

## Annie Pootoogook

Mendel Art Gallery, September 19, 2008 - January 4, 2009

David Garneau

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Volume 52, Number 213, Supplement, Winter 2008–2009

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/62117ac>

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### Publisher(s)

La Société La Vie des Arts

### ISSN

0042-5435 (print)

1923-3183 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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### Cite this review

Garneau, D. (2008). Review of [Annie Pootoogook / Mendel Art Gallery, September 19, 2008 - January 4, 2009]. *Vie des Arts*, 52(213), 14–14.

## SASKATOON, SK

# ANNIE POOTOOGOOK

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September 19, 2008 –  
January 4, 2009

Graphic arts are not indigenous to Canada's North. Printmaking was introduced to the Inuit in the 1950s. The commercialization of traditional art practices, the introduction of power tools to speed-up carving production, and graphic arts and mechanical methods of reproduction, were part of a government industrialization program designed to transition the people away from their customary ways of life. This change was due to Canada's forced settlement of these previously nomadic people. Ottawa even provided a notorious instructional book, *Eskimo Handicrafts*, that describes what Southerners expect Inuit art to look like. The book includes mixed samples of Aboriginal art from the Museum of Man collection, including totem poles! Its author, James Huston, introduced printmaking to Baffin Island. What the 'South' wanted and the Inuit provided were,

ironically, re-presentations of lifestyles that the settlement program was displacing.

It is, of course, possible to make great art even if the enabling conditions are over-determined by others\*but it is difficult. When art becomes a livelihood and whole communities survive on the commodification of their culture for consumption by a distant market, it takes great courage and imagination to be an innovator. Gallery agents, for example, used to discourage artists from making art that included snow machines and other signs of post-contact life. Though Annie Pootoogook comes from a long line of Cape Dorset artists (her mother is Napachie Pootoogook and grandmother is Pitseolak Ashoona), she decided to buck the tradition of illustrating old stories and making pictures of animals and hunters on the tundra, ice and ocean. Instead, her pencil crayon drawings capture ordinary, contemporary domestic scenes: people watching television, sleeping, playing games and cooking. "Sitting on the Bed with the Remote" is just that, a couple watching television. She also documents less happy moments: drinking, fights, depression and



*Sitting on the Bed with the Remote*, 2006  
Pencil crayon  
Courtesy of Lonti Ebers, Toronto

suicide. "Memory of My Life: Breaking Bottles" is a poignant account of her trying to prevent family members from abusing alcohol by destroying their liquor.

There is a sense in this collection of a person who has decided that every ordinary thing around her is worthy of attention and representation, that her life is the infinite sum of these unfolding observations, and is something worth sharing. Her visual diary has no hierarchy; a pair of glasses is as engaging as a domestic dispute. All are rendered in a careful, straight-forward manner. However, the drawings are not disinterested or apolitical. Many argue that the gendering of labour produces uneven

and unfair results, that alcohol abuse is ruining people and communities, and that men ought not to abuse their partners. Most importantly, every image asserts her and her neighbour's humanity.

These chronicles depart from much that is normally associated with 'Inuit art.' They show how the people actually live, rather than what romantic Southern imaginations desire for the North. The exhibition, curated by Nancy Campbell, also disrupts the idea of Northern peoples as a unified whole and Inuit art as a collective product. This exhibition, and Pootoogook's win of the 2006 Sobey award, encourages us to recognize Inuit artists as individuals within communities. □