
From the Selected Works of Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.

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Annie Pootoogook: In Memorium

Matthew Ryan Smith, Ph.D.



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Annie Pootoogook

May 11, 1969—September 19, 2016

I did not know Annie Pootoogook personally; I never had the opportunity to meet her, nor did I have the opportunity to know those closest to her. I knew her as most in the south of Canada did—through her artwork and through her presence in the media. As such, I can only speak to what I feel toward her, what I've read about her, and what she has taught me.

Annie Pootoogook's body was found on the shores of the Rideau River in Ottawa, the nation's capital. She was only 47 years old. Her life was not without struggle. She made a choice to move from Kinngait, known in English as Cape Dorset, to Ottawa a few years ago, assumedly to seek a fresh start, a chance to make a new home, to renew herself.

Annie Pootoogook's life began in her birthplace of Kinngait, recognized as a major hub of artistic production in Northern Canada, particularly for its contributions to contemporary printmaking. She was never far from this fire of creation. Her grandmother, Pitseolak Ashoona (Inuk, ca. 1906–1983), was a prolific artist known for radiating prints and drawings, while her mother, Napachie Pootoogook (Inuk, 1938–2002), produced a number of works on paper from which Annie Pootoogook would draw influences. So, she inherited a rich familial practice of art making and continued its legacy far beyond expectation. She made many things possible for Inuk artists. Her impact ripples far beyond the shores of Cape Dorset.

In the early 2000s, Annie Pootoogook's visibility in Canada increased. Her major breakthrough came when she was awarded the prestigious Sobey Art Award in 2006, the most significant contemporary art award for artists under 40 in Canada. That same year, she had her first major solo exhibition at Toronto's Power Plant Gallery before showing work in 2007 at Art Basel and at documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany; she was the first Inuk artist to participate in the event. Later, her work was included in the 17th Sydney Biennial in Australia and the National Museum of the American Indian George Gustav Center in New York. These are extraordinary achievements, and clearly her work has made deep impressions.

Everyone seems to know when a drawing is an Annie Pootoogook drawing. She gave us an idiosyncratic, visual language, both refined and considered, that will grow in appreciation in the coming years. Consciously or not, she picked apart the idealized and fictionalized image of the North perpetuated by non-Native filmmakers like Robert J. Flaherty, among many others, since the early 20th century.

Pootoogook's work is gracefully complex and intensely sophisticated. Her drawings are honest, uncompromising, even painfully blunt, with no embellishment or panache—just real stories told from deep inside that reflect real experiences, real life, real hurt, and real celebration. She made the everyday monumental. It is difficult to separate her life from her



Roy Boney Jr. (Cherokee Nation), *Annie Pootoogook*, 2016, digital drawing. Image courtesy of the artist.

artwork. There are scenes of domestic violence, suicide, and alcoholism. Then there's my favorite work of hers: a self-portrait drawn after she won the Sobey Art Award with her back turned to the viewer; the one where the Sobey banner hangs loosely in the background, and she's surrounded by the press staring at and interviewing her in a moment of triumph. It's so humble, as I imagine her to be.

Annie Pootoogook introduced many Northern truths to the South of Canada and the rest of the world, often to non-Indigenous peoples who are not aware of the realities she presented (or flat chose to ignore them). In this light, her body of work indicates how the project of colonialism is unfolding in Northern communities; how it has and continues to set up conditions for further economic marginalization and social disenfranchisement. Her death, under suspicious circumstances, is yet another reminder that Indigenous women and girls in Canada are subject to systemic violence more than any other group. Annie Pootoogook has died, and I fear that nothing will change.

I feel thankful to Annie Pootoogook. I am thankful for the art that she has chosen to share with us. I have showed it to my students. I have discussed it with others. I have seen it touch others. I am thankful. —Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD



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