

Mary Bucci McCoy

# Our Land: Contemporary Art from the Arctic

**T**attoo Lady, by Germaine Arnaktauyok, is a small-scale lithograph with a triangular composition, in which the figure of a woman is firmly planted in the picture plane; the woman possesses an enduring solidarity, and her face, seen in profile, is turned toward the sky. Her arms, legs, and face glow an icy blue and are tattooed with traditional Inuit geometric patterns made by threading soot-covered needles through the skin. She is depicted as a statement of dignity, beauty, and empowerment.

The sculpture, prints, photographs, functional objects, video, and sound installations chosen for this first exhibit of the Government of Nunavut's collection of Inuit art, *Our Land*, tell stories of a people whose process of defining a new geographic territory has also been a process of esthetic self-definition. In his essay on storytelling in the exhibition's catalog, Inuit filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk writes, "When I began to see myself as an aboriginal person and a filmmaker I learned there are different ways to tell the same story. People in Igloodik learned through storytelling who we were and where we came from for 4,000 years without a written language." Storytelling is central to Inuit art, which in recent years has given the Inuit the economic and cultural means of establishing their place in the world and forming a future from their past. The Inuit artist engages in a narrative that asks the question, "Who are we?" The answers are varied and complex.

If, as Philip Fisher writes in *Making and Effacing Art: Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums*, "The museum is more than a location. It is a script," then the curator's role can be seen as that of a translator using a language whose components consist of the context of the exhibiting institution, the value system implicit in the physical space, the design of the exhibit itself, the wall text and labels, and finally the catalog and collateral events. Through the course of its recent expansion of both physical space and scope of ambition, Salem's historic Peabody Essex Museum, formed when the Peabody Museum (founded in 1799) and the Essex Institute (dating to 1821) merged, has substantively reworked its identity. It has developed into a progressive, inclusive institution with a philosophy that allows for divergent viewpoints in the interpretation and exploration of art and culture.

The presentation and documentation of the artwork attempt to respect the Inuit voice. "In the history of museums, there is an overwhelming tendency to deal with non-Western cultures in a voyeuristic manner, creating—often unintentionally—an observer/observed relationship....This is not a proper atmosphere for empathy and understanding, for witnessing the magnificence of human creativity in diverse circumstances, for relaxing conceptual biases to get a glimpse of the world from alternative points of view—in other words, the things that museums are supposed to be about," explains John Grimes, the exhibit's curator. The objects on view are labeled in both the Inuit's native Inuktitut language and in English, and wall texts use oral histories from Inuit elders and the words of Inuit artists instead of more conventional scholarly analysis. "We chose statements that we felt were revealing of how Inuit understand and respond to the world, that give glimpses of how the world appears from within another culture," Grimes says.

The catalog adds another dimension to the narrative. While many images in the catalog are traditional documents, others present subjective views of the artwork through stylized framing, focus, and viewpoint. Dramatic, full-page, close-up images of two ceramic pieces—an unglazed sculpture, *Head*, by Pie Kukshout, and a large vessel, *Glazed Jar*, by Yvo Samgeshok—appear in succession. Just the eyes, nose, and mouth of *Head* are contained within the frame of the page, which faces the title page with only the exhibit's title on it; taken together, the two pages make the statement that the people and the land are one, a central Inuit cultural value. Two pages later, the stylized eye pattern in the close-up of *Glazed Jar* echoes the more realistic eyes of *Head*, eloquently introducing a central stylistic trait of Inuit art. Viewing these two pieces in the exhibit without the catalog, you might well not make this connection; seeing them in the catalog brings you back to the exhibit to reconsider the objects with a new perspective. Inuit artist Paulosie Kaukluk states in the label text accompanying *Head*, "We carve the animals because they are important to us as food. We carve Inuit figures because in that way we can show ourselves to the world as we were in the past and as we are now. It is there for everyone to see. It is just the truth."

The inclusion of new media offers another path toward the "the truth." The thirteen-part video series *Nunavut (Our Land)*, directed by Zacharias Kunuk, presents a narrative of traditional Inuit life in segments ranging from "Home" to "Stalking" to "Happy Day." In Inuktitut with English subtitles, the videos are shown in four areas throughout the exhibit, suffusing the whole of the exhibition space with the sounds of Inuit voices and life.

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Peabody Essex Museum – www.pem.org

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Zacharias Kunuk, director, *Nunavut (Our Land)*, video, 1994–1995. Isuama Productions, Inc.

## First Look (continued from page 15)

One of the most poignant explorations of identity is Lucie Idlout's alt-rock song, "E5-770 Amaamangma Atinga" ("E5-770 My Mother's Name"), which refers to the Canadian government's dehumanizing practice of identifying each Inuit with a number rather than a name. Idlout, who was born in 1973 shortly after this practice was discontinued, likens the numerical identification of humans by the government to the numbering of cattle by farmers. While Idlout's song is the story of a dark time in the Inuit past, the fact that Idlout has written it and is singing becomes in and of itself another, more hopeful piece of the story. ■