

Why is the Arctic Always White? Circumpolar Indigenous Artists in the Age of the Anthropocene

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Why is the Arctic Always White?

Circumpolar Indigenous Artists in the Age of the Anthropocene

We have mounting evidence that the environment is in crisis—obvious examples being species extinction threatening our earth’s biodiversity, and the dire consequences of anthropogenic global warming.¹ These concerns have not gone unnoticed in the art world, where exhibitions dedicated to the “anthropocene” proliferate amongst international and sometimes wasteful biennales.² Beyond the aesthetic spectacle of environmental destruction, or the intellectual nihilism of pondering our correlated demise, is a disdain for the environment. How did we humans come to perceive ourselves as so removed from nature that we exploit it to the point of extinction, and what does work dedicated to recovering these bonds look like? Of course the Global North’s view of this relationship changed as a result of settler colonialism, resource extraction, industrialization, and petro-capitalism. These contemporary issues have reached a breaking point in the Arctic Circle, where Indigenous knowledge, misunderstanding, Eurocentric perceptions, and the consequences of our eco-denial are hardest felt. The climate crisis isn’t the only reason we are becoming aware of the importance of an “environmental art history.” Inuit perspectives are making their debut at the 2019 Venice Biennale’s Canada Pavilion, with a project by Isuma, an artist collective that continues the difficult work of representing their land and ways of life to outsiders on their own terms.³

For many of us “southerners” or *Qallunaat*, we imagine the Arctic lands as a barren snowscape. American artist Subhankar Banerjee’s

Land-As-Home: Arctic series (2000–ongoing) has worked to challenge this dominant discourse, representing the region as a vibrant ecosystem rather than a “flat, white nothingness.”⁴ At the historic roots of this common perception is the visual culture associated with Arctic exploration, which represented the land as an icy obstacle, devoid of its diverse flora. Navigators deliberately erased iconic tundra plants—Labrador tea, cottongrass, and wildflowers—to bolster their own stories of conquest and to excuse historic examples of resource extraction such as whaling, fishing, and fur trapping. But even with this cultural construction of a vast and seemingly empty land, which Robert G. David equates to an Arctic “Orientalism,”⁵ explorers constantly relied on Indigenous technologies for their survival. In 1853, Sir John Richardson advised crews departing to search for Sir John Franklin that their European leather boots would prove useless in the Arctic. Instead, he recommended trading for sealskin *kamik* boots and learning how to use other technologies such as Inuit snow goggles.⁶ Understanding how non-Indigenous people imagined the Arctic throughout history helps us comprehend perceptions of it today, which is crucial since climate change renders the polar region increasingly important in Qallunaat-settler geopolitics. Just as explorers required Inuit knowledge in the past, understanding and respecting Indigenous knowledges today could play an important part in mitigating the climate crisis and creating a future free of fossil fuels.

Support for Indigenous community organizing that focuses on land and water protection has steadily grown along with the international attention given to Indigenous artists and circumpolar ways of life. Indigenous peoples in the Arctic have been—and remain—cultural as well as territorial stewards of their lands since time immemorial. Outi Pieski is one such example. Her most recent work *LAVDNEGOAHTI II | Turf Hut II* (2017), extends her series of landscape paintings framed with Sami handicraft elements such as textiles and fringes, to animate a deep relationship with the land. In response to this body of work, art critic Jan-Erik Lundström suggests, “Landscape is not a noun, an object or a thing, but always a verb, an activity, an event. The landscapes of Outi Pieski are acted, experienced, laboured... Inhabited, but not domesticated; lived, but not owned; dwelled in but not occupied.”⁷ Pieski’s pieces encompass and consume viewers, challenging their preconceived ideas for a glimpse into a Sami worldview and way of being with the land.

Artists like Inuuteq Storch from Sisimiut, Greenland, continue this work to reclaim experiences of the Arctic unacknowledged by outsider representations. His films and photographs centre on “the self,” and in the process they project local experiences outwards. “My work is about me. So I communicate with myself,” Storch told me in an interview about his video series *Old Films of the New Tale* (2017). “They are created when I have frustrations or difficulties being in-between two: traditional



Isuma

Installation view, Pavilion of Canada,
58th International Art Exhibition –
La Biennale di Venezia, 2019.
Photo : Francesco Galli, courtesy of
La Biennale di Venezia

Outi Pieski

Lavdnegoahti II / Turf Hut II, 2017.
Photo : Ari Karttunen / EMMA



Inuuteq Storch

← *Old Films of the New Tale*, video still, 2017.

