

A NEW INUIT CHILDHOOD AND HOME: THE DRAWINGS OF ANNIE POOTOOGOOK

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Cape Dorset is a village in Nunavut, sitting on the west coast of Baffin Island, a place so far north that it is above the tree line. The community has changed dramatically in the last sixty years due to increased government and commercial presences. In the 1950's the West Baffin Eskimo Co-Operative, founded to provide resources to Inuit artists, transformed Cape Dorset into the centre of the Inuit art world.¹ Here is where artist Napachie Pootoogook, daughter of artist Pitseolak Ashoona, moved to with her husband and where Annie Pootoogook was born in 1969. Annie, as a first generation to be born into government housing with the 'modern conveniences' of electricity and imported foods, grew up in a new Inuit culture that differed dramatically from prior generations.

Annie's drawings are documentary works of an autobiographical nature, featuring scenes from her daily life that are shared by her community, such as shopping excursions to the grocery store, and watching television. Issues of domestic and substance abuse are also present in her drawings. Her style of drawing is at once simple and methodical, minimal yet concise, a style which owes much to both the Inuit tradition in Cape Dorset and to contemporary popular culture. Drawing allows Annie to bring the viewer closer to her own personal experiences through its intuitive and documentary nature. Her use of the medium in this manner pushes her work beyond the boundaries of 'Inuit Art' as it has been previously constructed. No longer a part of the tradition of storytelling or images of an untouched pure North, Annie has chosen not to tell the stories of history, but a contemporary view of her community. In doing so she presents her own authentic and realistic vision of Arctic culture.

The drawing *Watching George Bush on TV* depicts a domestic scene that uses a combination of objects and cultural references to illustrate childhood inside the contemporary Inuit home (fig. 1). On the left of the drawing a black television sits on top of a blue shelving unit. The television screen shows the image of the bust of a man with grey hair, and the power cord from the TV is clearly shown plugged into a wall outlet behind the stand. Sitting in front of the television, and in the centre of the image, is an adult figure seated on a pink box. The person is pointing at the TV with the right hand and appears to be eating a chocolate bar with the left hand. On the floor, to the left, beside the figure, is a can of 7-UP, and to the right of the figure, stands a younger looking person in blue jeans, also watching the TV. Behind these two figures lies a child on a stripped mattress on the floor, wearing a diaper and blue shirt, holding a bottle. On the floor near the wall a pair of tan boots are haphazardly placed and a black parka with a fur-trimmed hood hangs from a peg on the wall.

The title of this drawing does not specify the identities of the figures, but it can be assumed by the varying ages and the domestic setting that they are a part of a family, inside a family home. The central focus of the image is the television. Its image is clearly depicted for the viewer and every other face in the room is only shown in profile. This scene points to a significant change in the Inuit home that Annie grew up in. More than 90 percent of today's Arctic homes have televisions in them, a change that began only in 1972 with the Canadian Government's launch of the Anik A1 satellite.²

The television, as well as the pop can and chocolate bar can be viewed as late twentieth century additions to the Inuit household, while the parka and boots remind the viewer of the setting which exists

outside the house and the ways of living in this climate. The boots appear to be made of tan leather sewn together in a 'traditional' style, and the parka is simple with a fur-trim that suggests that it is completely made of natural materials.

The home interior that Annie depicts in *Watching George Bush* (2006) differs in ways from the scene pictured in *My Childhood Home*, but is so similar that it creates a sense of continuity between her works (fig. 2). In this earlier drawing, Annie draws from memory a scene from the home in which she grew up as indicated in the title. A man, supposedly her father, sits on the left of the image in a tall-back chair while a woman, likely her mother, uses a wringer washer in the middle of the scene. To the right of the adults, a smaller figure stands in a doorway, dressed in a parka and boots, back to the viewer. Significant to this scene are the small objects that Annie has chosen to include: the television, a child's spin toy on the ground, and the clock and image of a house hung on the wall. The scene has been constructed from memory and therefore the objects included are those which Annie remembered most about her childhood, many of them being 'modern' objects. Even though time is still viewed as a relative, negotiable element in the Arctic, clocks have become an integral part of all homes; Annie says that the Inuit know "it's the way of the world", linking them to the rest of the globe and she includes them in almost all of her domestic drawings.³ As well, the electric washer and television would have been new additions to an Inuit home. Annie is connected to these objects and therefore to the modern family life.

