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The Art of Joy: Pitseolak Qimirpik's Shift from Sculpture to Drawing

Jessica MacDonald – November 13, 2024



Pitseolak Qimirpik, *Dinosaur, Animal, Mammal, and Bird Sedna Riding Transformation* (c. 2023)
Coloured pencil 76.2 x 111.8 cm
COURTESY MADRONA GALLERY/DORSET FINE ARTS © THE ARTIST

“I wanted to do something fun.”

That’s what **Pitseolak Qimirpik** tells me when I ask about his shift from sculpture to drawing, and those words are certainly apt for an artist who seems to have devoted much of his career to lively and often funny work. Qimirpik’s stone sculptures have often been noted for a palpable sense of joy—whether they feature dancing bears and walruses or pop culture icons like Nintendo’s Mario, Marge and Homer Simpson, or a young man dancing with an iPod. The artist from Kinngait, NU, has been working with stone since he was just thirteen, but in

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2021 he began to create vibrant coloured pencil drawings that pop off the page, bursting with eclectic figures and forms.

The transition from sculpture to drawing is more linear than one might think. “I drew a lot in school,” Qimirpik says, emphasizing that although his public-facing work has been sculptural for decades, drawing has always been part of his planning process. He calls the transition from two-dimensional sketches to three-dimensional pieces a “transformation” he enacts as the sculptor.



Left: Pitseolak Qimirpik, *Vision of Hell* (detail) (2021) Coloured pencil 38.1 x 58.4 cm
Right: Pitseolak Qimirpik, *Vision of Hell* (detail) (2021) Stone and antler 26.7 x 121.9 x 61 cm
COURTESY MADRONA GALLERY/DORSET FINE ARTS © THE ARTIST

The link gets more obvious seeing some of his sculptures and drawings side by side in Madrona Gallery’s 2023 exhibition *Collaborative Works from Kinngait*. As the title suggests, most of the works in the exhibition featured joint pieces made by two artists, with one artist creating a drawing and the other a matching sculpture. Of the nine joint works shown in the exhibition, two were Qimirpik’s—but he was the only artist who didn’t collaborate with someone else.

Instead, the pieces shown there brought together the dual sides of his own artistic practice. One of the works is a complex, multi-figured stone composition called *Vision of Hell* (2021), featuring two figures being tormented by snakes and insects while a devil looks on. The sculptural composition is accompanied by a drawing of the same scene, rendered in reds and yellows. Seen together like this, it’s immediately obvious that Qimirpik has perfectly transferred his style from page to stone, even down to depicting the middle and foreground objects of his drawing, such as a border of swirling humans or the flames that halo the devil, in stone. Although dark in subject matter, the stone devil is borderline gleeful, while the coloured-pencil bugs sport confetti-like spots, their colours recast as textured dots along the body of their stone doppelgängers.

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Pitseolak Qimirpik, *Clown Fish (Clown Crown Fish)* (2022) Coloured pencil 38.1 x 57.8 cm
COURTESY FEHELEY FINE ARTS/DORSET FINE ARTS © THE ARTIST

Qimirpik's drawings are densely layered and shaded. "I press very hard and I colour for a very long time," he says of the colour payoff he is able to achieve, solid blocks which often look more like marker strokes than the usually delicate hues associated with coloured pencils. His contemporaries at Kinngait Studios, such as **Ooloosie Saila** and **Saimaiyu Akesuk**, are able to achieve similar effects but use their powers more sparingly, balancing patches of intense colour with blank negative space on the page. Qimirpik, by contrast, typically fills every part of the page.

"Harder is better—that's why I do it," Qimirpik laughs, agreeing that the muscles he's obtained from working with stone are likely a factor in how much pressure he is able to apply. Working with coloured pencil lets him access a range of colours he's unable to achieve with stone, bringing another layer of joy to his forms.

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Pitseolak Qimirpik, *UFO* (2023) 38.1 x 56.5 cm
COURTESY MADRONA GALLERY/DORSET FINE ARTS © THE ARTIST

Figures from pop culture still remain a fixture of his work alongside dinosaurs, fish and insects of (literally) all stripes. In *Clown Fish (Clown Crown Fish)* (2022), a rainbow-coloured marine animal swims against a forest of dark, shadowy kelp, its neon green fins moving a banded and polka-dotted body through vivid blue water. Another work, *Simpson's Family With Bart's Cake & Musk-ox Pup* (2022), references Qimirpik's favourite Simpsons characters once more, infusing them with elements of Northern life—what might normally be a pet dog or cat is swapped for a pet muskox instead. "I [depict] those things because I watch them a lot," Qimirpik says about some of his recurring cast of pop culture characters and his desire to integrate parts of his everyday life into his practice.

UFO (2023) uses some of these pop figures to more overtly criticize aspects of reality, showcasing a neon green alien and the devil in flames vying for space on the same paper as flowers, spiders and police. Just as in *Vision of Hell*, *UFO* hints at some darker themes, with an old-fashioned sailing vessel and a priest alluding to early colonialism while a police officer shooting a Black man more overtly calls to recent racial injustices. The alien disembarking from his spacecraft almost seems to ask, "What is happening here?"

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Pitseolak Qimirpik, *Untitled (Home and Other Places)* (2024) Ink on paper
COURTESY GWANGJU BIENNALE/DORSET FINE ARTS © THE ARTIST

Qimirpik's success in just a few years of drawing publicly has resulted in several solo exhibitions in the last 18 months—at The Java Project in Brooklyn, New York; at Madrona Gallery in Victoria, BC; at Feheley Fine Arts in Toronto, ON; and at Galerie C.O.A. in Montreal, QC—as well as back-to-back inclusions of his work as prints in the 2023 and 2024 Cape Dorset Print releases. While Qimirpik hasn't yet been able to travel to see his shows in person, he hopes to make it to Gwangju, South Korea, this year to see his work in the exhibition *Home and Other Places* (2024) at the Gwangju Biennale, where it is featured as part of a cross-cultural collaboration between six artists from Kinngait and three from Korea, featuring large wall murals, drawings and mixed-media installations. Many artists from Kinngait Studios and beyond have worked in both drawing and sculpture—renowned graphic artist **Kenojuak Ashevak**, CC, ONu, RCA (1927–2013), for example, produced a number of sculptures in her early career, as did **Kananginak Pootoogook**, RCA (1935–2010) and later on **Jutai Toonoo** (1959–2015)—but none have actually fully merged sculpture with colour drawing, an entirely unique component of some of Qimirpik's newest work.

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Pitseolak Qimirpik, *Transformation* (2024) Stone and archival acrylic marker 16.5 x 15.2 x 6.4 cm
COURTESY DORSET FINE ARTS © THE ARTIST

In a series of sculptures that appeared in an April 2024 exhibition at the Kenojuak Ashevak Cultural Centre in Kinngait, he used archival acrylic markers to “colour in the carvings,” drawing yellow stars and fish across several transformation scenes and enveloping a small pair of stone flowers in their true-to-life colours for the top of a bone piece. “I was trying to do something different,” he says. With these pops of colour, Qimirpik imbues the stone pieces with even more joy than he would be able to achieve with shape and texture alone. When asked what’s next, Qimirpik is equally as prosaic in his answer as he was when explaining how he got where he currently is: “I plan to do [art] all my life,” he says.