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Embassy of Imagination**

October 21 to November 30, 2017

The Theatre Centre

1115 Queen St. W, Toronto

Inuuqatigiitsiarniq: Embassy of Imagination

The Theatre Centre Galleries & Objectorium

October 21 – November 30, 2017

Artists: Christine Adamie, Lachaolasie Akesuk, Salomonie Ashoona, Alexa Hatanaka, Salomonie Ivaluajuk, Harry Josephee, Parr Josephee, Moe Kelly, Saaki Nuna, David Pudlat, Taqialuk Pudlat, Daniel Qiatsuk, Kevin Qimirpik, Iqaluk Quvianaqtuliaq, Tommy Quvianaqtuliaq, Josie Saila, Susie Saila, Ezevalu Samayualie, Johnny Samayualie, Cie Taqiasuk, Patrick Thompson, and Joanasi Tunnillie.

Curated by Myung-Sun Kim

Inuuqatigiitsiarniq in Inuktitut is one of the core Inuit societal values and translates as ‘*respecting others, relationships and caring for people.*’

Created by Inuit youth from Kinngait (Cape Dorset, Nunavut) and *PA System* (Alexa Hatanaka and Patrick Thompson), the collaborative works by *Embassy of Imagination* animate the life of the North and the complexities of community care, kinship, solidarity, and empathy.

Visitors to Embassy of Imagination’s *Inuuqatigiitsiarnig*, are greeted with ‘*Fast and Furious*’ (2015), a reductive lino-cut print of ‘the fastest snowmobile’ by Joanasi Tunnillie that he

created at age twelve with precision and confidence. We might wonder, how long has he been dreaming this – *to ride the fastest snowmobile, bigger and faster than any airplane?* Tunnillie's quest for an agency, his desire for mobility, and his strong-willed affirmation to pave one's own pathway is visible in the playfulness of his work. Mobility and affirmation are forms of resistance against the colonial oppression that gave rise to the disparities and the hardships experienced by the Inuit communities and many other Indigenous communities in this north part of Turtle Island (Canada).



<Image Credit: **Fast and Furious** (2015) by Joanasie Tunnillie >

As a symbolic object in the North, the snowmobile provides an opportunity to be out on the land, and to deepen one's relationship with the place through intergenerational community care and knowledge sharing. With the access provided by snowmobiles, elders lead the way by teaching them about

connections to the land through oral history sharing. They demonstrate to the younger generation how the land can replenish and sustain them physically, emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically. Learning to live off the land by ice fishing, hunting, and berry picking, helps to establish food security. This is essential when food at the local co-op from the South is very expensive. For instance, a head of lettuce can cost \$10 or more. Journeys out into the land, enabled by snowmobiles, provide a deeper understanding of one's roots, history, and their place, resisting against cultural, linguistic, and historical amnesia.

10. "Wen ya' miss me, I gone." There are real consequences for being unseen. Unseen people can disappear and be murdered and forgotten and forced to write essays with their invisible thread that only their children can decipher.

Anique Jordan
'Tangential Tableau: Reworking Canadian Content' in Every. Now. Then: Reframing Nationhood. Art Gallery of Ontario (2017)



<Image credit: **Ezee** (2016); Collaboration between Ezevalu Samayualie and Alexa Hatanaka>

The portrait series by *Embassy of Imagination* was created collaboratively through multi-layered process with prints and drawings, based on photographs that the artists took of each other. Bringing visibility to the artist's individuality and their collective narrative through the lens of affirmation, love, and care is a way of generating new representations that can go beyond the limitations and stereotypes found in existing representations of Inuit culture and art.

The four cyanotypes (or sun drawing) in the exhibition were made with transparencies and found objects, by allowing sunlight to expose an image through and around the objects. Using the sun as a light source connects the works back to the outdoors, the land, and to a realm of independence beyond the colonial legacy of institutional spaces. These artists have utilized an energy source from

their land for their speculated world to become visible, realized into physical realm.



