

FORT GANSEVOORT

HYPERALLERGIC

Inuit Culture Comes to Life in Shuvinaï Ashoona's Drawings

In a new show in New York City, Ashoona's memory-based compositions infuse truth coupled with whimsy surrounding life in the Arctic.

Zhea Nayyar – September 20, 2023



Shuvinaï Ashoona, *Polar bear sketching people*, 2023, Colored pencil and ink on paper, 50.25 x 97.25 inches ©Shuvinaï Ashoona. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

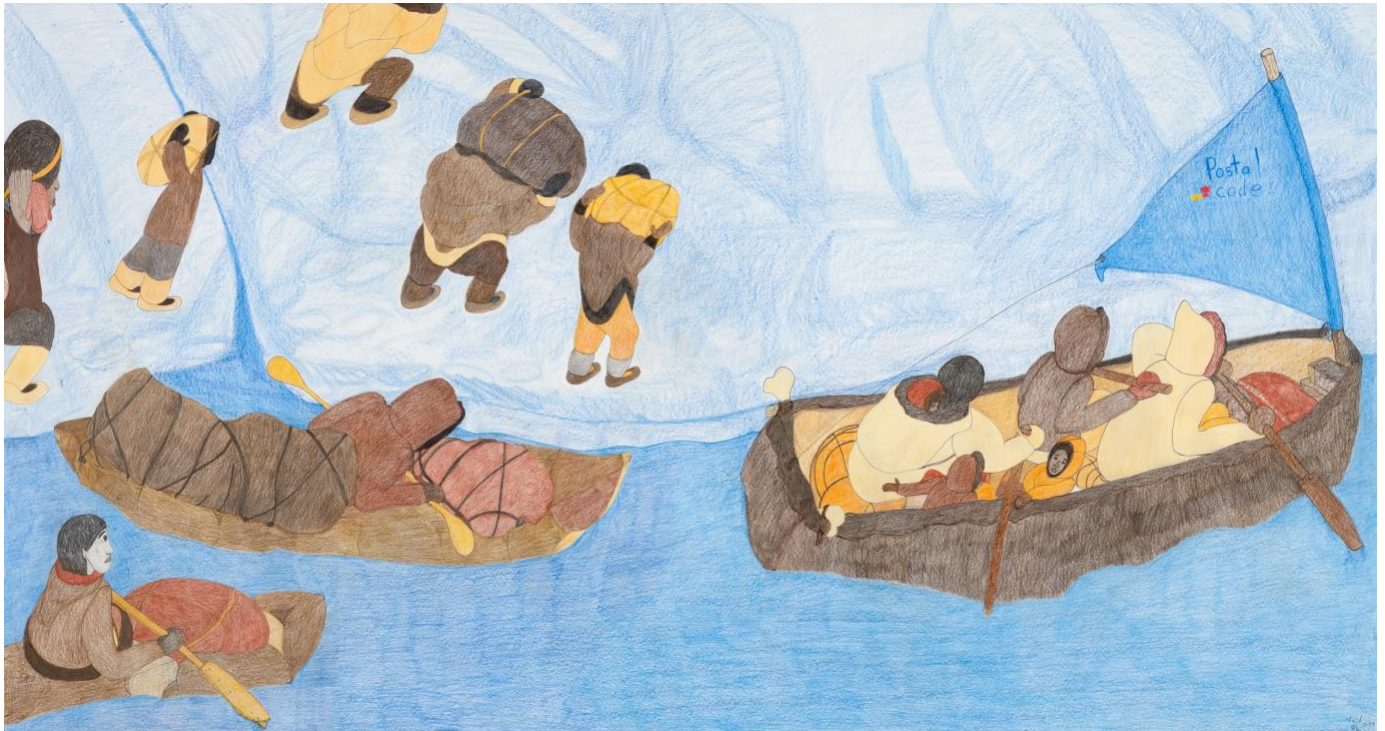
Celebrated Inuk artist Shuvinaï Ashoona has debuted a large swath of new work in her solo exhibition [Looking Out, Looking In](#), on view through November 4 at the Fort Gansevoort gallery in Manhattan's Meatpacking District. Hailing from a family of Inuit artists in Kinngait (formerly Cape Dorset), located in present-day Canada's Nunavut territory, Ashoona layers day-to-day experiences of Inuit culture in the Arctic with fantastical scenes of an imagined universe through colored pencils and oil pastels.

