the country and around the world, from Basel, Switzerland, to Sydney, Australia.

Currently, she is being celebrated in Shuvinaï Ashoona: Mapping Worlds, a major touring exhibition surveying the last two decades of her creative practice. Organized by Toronto's Power Plant

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Contemporary Art Gallery and curated by Nancy Campbell, an independent scholar and the leading expert on Shuvinaï's art and life, the show has now landed at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

At a media preview there and later at a public lecture, Campbell remarked that this is the first time an Inuit artist has had a solo show at the VAG. At the same time, she stressed the importance of resituating Shuvinaï's work from the peripheral category of "Inuit" into the mainstream of international contemporary art.

In many ways, that repositioning is already occurring. Shuvinaï is the subject of multiple articles, reviews, and catalogue essays, as well as a monograph by Campbell (available online and in print from the Canadian Art Library). Still, despite the exposure and acclaim, despite all that has been spoken and written about her, much of Shuvinaï's imagery remains mysterious.

It is intriguing and engaging, sometimes astounding and occasionally frightening, yes, but in many senses unknowable.

What to make, for instance, of *Earth Transformations*, a drawing that features a creature with a large blue-and-green globe for a head, arms and hands composed of strings of similar but smaller planets, a torso draped in octopuslike tentacles, and human legs with blue toenails? And how to read this creature's companion, a parka-clad Inuit man holding up a picture of a scene in which a hunter with a rifle sits behind a blind that is also an artist's canvas? (The titles are not really clues, as they're assigned by others.) Shuvinaï doesn't like to talk about what her works might "mean". She produces them without plan or precept, seeming to draw her images directly from her unconscious mind.

Whatever her propensity for the surreal and the phantasmagorical, Shuvinaï's drawings also reveal a keen understanding of everyday life in the North, from the snowy roads and prefab houses of Kinngait to hunting and camping scenes on the tundra, the land scattered with pebbles, stones, and rocky outcroppings, the lake shores covered in animal bones. At the same time, her drawings are informed by Inuit tales of human-animal transformation, Christian stories and beliefs, and American popular culture as encountered on TV and DVDs. Shuvinaï is a big fan of nature programs and horror movies—and also, as witnessed by her dramatic drawing *Sinking Titanic*, James Cameron's 1997 film *Titanic*.

One of the most extraordinary works on view is *Untitled (Birthing Scene)*, in which a blue-haired woman, whose hands and feet are changing into fins, feathers, and claws, gives birth to not only a wee baby but also a cluster of tiny blue planets. Lying on the ground beside her is another baby, this one with an older boy's head, who is also giving birth. The midwife seated behind the woman is a large yellow seabird with a polar-bear foot, and hovering in the lower right corner of the picture frame are three more little planets, superimposed on each other. In many ways, this is a work of extraordinary realism—the rocky stretch of tundra in which the scene is set, the sheet of plywood on which Inuit women typically give birth, the excrement that comes out of as the woman pushes down—but it is also a scene of otherworldly transformation.

There are a number of drawings, such as *Composition (Creature Invasion)*, of hideous monsters attacking hapless humans. Equally, there are images, such as *Untitled (People, Animals, and the World Holding Hands)*, that suggest living in harmony with each other and with the creatures and entities of the natural and supernatural realms in which we dwell.

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In her talk, Campbell stressed Shuvinai's essentially positive outlook and the many works she has created that speak of tolerance and understanding. Of all the mysterious images and symbols Shuvinai enfold in her work, this is the meaning, the message, that we should take home with us.