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What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in October

By John Vincler – October 27, 2023



Shuvinai Ashoona's "Drawing like the elephant," 2023, colored pencil and ink on paper.Credit...via Shuvinai Ashoona and Fort Gansevoort, New York

Traditional Inuit stories often involve the transformation of a person into an animal. In Shuvinai Ashoona's large-scale work on paper, "Drawing like the elephant" (2023), tusks appear to erupt from the mouths of two human forms. One figure has the feet of a bird and another the legs of a polar bear. And is that an alligator standing on its hind legs like a person in the center?

The depicted figures hold drawings, which similarly feature beings holding even smaller drawings. This mise-en-abyme composition of an art competition at once draws in and confronts the viewer's expectations. You have to

FORT GANSEVOORT

look closely to read the phrases: “2023 winner for each animal drawing,” and then “winner for showing animals do draw.” Here she’s provocatively satirizing and rejecting the settler-colonialist violence of viewing the native artist as a human animal or curio. Ashoona, who works primarily in colored pencil and ink, descends from an Inuit dynasty of artists working in Kinngait (formerly Cape Dorset), Canada. Her grandmother was Pitseolak Ashoona and her cousin was Annie Pootoogook, who showed at Documenta 12 (2007) in Kassel, Germany.

Standout works, across three floors of recent drawings (all 2023), include the intricately detailed landscape panorama “Eggs and Rocks,” which harks back to Ashoona’s early monochromes, and “Love of Mother Earth,” in which a woman in a light green parka reaches skyward, with her back to the viewer before two children, as globes of mini earth-bubbles float above: a vision of ecological sorrow or of so many possible worlds? *JOHN VINCLER*