Kinngait in Scale: Embassy of Imagination and the Next Generation of Inuit Artists

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by Matthew Ryan Smith
Awash in fantastical imagery and vibrant colour, formerly drab walls in Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal and, perhaps most surprisingly, the small hamlet of Kinngait (Cape Dorset), NU, are being transformed by a shifting roster of artists—most of whom are still in high school. Created with the support of a Southern arts collective, this talented group of youth is carrying a community arts legacy into the future and leaving their own unique mark along the way.

For several months in 2015, four youth artists from Kinngait drew candid and stylized pictures of animals, objects, portraits and scenes from everyday life. The artists—Lachaoalisie “Latch” Akesuk, Parr Josephee (formerly Etidloie), Aoudi Qinnayaq and Cie Taaqsiak—soon travelled 2,294 kilometers south to Toronto where they were joined by two local artists—Juliet Arias and Moises Frank—to execute a massive 50-foot mural on the side of a grey building on Church Street in Toronto’s east end. Although the original site for the mural fell through, a different building owner offered their wall to the group shortly thereafter. The mural’s title, Piliqratiguq, translates to English as “working together towards a common goal,” a title befitting the painting’s collaborative framework.

The work is an abstract representation featuring stylized patterns, motifs and a radiating colour palette, picturing caribou, dogs, fish, a walrus, faces, human hands and a broken-down snowmobile. Set against a glowing orange sun, these figures and objects are strapped onto the back of a hunched over male figure who lumbers under its immense weight. The figure is based on a story handed down by members of the community to one of the artists involved. “I heard some stories about my grandfather carrying a snowmobile and they told me to draw it,” says Josephee. “And it worked out.” The image of Josephee’s grandfather with, not only the weight of the broken snowmobile, but also the weight of the North on his shoulders, is an apt metaphor for those like him in Northern communities who would have experienced the transition of “social upheaval” from nomadic existence to colonial resettlement in matchbox houses. While it may not have intended to do so, the wall speaks of colonialism’s unfolding history in the North, and the ways that colonization reverberates amongst individuals and communities.

The Piliqratiguq project was directed by Embassy of Imagination (EOI), a Toronto-based arts initiative that organizes cultural programming, events and workshops for Kinngait youth. The initiative is directed by two non-Indigenous visual artists, Alexa
I’m so proud of the mural we painted in Ottawa, I’m proud of everyone. I felt excited to be at the unveiling, and I will be so excited to see the mural again when I go back to Ottawa.

Hatunaka and Patrick Thompson, who also work under the artist collective moniker PA System. As visual artists, an artist collective and a social praxis co-operative, they blur discursive lines, thus raising an important question: where does socially engaged community action begin and individual artistic practice end (and vice versa)? Together, Hatunaka and Thompson have helped to facilitate mural paintings and other creative projects in the Nunavut communities of Iqaluit, Kinngait, Iqaluit and Sanirajak (Hall Beach), as well as those in Northern Quebec, including Kangiqsujuaq, Kuujjuuaq and Inukjuak. Moreover, the group’s other Southern mural projects include Tunnganarniq (2017) in Ottawa and Qamutiuqiq (2016) in Montreal. For Tunnganarniq, E01 collaborated with Kinngait youth and the Ottawa School of Art to produce a colossal public mural on the side of a building in the ByWard Market on George Street. The work represents the story of an Inuit hunter who captured a whale that had a harpoon over 100 years old lodged inside its body.

In Qamutiuqiq, the second of E01’s travelling mural projects (after Toronto), the group once again collaborated with Kinngait youth. The result is a large-scale public mural of an anthropomorphic face emerging from an underwater landscape dotted with walrus, caribou, an iceberg and an igloo. Qamutiuqiq is a term meaning innovative and resourceful, which bears on the mural’s message of the detrimental effects of climate change on everyday life in the North.

One of the central objectives of E01 is to bridge the gap in dependable cultural programming opportunities for Kinngait youth; namely, by providing access and agency to meaningful art-related experiences. According to their website, “E01 encourages youth to achieve self-empowerment through creating fun, collaborative community projects and professionally-realized satellite projects across Canada. [...] in a territory [Nunavut] that has complex challenges and lacks employment opportunities, artistically inclined youth must be supported.” For instance in 2014, E01 visited Kinngait in order to lead a workshop that taught youth artists to construct multi-layered stencils, which were then used in the process of painting patterns and motifs on eight wildlife-proof recycling bins. There, youth learned a contemporary street art approach, while attempting to beautify public space and assist in environmental sustainability.

During this trip, Hatunaka and Thompson were introduced to the youth artists who would later participate in the Toronto mural project as part of the collaborative mural, Mine Your Imagination, installed on the facade of Sam Pudlat Elementary School in the hamlet.

Recent exhibitions, such as the touring show Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture (2012) and the Art Gallery of Ontario’s Every. Now. Then: Reframing Nativehood (2017), which featured E01 and Kinngait youth artists, have pointedly demonstrated the ways that Inuit youth (and Indigenous youth, more broadly) are invested in the aesthetics and political contributions made by skate and urban hip-hop culture, which includes sanctioned (and unsanctioned) forms.
I'm passionate about art. I like drawing because it makes me happy and calm; I feel good when I'm drawing. I like being part of the zoi projects because it makes me feel like I'm not alone. I want to be an artist when I grow up.

of graffiti and street art; yet, rather surprisingly, there remain few examples of academic literature on First Nations, Inuit and Métis graffiti and street art. With the emergence of the “post-graffiti” condition, defined as the explosion of graffiti and street art into subgenres, including wheatpaste stickering, stencilling, yarn-bombing and guerrilla sculpture, research in this field will surely increase. Part of this critical lack in Canada is due to absent prospects for Inuit youth to learn, execute and sustain sanctioned graffiti and street art practices in Northern communities when cost, resources, materials, educators and suitable wall space are in short supply.