<Image credit left to right:

Untitled (Portrait of Etulu Aningmiuq), (2016) by Daniel Qiatsuk

[Top] **Untitled (2016)** by Johnny Samayualie and Ezevalu Samayualie

[Bottom] **Untitled** (2016) by Ezevalu Samayualie

Untitled (with qulliq) (2016) by Saaki Nuna

This process of artmaking connects to other indigenous practices, for instance a Vancouver-based indigenous curator and artist from the Secwepemc nation, Tania Willard, created BUSH Gallery with an intention to “*articulate indigenous creative land practices, which are born out of a lived connection to the land.*”¹ In Willard’s workshops, the participants use the residues of shared meals and food harvested from the land. The resulting artworks document the moment of collective sharing and

¹ Tania Willard, <http://www.taniawillard.ca/blog/>

community care, thereby creating a different way of archiving the history of the shared land. This embodied process connects the participants directly with a physical aspect of history through materials and place. By ingesting these elements during the ritualistic processes of artmaking, they literally and metaphorically embody the history collectively, becoming a community.



<Image credit: Courtesy of Embassy of Imagination>

Finding and transforming materials from the land generates a different narrative for the collective, *Embassy of Imagination*. They have chosen to work with debris and objects found in a large dump that is a prominent part of the Kinngait landscape. Because the location is so remote, it is costly to transport waste away from the community. The dump represents a record of life in Kinngait from colonial past to the present. The collective made musical

instruments by repurposing metal and discarded objects from this archive of waste materials during workshops, co-facilitated by Jason Kenemy. The musical instruments were placed at the centre of a space surrounded by portraits of the artists that created them. Visitors are invited to play the instruments with the artists present through the portraits - an extra-ordinary situation borne out of a discarded scene.



<Image courtesy of Embassy of Imagination (David Pudlat, Taqialuk Pudlat, Christine Adamie, Moe Kelly, and Iqaluk Quvianaqtuliaq)
Documentation by Myung-Sun Kim>

On the walls of staircase, there are sea creatures that bring a part of the North to the South, evoking a way of sharing and living on the land; one where humans and non-humans may harvest what they need with minimal impact on the existing ecology.

The only human figure in the mural is Peter Pitseolak – an important Inuit figure, who taught himself photography in the 1940s and then documented the fleeting cultural life of the North just as the government began to take control of the Inuit communities, starting with relocation of seasonal hunting camps (Seekooseelak) to permanent settlements.

All of the works in this exhibition came out of a process of collaboration. The murals, objects, drawings, and prints were developed by groups of Inuit young artists (average age between 12-20), facilitated by Alexa Hatanaka and Patrick Thompson. Their first visit to the North was for a mural project in 2008, and subsequently created artworks in several communities in the North, which led to the formation of *Embassy of Imagination* in 2014. They spend three to six months of the year in Kinngait, and carry out out-of-community projects with groups of youth. In 2016, three of the Inuit young artists spent their summer in Toronto making art with Alexa and Patrick, where nurturing a unique intercultural and horizontal kinship. They converse with their collaborators from Kinngait through image making: a method of deep listening, sharing and communicating the ineffables through visual language. For example, Johnny Samayualie and Patrick Thompson supported each other as they grieved the recent loss of their mutual friend through a collaborative drawing, *Untitled* (2016, cover

image), a process which held them together in communication over several weeks.

Through active cultural production – artmaking, self-image making, storytelling, writing, and exhibition-making – intergenerational knowledge and oral history are embodied and recorded in concrete forms. Cultural production ensures that this legacy will be archived, and makes it possible for conversations to begin in mobilising the Indigenous with intercultural communities. This process replenishes the community with care and sustenance.

