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Time Out

Shuvinaï Ashoona: 'When I Draw'

By Eddy Frankel — December 8, 2023.



Photograph: Shuvinaï Ashoona, 'Drawing like the elephant'

Time Out says



The most surreal thing about Shuvinaï Ashoona's world of half-human hybrid sea creatures, ice and writhing tentacles is how un-surreal it all is. This is normality for the Inuit artist.

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She comes from a family and community of artists in Kinngait on Canada's frozen arctic east coast. She works in an aesthetic tradition where men can be depicted as part-walrus, women can morph into dolphins, and lizard creatures can take part in drawing competitions. Ashoona's pencil and pen drawings show everyday Inuit life, filled with spiritual presences and hints of encroaching modernity. In one work, empty cereal boxes and cans litter the streets of Kinngait as creatures roam around, all the inhabitants locked away against the piercing wind. In another, kids ride bikes and eat ice cream in t-shirts on a rare summer's day. Nearby works show whales being hunted, ships bringing in essential supplies. One incredible image shows Ashoona visiting the dentist for the first time in Toronto, surrounded by two-headed, blue-skinned, tusked beings, harsh lights and tentacles.

In all these simple drawings, traditional aesthetics and spirituality meet modern life, and the result feels somehow natural, normal, everyday, poetic. The key, for viewers force-fed a diet of ultra-proscriptive Western art history, is to forget what you know. Don't place this in the context of Dali or Matisse or whoever, don't look at the work or analyse it like you would something by a CSM graduate. Ashoona's art is in its own context, it's its own thing, a gorgeous reflection of life in the ice-bound north that'll leave you shivering, snow-blind and totally mesmerised.