The appearance then of Piitiqalirtiingnigq on a public-facing wall in downtown Toronto, for tens of thousands of Indigenous and non-Indigenous daily viewers, is significant for a number of reasons. The most striking being that the work translates the rich tradition of oral storytelling into the visual sphere—into the stuff of aesthetics. By employing strategies and methodologies that have been similarly harnessed by video collectives Igloolik Isuna Productions and Arnait Video Productions, recent graffiti and street art produced by Inuit artists serve to pass cultural values and community narratives to other Inuit, particularly those living in urban centres, but also to non-Indigenous folks living in Southern Canada as well, forcefully redressing stereotypical narratives of the North. Their subject matter and iconography are not void of political capital; instead, many of their stories draw from—and draw attention to—cultural resiliency as well as the destructive spirit of colonialism that continues to threaten the socio-cultural survival of Inuit communities. Innovative and experimental forms of contemporary art, of which sanctioned graffiti and street art belong, are emerging as one of the most important aesthetic developments in the history of Inuit art and visual culture. For art historian Heather Igloliorte, [new approaches], involving the illustration of trans-cultural processes and the Inuit experience of the contemporary world, [seem] to be accelerating and now include remarkably sensitive and even more nuanced social commentary and critique. There has been a noticeable shift over the last two decades to the depictions of daring, intercultural subject matter [...] and what is, hopefully, a growing body of work that directly calls into question the legacy of trauma and colonization in the Arctic.

For graffiti and street art specifically, their political clout is deeply related to the construction of colonial space. To this end, “regardless of the artist’s intention,” contends Anna Waclawek, “producing art on the street is in itself a form of resistance to sanctioned imagery and the notion of public space [...] a type of rebellion against the capitalist construction of space.” This work can symbolically reclaim colonial architecture, sites, spaces and dead grey towers awash in commercial advertising imagery. Even the physical presence of Indigenous peoples in colonial spaces may function as a political act of resistance that responds to the attempted erasure of Indigenous peoples and cultures by European colonialism since Contact. Like most places, Kingait has its differences, its paradoxes and its dichotomies. The hamlet maintains a small population of around 1,400 people, and, yet, since the 1950s, has remained one of the major centres of artistic production in Canada, home to some of its most celebrated artists, including Kenojuak Ashevak, CC, ON, RCA (1927–2013), Pitseolak Ashoona, CM, RCA (c. 1904–1985) and Annie Pootoogook (1969–2016); though the Canadian government asserts that 90 percent of those over 15 years of age is engaged in the arts and crafts industry, the rate of suicide in Nunavut territory, according to Statistics Canada, is nearly eleven times higher than the
Canadian national average, with the vast majority of deaths being people under 50 years of age. Twenty-three percent of Inukjuak's population identify as visual artists, however the unemployment rate hovers somewhere around 22 percent, while the high school dropout rate approaches 40 percent; what is more, one in five people from Inukjuak—according to the territory's tourist board—identify art-making as their principle source of employment. These numbers say very little, if nothing, of the real and often understated ways that settler colonialism has structured and systematized forms of suffering in the North, particularly intergenerational traumas that affect the health and well-being of families and communities. Despite the fact that art and the art market holds a key position in Inukjuak's economy, social stability remains a priority—the idea that art can save the world just isn’t working.

According to New York-based critic and curator Carlo McCormick, forms of graffiti and street art such as mural painting follow an "other" history, one that seeks to disarm the art establishment and the economy itself. It is something that steadfastly remains, by its very nature, attributable yet unknowable. Ethereal and fleeting, this work can be ruined as quickly as it can be created. "Inherently
Being part of nor shows us that we are loved and cared for and that we have the opportunity to have the best experiences we can. I’ve seen so much and met so many different people. I have more understanding and respect of other people. I don’t even have the words...it’s been something else in my life.

My grandma’s name is Meelia Kelly, I’m inspired by her. My favourite artwork of hers is Bountiful Sea (2006). Being part of the nor mural in Kinngait makes me feel that I am not alone. I drew a mirrored drawing, with a polar bear, two creatures and two faces. It makes me feel happy.

anti-institutional,” says McCormick, “it has never fit well within the academy or the museum; basically free, it has consistently had a problematic relationship with the art market.” The act of Inuit youth artists from Kinngait producing large-scale public mural paintings such as Pilirrigitigninguq, Tungangarnaq, and Qoneqauqamik that cannot be bought or sold is powerful in many ways. Namely, considering Inuit art’s historical relationship to the art market, these works maintain their place among the many forms of political resistance to colonialism and its capitalism. These public mural projects featuring Kinngait youth have the potential to support intercultural dialogues that do not readily exist between Northern and Southern communities, but who is listening and what is at stake? Undoubtedly, their work helps to redefine how graffiti and street art operate in Canada, as well as how it can be deployed to claim space at both the community level and within the realm of contemporary art. Ultimately, however, the scope and extent of its ability to shift political discourse remains in the realm of individual viewers. It will be interesting to watch the long-term permutations of these projects as they shift from the two-dimensional sphere of the wall, to the multi-dimensional space of public imagination.

NOTES
2 Heather Igloliorte discusses the relationship between “social upheaval” and the creation of art as a mode of resistance in “Inuit Art: Markers of Cultural Resistance,” Inuit Art Quarterly 25, no. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 2010), 4.