For any meaningful change to happen in Kinngait, the next generation of artists will need to have consistent and sustained opportunities and support. *Embassy of Imagination* has been recognized for engaging youth on the fringes of an already underserved community. Every youth working in the collective has been affected by suicide, and many struggle in school or have dropped out. Many live in precarious food insecurity and overcrowded homes. Like many indigenous communities, the suffering stems directly from historical traumas caused by colonization with insufficient support to transition people into an imposed colonial economy and way of life, and the lack of support to maintain traditional knowledge and activities. Kinngait has long been regarded as the capital of Inuit art, but very few opportunities are available for their youth to become

part of this legacy and take it into the future. The next generation needs to be supported in order to continue defining their own voices.

Embassy of Imagination isn't a part of an official program set up by the government to work with the young people of Kinngait. Alexa and Patrick connected with them during a mural project in 2014, and they have committed themselves since then to building a relationship with the community. They share their insights, resources and knowledge from their quite different life experiences, and contribute both vocabulary and tools to help the youth develop their own visual language. People unfamiliar with their practice, especially those from the South, often ask "*why doesn't an Inuit artist provide leadership for young artists?*" This is a valid question, but there doesn't seem to be a simple or easy solution to the present difficulty in sharing intergenerational knowledge and building trust among the generations living in Kinngait. In reflecting on the complicated cultural landscape of Canada, there is a value in sharing of resources and diversity of perspectives in sharing the land together. *PA System's* commitment is a way of acting on their shared beliefs of community care, and acting in solidarity with the Inuit and the North.

This exhibition shows what acting in solidarity can look like. People are standing in hard places together, and creating something tangible through

their collective action, despite the costs. A mentor that I highly respect told me that changes cannot happen without costs, and as a queer woman of colour working in the arts I understand this very well. Community care and collective justice can take many forms. This beautiful kinship that *Embassy of Imagination* has built together can extend out beyond the collective, adding strength and optimism to the larger community surrounding them.

These ideas may seem ephemeral or vague in the context of a large urban center like Toronto. Some of self-defined politically conscious people often do not speak up or act when they see violent acts of racism, homophobia, sexism, ableism, or other forms of xenophobia in their everyday spaces, in fear of making a scene, or making someone uncomfortable, or the labour feels too difficult. And yet these moments become a dinner conversation topic on what-is-wrong-with-the-world. They are found at public or art events about social justice, or safe protests that are well staged with celebrities and police – cathartic theatricalities of protests makes it easily exciting instagram-able, twitter-able moments to raise their own image with an aesthetic of social justice.

The connection between artists' survivability, the funding system, and cultural production of artwork are closely interlinked and it changes how the artist's work is presented. The funding councils now

prioritize Indigenous peoples, people of colour and artists with disabilities, where the theatricality of protests and aesthetics of social justice around these bodies have become a form of currency.

Unfortunately, this disembodied system often benefits institutions while ghettoizing the artists that it was intended to support. To profit from the labour and lived experiences of these bodies parallels a nearly prophetic speculative fiction by Octavia E. Butler, *Parables of Talent*, which articulates a form of cultural mining that promotes and utilizes the methodologies of post-capitalist slavery. Publicly funded institutions have a long way to go before they can act in solidarity with the larger intercultural communities, and eliminate bureaucratic practices that are rooted in the colonial past. Embodied approaches to thinking about the ecology of art system may help to build accountability and criticality in an impactful way.

The works and practice of *Embassy of Imagination* express the experience and values of the Inuit North through the kinship that they have built over the years. Their art practice, exhibition-making, and by extension my contributions as curator are borne out of being in solidarity with the North. The intention here is to generate many intercultural conversations that will respect, support, and create bonds with the Indigenous North, particularly in reflecting on the complexities of sharing the evolving cultural landscape. Experiencing an embodied practice, with

empathy at its core, encourages each visitor to engage more deeply with one's surroundings and the interlinked extended communities.

Inuuqatigiitsiarniq – to respect others, relationships and caring for people.

Written by Myung-Sun Kim

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