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From two worlds, an unlikely artistic synergy

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Just how small is this gigantic country of ours, anyway? Small enough, it would seem, that vast disparities, whether in geography, climate or accessibility to Wal-Mart, can nonetheless yield some common experiences, or at least some common ground.

At the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, this thesis is on fine display in "Noise Ghost," a joint exhibition of the work of Toronto artist Shary Boyle, 37, and Shuvina Ashoona of Cape Dorset, Nunavut.

Let's not be too literal in the comparison, as curator Nancy Campbell certainly has not been; but there is a revelation to behold in setting Ashoona, who, at 48, has a unique visual language among her prolific community of northern peers, next to the much-better known work of Boyle, a long-time darling of the Toronto scene and this region's Sobey Prize nominee for 2009.

Boyle is a decidedly urban creature, raised in Toronto, and a leader of its dynamic downtown art scene; Ashoona, an Inuit artist from a remote community on Frobisher Bay, most certainly is not. But a set of shared concerns emerge here, of two artists dwelling deep in a set of mythologies that govern their worldviews.

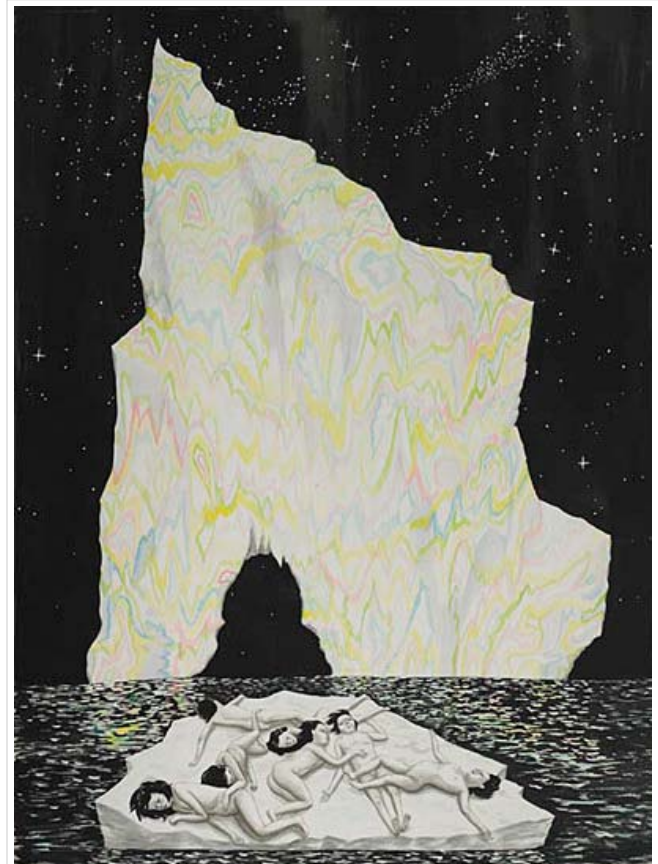
Boyle's may be entirely of her own creation – what else to make of her drawing of a pregnant couple lounging at the edge of an ochre lava sea, contemplating a Technicolor apocalypse with an odd serenity? – while Ashoona's may touch on Inuit culture's animistic beliefs. But the fact remains that both artists conjure scenes from their own personal fantasy worlds. The result is a curious synergy that defies preconception.

"I don't know if 'mission' is the right word," says Campbell, "but I'm trying to spin the expectation of Inuit art, and putting Ashoona next to a contemporary artist like Shary Boyle certainly does that."

If not a formal mission, then a serious commitment, at least. Campbell brought Annie Pootoogook, the most prominent of Ashoona's generation of Cape Dorset artists, to the Power Plant for a major show. Pootoogook, who has since gone on to win the \$75,000 Sobey Prize herself, exemplified a departure from the expectations of Inuit art, eschewing traditional subjects – heroic landscapes, igloos and untamed wilderness, to name a few – for the bland, often bleak circumstances of contemporary everyday life in her remote community.

Ashoona engages that too, but her work veers sharply into a vividly imagined realm of the fantastical ("Noise Ghost," the show's title, is a snakelike Inuit poltergeist; it appears here in various forms). At Barnicke, the entry of one of the show's two rooms catapults you directly into it: in a huge work of Ashoona's on paper, a steel-hulled fishing vessel gives chase to a huge sea monster with long tendrils and claws, which in turn is pursuing a handful of Inuit fishermen in tiny aluminum boats with outboard motors. On the shore, a griffin emerges from a cave to watch; tiny griffins skitter about the dead-seeming landscape around it.

It's a good fit with Boyle's work, which has always seemed drawn from outdated children's books gone seriously awry; at Barnicke, works



The two artists at play in "Noise Ghost" have a shared sensibility of imaginative self-isolation. The work of Shary Boyle, above, is alternated on the wall of the Barnicke Gallery with that of Shuvina Ashoona.

ICEBERG (2007) BY SHARY BOYLE

include a grayscale watercolour of a giant hand emerging in a typhoon-like whorl, engulfing everything in its path, chasing down a cluster of frightened children, to a clutch of androgynous nudes splayed on an ice floe, drifting past a brightly lit iceberg.

The shared sensibility of imaginative self-isolation can play a bit of a mind game; on one wall, Campbell alternates images between the artists, and on first glance, they merge into an unsettlingly seamless whole.

"Excellent curating," Campbell laughs. "But really, seeing them you realize, `Oh my God, these are perfect together.'"

Almost too perfect, if it were possible: One room at Barnicke is given over to two of Boyle's large-scale installations, made while at a Canada Council residency in the U.K. in 2007.

As luck would have it, while in London, Boyle was struck by a show at the British Museum called "New Worlds," which included watercolours by 16th-century painter John White. White's images depicted an Inuit family brought back to England by British explorers as an anthropological exhibit; seeing it touched off a flood of post-colonial angst in Boyle, resulting in the two installations, *Skirmish at Bloody Point* and *The Clearances*.

Both are elaborately constructed, with cut-out figures pinned to a paper backdrop; overhead projectors add layers to the giant wall collages, vaulting them from paste-ups to otherworldly light experiments.

Skirmish is the more straightforward of the two, with a simple grim narrative of British soldiers frog-marching two Inuit men off the cliff of an iceberg and into the icy sea. *The Clearances*, meanwhile, is a magnum opus, from era-spanning military figures to clergy to weaponry to sea monkeys to First Nations figures alternately skewered, hunted or in dark silhouette.

Across the hall from Ashoona, it reads as a sympathetic mash-up of colonial, consumer and junk culture, which are really one in the same; more to the point, it makes their common retreat into fantasy, however dark, a completely understandable, preferable choice.

Just the facts

WHAT: Noise Ghost

WHEN: Tonight to Aug. 28

WHERE: Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House, 7 Hart House Circle