Photo : courtesy of the artist & Inuiaat Isaat

Elisapee Inukpuk

↓ Installation view, Faculty of Fine Arts Gallery, Concordia University, Montréal, 2018; *Qayait (kayaks) #13*, installation detail, 2003.

Photos : Guy L'Heureux

asinnajaq

↘ *Three Thousand*, video still, 2017.

Photo : courtesy of the artist



life and modern life.”⁸ Exploring this tension between old ways and the changing present is cathartic, and the backdrop for these deeply personal narratives is the tundra, which plays into how Inuit protocol mixes with the understanding of outsiders. These portraits focus on people represented in archival videos. These fragments are combined with heavy screens of sentimentality like music and distressing effects on the film reel. But this footage also features Greenland’s landscape as the prominent backdrop to human life and emotion. Responding to comments about this body of work, Storch states, “In *The Finger and The Message* (2017), because the landscape is so normal for me, the portraiture of these people is so strong, I didn’t even think about the tundra in the videos. It’s first now that you say that there’s a lot of tundra here, but that’s how our town and villages look like.”⁹ Storch’s experience of his homeland is deeply social, but the foundation for these relationships is the land and waters, which provide all that is needed to live.

Tiohtià:ke-based artist asinnajaq is another contemporary Inuk filmmaker committed to sharing her vision of the circumpolar landscape, not as a place of frozen scarcity, but as a land of “plenty.”¹⁰ The recurring references to Arctic flora in asinnajaq’s work are not simply an aesthetic motif, they are part of a conscious project of reframing. She told me, “I think that one of the reasons that I do make sure that they’re present is the knowledge that people from outside of us don’t understand how full of life our land really is. Even many Inuit and people that live in a landscape like ours fall into the pattern of copying the language people around us use, such as ‘barren.’” asinnajaq portrays a different Arctic in her curatorial work. A good example is Elisapee Inukpuk’s doll exhibition at FOFA Gallery (2018, Montréal), which

featured brightly coloured macro images of Arctic plants and tundra covering the walls. The work, concerned with changing the perceptions of audiences, is not just about the visual associations of images, but is also about power, language, and naming. asinnajaq suggests, “We should stop calling our *nunaat* ‘tundra,’ because tundra isn’t our word, and we can easily use our word which would just be *nunaat*.”¹¹

asinnajaq’s most recent “sci-fi documentary” titled *Three Thousand* (2017), is a time-lapse Inuit-futurism video piece that blends digital animations with archival footage of Inuit subjects from the National Film Board’s archive to project what the future may look like in Inuit Nunangat. As the piece begins, a lichen colony clusters and procreates over the screen, bringing the film to life. According to asinnajaq, the recurring motif symbolizes safety, life, and growth. The Arctic’s botanical ecosystems are retrieved from the past through the use of archival footage, and this ancestral knowledge is carried forward as a way to sustain life in the future imaginary. These interpretations of Inuit Futurism are crucial for Indigenous People to build worlds beyond the impact of settler colonialism. In the circumpolar context, this pursuit is even more important for Indigenous Peoples, given the urgent need to envision alternative ways of being, combat climate change, and end environmental degradation. On account of the Arctic’s remoteness, its interpretation by outsiders has always been heavily mediated through images. Thankfully, these misconceptions are being challenged by the humble ways that contemporary Indigenous artists represent their homeland. ●

1 — IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5C, International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2018; IPBES Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, Intergovernmental Science-Policy on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), 2019; Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

2 — Hettie Judah, “There’s a Flood of Climate Change-Related Art at the Venice Biennale. Can It Make a Difference—Or Is It Adding to the Problem?” *Artnet News*, May 6, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/climate-change-venice-biennale-1532290>.

3 — asinnajaq, “Isuma Is a Cumulative Effort,” *Canadian Art*, April 22, 2019, <https://canadianart.ca/features/isuma-is-a-cumulative-effort/>.

4 — Thomas J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 95.

5 — Robert G. David, *The Arctic in the British Imagination, 1818–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 28–29.

6 — MG12-ADM7 microfilm B-5333/801, “Arctic Exploration: Correspondence, Reports, etc.” Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Ontario.

7 — Jan-Erik Lundström, “Inhabited Lands,” text written in 2014 and published on Outi Pieski’s website, www.outipieski.com/about/texts/.

8 — Inuuteq Storch, digital interview with author, Tiohtià:ke—Mooniyang—Montréal, Québec, February 8, 2019.

9 — Ibid.

10 — asinnajaq, interview with author, Tiohtià:ke—Mooniyang—Montréal, Québec, January 18, 2019.

11 — Ibid.

