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Art Trip: Shuvinai Ashoona collapses boundaries at the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow

Rose Prata – February 3, 2020



Shuvinai Ashoona, *Pregnancies in Universe*, 2014, Graphite, colored pencil, and ink on paper. 36.75 x 49.5 inches. Courtesy of Shuvinai Ashoona and Dorset Fine Arts.

The Blue Marble, a photograph of Earth from space taken by the crew of the Apollo 17 spacecraft in 1972, is one of the most widely distributed images in history. It shows our home planet as isolated and vulnerable, suspended in an expanse of inky black. A well-used symbol for environmental activism, it's often paired with the caption, "It's the only one we've got."

But for Kinngait-based artist Shuvinai Ashoona – whose exhibition *Holding on to Universes* is on view at the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Glasgow until March 22 – worlds exist in plurality. In *Pregnancies in Universe*, part of a larger body of work that uses globes as a motif, 19 pregnant bellies distend into an encroaching galactic circle as eight people, including two babies tucked into the hoods of their mothers' amauti (parkas), look up in wonder and fear.

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Flipping the colonial-scientific gaze on its head, Ashoona collapses the boundaries between microscopic and macroscopic, real and phantasmagorical, dream and nightmare. In her highly detailed coloured-pencil drawings – which blend supernatural and real-world references from film and television, Inuit culture and history, everyday life and the topography of her Nunavut home – she generates a visual poetry that is unequalled in its skill, humour, warmth and uninhibited imagination.

Ashoona, who was awarded the 2018 Gershon Iskowitz Prize for her outstanding contribution to the visual arts in Canada, is the child of artists, the eldest of 11 children and a mother herself. Her work is informed by her personal experience, but also likely by Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit (IQ) – Inuit traditional knowledge that takes the interconnectedness of all life as its foundation. Some of the principal values of IQ are being respectful and responsible toward the land and others, and always preparing for a better future.

Perhaps the cosmic mothers the artist has gathered are swollen not with babies, but with planets – each one containing the potential for a new, better world. “I’m such a little person beside such a big universe,” Ashoona says in the book *Vitamin D2: New Perspectives in Drawing*. With her unique worldview, she proves that symbolic value can outsize the literal, and that even a little person is capable of initiating enormous, universe-shifting transformation.