

Blue Cloud: Canadian abstractionist Jack Bush and Inuit artist Ohtaq Mikkigak's exhibition reviewed

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An installation view of "Blue Cloud," a new exhibition at the University of Toronto that pairs seminal Canadian abstractionist Jack Bush with Inuit artist Ohtaq Mikkigak. From left: Composition (Green House), by Mikkigak; Paris #5, by Bush; Composition (Striped Landscape) by Mikkigak.

By: Murray Whyte Visual arts, Published on Sat Sep 08 2012

To fully grasp the import of "Blue Cloud," the elegant, sleek, quietly colour-filled new exhibition at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto, you have to do a little history.

Fifty years or so will do, which puts us at, or at least very near, the parallel dawns of two art market phenomena, side by side, yet worlds away. The first, Abstract Expressionism, was well on its way in New York, climbing towards its multi-million-dollar apex with works by now brand-name artists like Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. The other, far less moneyed but more widely accessible and arguably as popular, were the first releases of drawings out of the tiny far North Inuit encampment of Cape Dorset, near Frobisher Bay, packaged and sold to an eager constituency of southern buyers enamoured of a romantic notion of indigenous life on the northern ice.

For all practical purposes, these two moments, semi-simultaneous though they were, may as well have been on different planets. So what we're doing here, with towering Canadian abstractionist Jack Bush and Inuit

artist Ohoq Mikkigak shown side by side is a fine question indeed. Questions like this, though, are the stock-in-trade of curator Nancy Campbell, who's been down this road twice before and in this very space: in 2009, with the bang-on pairing of Toronto-based artist and 2013 Venice Biennale entrant Shary Boyle with Cape Dorset's Shuvinai Ashoona; and in 2010, ganging up the grisly on-paper visions of Toronto's Ed Pien (organs, entrails, various viscera, in inky-thick glory) with the good fun of Samonie Toonoo's ghastly death-metal soapstone carvings.

Each time, Campbell threw down a quiet challenge to our silly southern view of contemporary — and, importantly, its exclusions — as an overridingly urban, centralized phenomenon. Shows like the previous two helped expose the cockeyed notion of “contemporary” as anything other than a temporal condition, particular in this frenzied moment of infatuation with global newness.

“Blue Cloud” does that, but something else too. In its quiet way, it chips away at the exclusive histories of modern art and exposes those exclusions for the simple conveniences they tend to be.

On the surface, the show plies multiple points of connection between its incongruous pair: Both Mikkigak and Bush abstract from nature, and both came to it late. Mikkigak, still alive and in his late 70s, began his career as a young art labourer, churning out iconographic images of birds, fish, walrus and hunters with spears to be packaged and sold in the south by the Cape Dorset Co-op that kept a stable of artists as de facto employees. Bush started out as a painter with the by-then shopworn landscapes of a still-prolific Group of Seven as a model (by the 1930s, when Bush was a young painter, they were selling nicely).

After virtually abandoning drawing and working some years as a janitor up north, Mikkigak returned to Dorset's collective Kinngait studio in retirement and found a gang of younger artists — Ashoona, for one, as well as Tim Pitsiulak — doing wildly different things than the old hunter/trapper trick. More to the point, they were selling, and in contemporary art galleries and to contemporary art museums — a new frontier for a culture whose output had been willfully ossified by a market-ready veneer of false authenticity.

Mikkigak assumed their flattened perspectives and coloured pencils, producing vibrant images: a lime-green house on an identically coloured landscape; a row of sheds pressed flat against two horizon lines in the background. But the revelations are big, undulating abstractions in thick graphite with the occasional stripe of colour — all made in the last couple of years — that position Mikkigak as essentially unique in the pantheon of Inuit artistic output.

Bush, too, took a turn, though in his 40s, energized by the burgeoning Abstract Expressionist movement in New York. He turned to abstraction as a full-time occupation, though it wasn't until Clement Greenberg, the influential New York critic and architect of Abstract Expressionism as a full-blown movement, turned his eye to Bush and, with his ever-streamlining ethos of painting, made him one of a few poster boys for his notion of painting's *ne plus ultra*, the Colour Field movement in the early '60s, that Bush shed his backwoods-Torontonian skin.

At least, that's the popular mythology, which also has the audacity to suggest that Bush, who died in 1977 at age 68, didn't become a fully formed painter until Greenberg sunk in his hooks. The show provides a remarkable opportunity to engage Bush's rarely seen early abstract canvases — I challenge anyone to stand in front of *The Blue Cloud*, from 1957, a chilling tableaux of indistinct forms adrift in a white mist, or the kinetic vibrancy of 1955's *Encounter* or *Hot Day No. 2* and dismiss them as provincial or underdeveloped — but in linking him with Mikkigak, “Blue Cloud's” job is bigger than that.

Simply put, even Bush, whom we praise in the Canadian canon as a pillar of the Painters Eleven, has his moments on the outs with history. Mikkigak feels his pain. “Blue Cloud” points out in no uncertain terms that the art world, or at least the art market, has always favoured a tidy, manufactured continuum in place of actual history, the easier to parcel and sell in pre-packaged boxes.

“Blue Cloud,” like its two predecessors, suggests that tidiness is the product more of a certain cadre of the art world's oligarchical dominance than anything qualitative. Newness, as a commodity, in its headlong rush into futures unseen, relies on exclusion. That leaves a lot by the wayside. How much? The tantalizing, depressing inference of “Blue Cloud” is that we'll likely never know.

Blue Cloud continues at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, University of Toronto, to Oct. 28, 2012. www.jmbgalle