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PENTICTON HERALD

West Baffin Cooperative gears up for 65th anniversary

Kira Wronska Dorward— November 27, 2023

Kinngait's West Baffin Cooperative will be celebrating its 65th anniversary in 2024 with more than a dozen exhibitions of local art and related events across the globe, including the United States, Italy, Korea, England and France.

The launch of festivities will, however, take place in early December, in partnership with Canada Goose and their pop-up store in Miami. It will showcase the work of Kinngait Studios artist Saimaiyu Akesuk.

January 2024 will feature an exhibition of work at The Perimeter in London by Shuvinai Ashoona, which will be the second solo exhibition for the artist in England. The same month, the national touring exhibition Kenojuak Ashevak: Life and Legacy will see its ninth venue at Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton, N.B.

"Established in 1959 by its Inuit community, the West Baffin Cooperative has provided a substantial economic benefit to hundreds of local artists promoting sales and exhibitions of their work across Canada and internationally. In 2018, the administrative offices and Kinngait Studios relocated to a state-of-the-art facility, the Kenojuak Cultural Centre, a venue built with more than \$13 million in private and public sector support," reads the press release. "In addition to its Kinngait operations, the West Baffin Cooperative maintains a Toronto office, which is responsible for interfacing with galleries, museums, cultural professionals, Inuit art enthusiasts and the art market globally. Over the years, this shared endeavour has allowed Kinngait to become one of our nation's most important centres for visual art, and has nurtured generations of Canada's most celebrated artists."

Although most famous for its art collective and highlighting the artwork of the community, the cooperative has a diverse business portfolio that includes a restaurant, a local grocery and hardware store, rental properties and it maintains various utility contracts.

The cooperative and its artists

It all started long before the time of current West Baffin Cooperative president Pauloosie Kowmageak, when the federal government began sending administrators up North to invest in affordable projects. The Co-op, the oldest in Nunavut, was one such project to receive funding.

"Everybody that is a member has to put in \$5 to join," said Kowmageak. "That's how you build up your equity."

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Since the organization is community-owned, nearly all Kinngait adults possess shares, with profits being redistributed back to the community in annual dividends.

“It’s not a whole lot,” Kowmageak acknowledges, “but it’s like you’re getting something back for investing in the Co-op.”

A remarkable 10 per cent of the community’s 1,400 residents are professional artists. The Co-op refers to Kinngait as “one of our nation’s most important centres for visual art and has nurtured generations of Canada’s most celebrated artists.”

Kowmageak added, “Our strength lies with the successive generations of committed artists, dedicated community members and trusted partners who continually shape this organization. This significant anniversary is an opportunity to acknowledge everyone who has contributed to our growth and to foster those new relationships that will ensure our future prosperity.”

Of that future prosperity, Kowmageak said the West Baffin Cooperative is seeking to continue to “succeed and try to promote artists and grow the market. We want to give our artists a platform to showcase their artwork. Right now, we’re just at the very beginning of planning for the year’s events.”