



## Art addresses issues that touch Inuit society, but with a good dose of humour

JOHN POHL, *The Gazette*

Published: Saturday, April 14 2012

The answer to the question - "why is Inuit art popular?" - is to be found in Inuit Modern, on until Sept. 3 at the McCord Museum.

The sculptures that predominate in this show portray a people who we "southerners" might imagine as just barely enduring life in an inhospitable climate. Instead, the Inuit seem to be people at peace with themselves, their families, neighbours and their environment.

And they are often in good humour. Try to find a stone or whalebone sculpture without a face that is at least raising its eyebrows in feigned surprise at the survival of Inuit culture, survival that is in part thanks to how the Inuit found an audience for an art that is both accessible and challenging.

Subjects such as mother and child, spirituality and animals make Inuit art accessible; the minimalism of much Inuit sculpture makes it modern, and the way many younger artists use traditional subject matter to critique social and political issues makes it contemporary.

The exhibition, with 138 sculptures, drawings and prints, was organized by the Art Gallery of Ontario.

In its first section, co-curators Gerald McMaster and Ingo Hessel describe how the Inuit traded ivory objects with Europeans from the 17th century on. In 1949, an exhibition and sale of Inuit crafts in Montreal created an art market.

We Are Inuit, the second section, traces the formation in the 1960s of artists' co-ops in the villages where the Inuit were settling. Artists went beyond depicting anonymous generic scenes, like a hunter and seal, to what Hessel called the great themes of Inuit art - family life and spirituality.

"To understand the soul of Inuit art, look at a human figure," he said during a tour of the exhibition. Kiugak Ashoona's *Sea Goddess and Young* depicts a mother holding a happy child as if it were a trophy.

I Am an Inuit Artist traces the 1970s and 1980s, when personal expression became more important than conforming to a community style. McMaster spoke of Karoo Ashevak, who created a fantastic world with a sentient cosmos. "He had the fresh, tender qualities of a great sculptor," but he died in a house fire after a brief career that won him solo shows in Toronto and New York.

The final section is I Am an Artist. Like their contemporaries elsewhere, Inuit artists address global issues that affect their society and environment. But the Inuit artist does it with much more humour, Hessel said.

And nobody is off limits, as seen by David Ruben Piqtoukun's Shaman Crash Landing.

Inuit Modern continues until Sept. 3, at the McCord Museum, 690 Sherbrooke St. W. For information on the exhibition and showings of films on Inuit art, go to [mccord-museum.qc.ca](http://mccord-museum.qc.ca).

XTINCT, a life-size sculpture of an exhausted polar bear by Laura Santini, is on display at the McCord Museum until the end of May. Santini simulated the bear's fur by weaving hundreds of oyster shells into layers of wire mesh. The Montreal artist said she is trying to raise awareness of how climate change threatens both the polar bear and the oyster.

An exhibition at the Stewart Hall art gallery has animals, too, but these are roadkill cats that Kate Puxley has given a dignified new life through taxidermy.

Puxley is part of Copy/ Paste, a four-person exhibition co-curated by the gallery's Alexandra Hofmaenner and Chris Hand, who devoted his now-defunct Zeke's Gallery on St. Laurent Blvd. to giving artists their first show.

Copy/Paste refers to reusing a technique or material to create something new, Hand writes in the catalogue.

Madeleine Pippa Bartlett is a "yarn bomber" - a kind of slow-motion tagger who hides in city trees at night, knitting sweaters that wrap around trunks and branches.

Mitchell F. Chan built a machine that spews out puffs of vapour that spell out Cervantes's Don Quixote, lett by letter.

Elisabeth Picard takes white plastic zip-ties, which were created for bundling cables, and turns them into what appears to be the bleached skeletons of marine animals.

Puxley studied taxidermy, learning the practice from a Calgary taxidermist, followed by stints in natural history museums in Rome and London. She creates tableaus with cats and other animals - a pheasant with its head stuck in a tin can, a weasel in a sandwich container.

In Senza Terra: Cats, she juxtaposes a domestic cat on a carpet, toy mouse at its paws, with stray cats that appear to be falling. The installation recalls Robert Longo's Men in Cities drawings of men and women in contorted, ecstatic poses.

The domestic cat was a friend's beloved pet, the strays she found on the street. Which cat is more worthy of love, she seems to ask - the pet or the stray?

"I care deeply about what our relationship with animals says about us," Puxley said in an interview. These "rearrangements of skin" are a lot of work, she said. "It's a ritual."

Copy/Paste continues until April 29 at Stewart Hall Art Gallery, 176 Lakeshore Blvd., Pointe Claire. A catalogue launch will be held Thursday at 7 p.m. Information: [www.ville.pointe-claire.qc.ca](http://www.ville.pointe-claire.qc.ca).

Note: Last week I mentioned a grant given in 2011 to support the Papier art fair, which continues through Sunday at the corner of Bleury St., and de Maisonneuve Blvd. The grant was made by Quartier des Spectacles, the organization that is developing the cultural potential of the central downtown district. (Info: [papiermontreal.com](http://papiermontreal.com))

[john.o.pohl@gmail.com](mailto:john.o.pohl@gmail.com)

Unauthorized distribution, transmission or republication strictly prohibited.