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Kinngait artists' work gets worldwide audience as studio marks 65 years

West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative Ltd. Is Canada's oldest Inuit-led arts organization

Livete Ataguyuk- January 30, 2024



The work of Kinngait artist Shuvina Ashoona is being showcased at The Perimeter art gallery in London, England until late April, as part of the West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative's plan to mark its 65th anniversary. (Image provided by West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative)

West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative Ltd. is celebrating 65 years with a solo exhibition by Kinngait artist Shuvina Ashoona in London, England.

It's just one of a dozen exhibitions and events planned this year around the world.

The co-operative, known as Canada's oldest Indigenous-owned and Inuit-led arts organization, was founded in 1959. It has supported hundreds of artists through sales and exhibitions of their work across Canada and internationally.

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The Ashoona exhibition, titled *When I Draw*, opened Jan. 25 and will continue until April 26 at The Perimeter art gallery. It's her second solo exhibition in London.

"A private collector bought 13 of Shuvinaï's works," said William Huffman, interim manager for West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative Ltd., at its Toronto office.

"The exhibition is really remarkable, and [the impact] Shuvinaï's work and Inuit art in general that we can have like this in London is enormous."



An exhibit by artist Shuvinaï Ashoona, shown here at the Kinngait studios in 2016, will be at The Perimeter art gallery in London, England until April 26. (File photo)

Huffman said that in his job, his focus is on the artists and "developing the art market internationally, and to make sure that Kinngait artists are participating in these important exhibitions globally."

He said he will be in Kinngait in February to prepare for upcoming events and to let the artists there know what is happening globally. The next big exhibition for the co-operative will be in March in South Korea.

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Huffman said young artists are starting to take on the work that has been passed down to them from artists who are no longer in the community.

“This is vital for continuation of Inuit art locally,” he said.

Huffman said he’s seen remarkable growth in the recognition of the Inuit artists’ work in recent years.

“Suddenly, people who know nothing about the art before ... are now saying, ‘This is amazing and I am so glad I discovered this,’” he said.

A news release from West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative noted 10 per cent of Kinngait’s 1,400 residents are professional artists. Nearly all of the adults living in the hamlet are shareholders of the community-owned co-operative and share in its profits.

To diversify its revenue stream, the co-operative also owns a hardware and grocery store, restaurant, rental properties and maintains some utility contracts in Kinngait.

“Our strength lies with the successive generations of committed artists, dedicated community members and trusted partners who continually shape this organization,” said West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative president Pauloosie Kowmageak, in a news release.

Some of the other events being held to mark the co-operative’s 65th anniversary include:

- A national touring exhibition titled *Kenojuak Ashevak: Life and Legacy*. It opened in January at Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton, N.B.
- A five-year research initiative launched in partnership with University of Aberdeen in Australia, exploring sea ice as depicted in the work of Kinngait Inuit artists;
- Staff and artist profiles along with a special archive exhibition in Kinngait at the Kenojuak Cultural Centre and Print Shop;
- A special exhibition in Gwangju, South Korea, celebrating the Inuit art of Kinngait;
- A possible IKEA delegation to Kinngait to discuss a product partnership and ideas to assist with food security in the community;
- West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative at Toronto Outdoor Art Fair in July;
- Release of an anniversary publication documenting the history of West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative, the 65th anniversary program and outlining future plans.