Watching George Bush on TV does not feature a clock yet the work also depicts a modern home. The television is now turned on and its image shines clearly. No domestic duties are being performed. In fact the child has been left untended in favor of watching the television. The walls are finally painted white, not the same yellow panels as in Annie's childhood home, but the floors are the same wood panel, suggesting an 'unfinished' interior.

The correspondence between the depiction of objects and scenes in these two works are typical of most of Annie's domestic interiors that are composed in a similar manner. Both *Childhood Home* and *Watching George Bush* are a collage of objects and figures generalized to be able to accommodate both memory and specificity. Annie's childhood home seems just as real as the other interior and, therefore, time and personal experience melt away to create a portrait of a culture as Annie sees it. The harsher realities of domestic life are not depicted in either of these works, such as domestic abuse and alcoholism. In *Watching George Bush on TV*, the neglect of the child in favor of watching the television may hint at changing family priorities and problems as Annie's drawings do address these issues, but they most often pertain to her adult life and the struggles she faces as a young woman.

In Cape Dorset there have been few artists whose works can be considered autobiographical.⁴ Annie's mother, Napachie, is one artist who often created autobiographical works, but she also produced many works telling stories that were passed down to her orally from relatives. Through the telling of these stories she hoped to keep a record of the tradition and legends of her culture, even after making the move with many of her peers to the government housing of Cape Dorset with her husband.⁵

Napachie's *Hungry Grandmother* is a drawing of the story of a mother and daughter, Mary and Akatuk. Akatuk had the urge to eat her granddaughter and is sitting with a pot ready near the door, but Mary is holding on tight to her baby and has refused to give her to her mother (fig. 3).⁶ The drawing shows the mother, daughter and baby inside a tent, using a cut-away perspective to view both the rocky

exterior and the sparse interior of the tent. Mary and Akatuk wear similar coats and boots, and the inside of the tent contains similar boots, as well as blankets and what appear to be rocks.

Hungry Grandmother as well as *Watching George Bush on TV* are both drawings of Arctic interiors, but Napachie has chosen to set her work inside a traditional Inuit tent and to tell a story about a specific family, which could be considered legend. An artist since the 1960's, Napachie considered herself a 'local historian' and used text along with her drawings to ensure accuracy of the story.⁷ This text is didactic and specific, not allowing for any alternative interpretation or assumptions to be made about the identities of the figures. In *Watching George Bush*, it is possible to assume that any one of the figures is the artist, placing her within the family narrative. Annie's mother encouraged her to draw, and her grandmother was a large influence, but Napachie's style and approach differs dramatically from Annie's which are motivated by personal narratives and emotional expression.

Annie grew up watching both her mother and her grandmother draw, and was supported by the West Baffin Eskimo Co-Operative in Cape Dorset.⁸ All these factors led Annie to pursue drawing and shaped much of her style. But it can also be said that her approach to drawing is definitively contemporary and influenced by factors different than those of previous generations.

The traditional Inuit art that sells commercially to southerners is part of a constructed image of the North as an untouched, timeless, romantic place. The carvings, drawings and prints of a simple way of life have been for a long time the most coveted and 'authentic' cultural objects of the Arctic.⁹ Annie's work in contrast exists completely outside of this constructed image of the Inuit, and therefore outside the category of 'Inuit Art', linking her with a broader category of contemporary drawing. Her mother's works feature a top-to-bottom ordering of objects to portray spacing and perspective, whereas Annie's uses the layering and linear perspective of objects to give depth to her spaces. Her compositions demonstrate her exposure to television, movies and photography, especially in drawings such as *Watching Jerry Springer*, which features a very cinematic perspective (fig. 4). As if through the lens of a camera, the scene is shown in a wide angle and the viewer stands just outside of the room observing.