Ashoona's artistic lineage can be traced back to her grandmother, painter and printmaker Pitseolak Ashoona, as well as her parents, expert carver Kiugak and graphic artist Sorosiluto Ashoona; her aunt, graphic artist Napachie Pootoogook; and her cousin, draftswoman Annie Pootoogook, among several other relatives. Ashoona and her family members facilitated their art practices at the Kinngait Studios that are [operated by](#) a community-owned organization self-governed by an all-Inuit Board with shareholders who are nearly all Kinngait residents.

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With Kinngait serving as the center of Inuit art, the studios have harnessed and expanded upon the existing cultural craftsmanship and channeled it for worldwide appreciation since the late 1950s, with the Toronto-based Dorset Fine Arts office serving as the marketing liaison since 1978.

During the in-person remarks at Fort Gansevoort, William Huffman, the organization’s marketing manager, shared a refreshingly humorous anecdote in which an Inuk teenager visited the studios on the instruction of his father, who had told him that he “should get a real job and become an artist.” More than 400 of the some 1,400 Kinngait residents [work in the arts sphere](#), an astounding percentage that Ashoona highlights in a variety of her own works pertaining to the Kinngait Studios and its members.



Shuvina Ashoona, *Moving with our campsites (traditional movers)*, 2023, Colored pencil and ink on paper, 50.25 x 96 inches ©Shuvina Ashoona. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

Through 20 drawings created this year, Ashoona presents both enormous events and minute memories on varying sizes of paper, incorporating references to her past works as portals that transcend time. Her memory-based compositions infuse truth coupled with whimsy surrounding life in the Arctic. Highlighting the family- and community-oriented nature of Inuit culture, also modeled by Kinngait Studios, Ashoona’s figurative drawings depict people hunting, making art, or simply communing. Deeply influenced by the natural world, Ashoona also transforms her community members and fellow artists into animals, both endemic and fictional, blurring the lines between reality and imagination.

Ashoona’s continued fixation with landscapes is also presented at a magnificent scale as she renders the near-imperceptible delineations between sea, snow, and sky, or meticulously captures each stone in the craggy terrain shown in “Eggs and Rocks” (2023). Her landscapes are fluid rather than fixed, often leaning into the cosmic, untethered nature of an ever-shifting aurora borealis and the evolution of flora and fauna in the face of monumental climate change.

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Detail of Shuvinai Ashoona's "Eggs and Rocks" (2023), a colored pencil and ink drawing on paper showing a rocky landscape populated by native birds (photo Rhea Nayyar/*Hyperallergic*)

Spread across three gallery floors, Ashoona's compositions celebrate and document contemporary Inuit existence and perseverance in juxtaposition with pre-colonial traditions that have been threatened by the modern environmental consequences of capitalism and colonialism. These explosions of color and carefully mapped spatial dynamics narrate the artist's enthusiasm for life and its truths, in all their harshness and beauty.

"Ashoona has really created a very specific kind of vernacular," Candice Hopkins, executive director of the Indigenous arts and culture advocacy organization Forge Project and long-time admirer of Ashoona's practice, shared during the remarks. "She's self-declaring their own [Inuit] art history and referencing the women in her lives who were all extraordinary artists as well as recurring motifs that were carried forward from some of the earliest images and prints of Inuit art."

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An installation view of Shuvinai Ashoona's "Untitled" (2023), ink and colored pencil on paper, 15 x 23 inches, on the second floor at Fort Gansevoort (photo Rhea Nayyar/*Hyperallergic*)



Installation view of Shuvinai Ashoona's enormous drawings on the second floor at Fort Gansevoort (photo Rhea Nayyar/*Hyperallergic*)