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HYPERALLERGIC

The Simpsons Make Their Mark in Inuit Art

Nunavut artist Pitsiulaq Qimirpik juxtaposes different spiritual traditions with pop culture symbols in his drawings and soapstone sculptures.

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Pitsiulaq Qimirpik, "Bart & Lisa Flowers" (2023), stone and antler, 6 x 4.5 x 2 inches (all photos AX Mina/Hyperallergic)

"*The Simpsons* predicted it" is by now such a popular adage that there are lists upon lists for apparent *Simpsons* predictions, from the rise of the US's 45th president to faulty voter machines. At least in internet lore, this pop culture phenomenon has transformed into an oracle for our chaotic future.

It's fitting, then, that the TV show's characters might appear in the soapstone carvings of Pitsiulaq (Pitseolak) Qimirpik, a multimedia artist working in Kinngait, Nunavut (formerly Cape Dorset), the so-called "Capital of Inuit

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Art.” In “Bart & Lisa Flowers” (2023), the two iconic *Simpsons* characters sprout from carved caribou antlers. They smile knowingly at just six inches tall, set among a larger installation of the artist’s work on view at The Java Project through the end of January.

In an interview with *Hyperallergic*, curator Peter Kelly noted that he took interest in Qimirpik’s use of the traditional medium of soapstone with contemporary topics: “The older sculptures are in the shamanistic tradition. A lot of the visuals are about transformation, the body shifting into a different body, and the spectacle of transformation.”



Pitsiulaq Qimirpik, "Vision of Hell" (2023), graphite and colored pencil, 34 x 23 inches

In “Chimichero (muskox and plant)” (2023), a smiling plant with spikes on its head emerges from a more somber muskox, while in “Muskox and Flowers” (2023), the flowers stand delicately on antlers. As Kelly informed me, the works were shipped unassembled, and he had to carefully put them in place for the show. This lends an air of potential energy to the works, as if they could be transformed once more through reassembly.

The juxtaposition of different spiritual traditions helps illuminate connections between them. In “Jesus Overcoming the Devil” (2023), a Christ figure holding a cross stands above a figure with a trident. The pieces are arranged loosely, and the devil’s feet are flat, making me wonder if they could be arranged in opposition, or both in repose.

In “Shaman Riding Sedna” (2023), a stone figure with little antlers rests atop the head of the

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Inuits' goddess of the sea and marine mammals. Here, the sacred and the profane work together, rather than battle each other. In one legend, Sedna attacked her parents, and as punishment, her father chopped off her fingers. These in turn became the creatures of the northern sea, such as walruses, seals, fish, and whales.



Pitsiulaq Qimirpik, "Vision of Hell" (2023), stone and antler, 8 inches height, width and depth variable

According to Inuvialuk artist Caroline Blechert, “In our culture, Inuit shamans were known to travel to different afterworlds. When hunters were unable to catch food from the sea, they would transform themselves into fish in order to reach the bottom of the ocean. There they would find Sedna, and would comb her long tangled hair and weave it into braids to soothe her trauma and showcase compassion.”

Alongside the sculptures are paintings by the artist. In “Vision of Hell” (2023), a drawing of bees, bugs, snakes, millipedes, and other creatures is set above soapstone carvings of almost the same figures. Snakes attack the genitals of a male and a female figure, and a half dozen human silhouettes float in a river of red. “It’s almost Boschian,” stated Kelly during my gallery visit, referencing the iconic “Garden of Earthly Delights” by Hieronymus Bosch.

Unlike the latter painting, the human figures in Qimirpik's work don't show pain. In Christian symbology, hell is a state of permanence. In this alternate vision of hell, I wonder if, perhaps, the central characters are themselves shamans traveling into one version of the afterworld. What they learn, and the stories they bring back, may carry lessons for us all.

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(Left) Pitsiulaq Qimirpik, "Chimichero (muskox and plant)" (2023), stone and antler, 13 x 6 x 3 inches
(Right) Pitsiulaq Qimirpik, "Untitled" (2022), colored pencil, 8.1 x 11.7 inches



(Left) Pitsiulaq Qimirpik, "Shaman Riding Sedna" (2023), stone and antler, 4.5 x 9.5 x 2 inches
(Right) Pitsiulaq Qimirpik, "Untitled" (2022), colored pencil, 15 x 22.4 inches



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(Left) Pitsiulaq Qimirpik, "Muskox and Flowers" (2023), stone and antler, 7 x 3.5 x 4.5 inches
(Right) Pitsiulaq Qimirpik, "Untitled" (2022), colored pencil, 11.6 x 8.1 inches



Pitsiulaq Qimirpik, "Jesus Overcoming the Devil" (2023), stone and antler,
6.5 x 6 x 4.5 inches

Pitsiulaq Qimirpik continues at The Java Project (252 Java Street, Greenpoint, Brooklyn) through January 31. The exhibition was organized by Peter Kelly.