It can be argued that drawing, historically, has existed outside the realm of other artistic practices such as painting or sculpture, because of its status as a means to an end.¹⁰ It is unhindered by the weighty expectations of the more time and space consuming forms of art, and therefore offers a fresh approach to representation and experience. Simply by placing a few lines on a piece of paper, the artist is able to represent form and content in the most immediate and personal of ways. Contemporary art has seen a revival of drawing as a valued medium, due to its freedom from the crisis of purpose being felt by other mediums. Contemporary drawing is concerned with the subjectivity of works, rejecting the representational focus of old masters and consciously adopting an awkward, naïve line.¹¹ So as to distance it from any academic traditions.

Annie's drawings benefit from these characteristics of contemporary drawing, and are so sure in their methods that they solidify these virtues. Her work is constructed of outlines and colours, omitting certain details while emphasizing others in a way that speaks to subjective memory. The dark outlines are drawn with certainty, creating a personal narrative, while the pencil-on-paper colouring and blank spaces are an expression of directness and intuition. No attention is spent on solidifying the shapes as a painting or sculpture might. Annie's peers in the contemporary world of drawing, such as Marcel Dzama and Keith Jones, share with Annie this clarity of figures, ambiguity of space and a movement away from realism.

While her works are more personal and documentary in nature, Annie's drawings share a sense of nostalgia and colourful manipulation of daily life with these artists.

Inuit art was originally sculpturally based, since the materials available in a place above the tree line were ice, bone and rock; paper was not introduced to Arctic communities until the 1950s.¹² Therefore the generations before Annie were still experimenting with the methods of creating depth through perspective and illusion on two-dimensional planes, combining their own intuition with the body of western art that they were exposed to. Annie's works continue the development of drawing in the Arctic, and incorporate her own experiences to create a whole new, individual style.

Annie Pootoogook is a significant Inuit and Canadian artist. Her drawings are accomplished depictions of a personally daily life, poignant in their subjective arrangement of figures and objects. Her 2006 work *Watching George Bush on TV* is both personal and documentary, using pencil and ink to record a family's personal life, a mundane yet significant experience which Annie is a part of.

FIGURES



FIG. 1

Annie Pootoogook. *Watching George Bush on TV*. 2006. Pencil crayon, ink on paper. (Image: www.cbc.ca/arts/photoessay/pootoogook/index4.html)



FIG. 2

Annie Pootoogook. *My Childhood Home*. 2001/02. Cape Dorset.
Pencil crayon, ink. 20 x 26 inches.

(Image: www.feheleyfinearts.com/gallery/exhibitions/pootoogook/index3.shtml)



FIG. 3

Napachie Pootoogook. *Hungry Grandmother*. 1999/2000.



FIG. 4

Annie Pootoogook. *Watching Jerry Springer*. 2002-03.

Pencil crayon and ink on paper. 20 x 26 inches.

(Image: <www.artgalleryofnovascotia.ca/en/sobeyartaward/pastwinners/2006winnerandshortlist/anniepootoogook.aspx>)

ENDNOTES

¹Nancy Campbell, Introduction, *Annie Pootoogook: [published on the Occasion of the Exhibition Annie Pootoogook, June 24 - September 4, 2006, The Power Plant, Toronto]* (Toronto: Power Plant, 2006) 18.

²David Balzer, "Photo Essay - Culture Clash," *CBC.ca* (27 June 2006)

<<http://www.cbc.ca/arts/photoessay/pootoogook/index.html>>.

³Campbell, 21.

⁴"Modern Language: The Art of Annie Pootoogook," *Inuit Art Quarterly* 19:2 (2004): 12.

⁵Leslie Boyd Ryan, "Napachie Pootoogook," *Napachie Pootoogook*, ed. Darlene Wight, Napachie Pootoogook, and Leslie Boyd Ryan (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2004) 13.

⁶Napachie Pootoogook, *Napachie Pootoogook*, ed. Darlene Wight, Napachie Pootoogook, and Leslie Boyd Ryan (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2004).

⁷Ryan, 16.

⁸Campbell, 13

⁹Deborah Root, "Inuit Art and the Limits of Authenticity," *Inuit Art Quarterly* 23:2 (2008): 20.

¹⁰Simon Downs, *Drawing Now: between the Lines of Contemporary Art* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009) X.

¹¹Xi Downs.

¹²Marion E. Jackson, "Reflections of an Art Historian," *Contemporary Inuit Drawings*, ed. Judith Nasby (Guelph, Ont.: Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, 1987) 10.

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