

Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893–1910) is among the most well-known and widely reproduced icons of Western art. Given the four versions (in paint and pastel) plus a lithograph made by Munch himself, *The Scream* has been a somewhat promiscuous and democratic image from the start. Over the last fifty years, everything from fine art prints to mousepads to "Screaming" plush toys has proliferated in a mass of merchandise that makes for Expressionism's greatest gift to the museum souvenir shop. Throughout this phenomenon, there is pervasive tension between the earnest and the ironic, between those who identify on some emotional level with the paintings and those who are more amused by the endless gags that can be built around a central caricature of angst. Ten years ago, the current show at Hart House's Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, *Scream* (named, of course, after the aforementioned Munch), would have sat squarely in the latter camp, but today a more heartfelt approach prevails. Angst, it appears, can be earnest again.

Scream is a double bill affair. Toronto-based artist Ed Pien's drawings paper the walls of the gallery, while the sculptures of Cape Dorset's Samonie Toonoo rule the floor in glass-covered plinths.

Pien's work is indebted to Surrealism—especially in the demonstratively-titled series, *Three Minute Drawings* (1998), where crude, hurried brushwork and

## SCREAM (But Hold The Universal Angst Of Modern Man)

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naive technique belie Pien's smooth assimilation of ideas into tiny visual riddles, the answers to which stick to the back of the tongue, uneasily suspended somewhere between articulable and amorphous dream-illogical thought. The walls of the second gallery chamber are dominated by Pien's large-scale composite drawings. These wide spreads are what look like pasted together grids of computer paper, warped by entropic blots of black and delicate colour beneath palimpsestic Gordian knots of intertwined and otherwise conjoined creatures like, but never exactly, human. Here Pien's brushwork is less hurried, more calligraphic and sensual, yet somehow more out of control, more demented than the Three Minute Drawings, and no less automatiste.



Samonie Toonoo, Skull, 2008. Courtesy Fehelay Fine Arts. Ed Pien, After the Meal, 1999. Courtesy Birch Libralato Gallery - Photo Courtesy of jmbgallery.ca

In contrast to the mess and fragility of Pien's work, Toonoo's sculptures in horn, bone and soapstone exert a sensual, relentless weight. Toonoo hails from a well-known family of Inuit carvers and printmakers out of the capital of Inuit art in Canada, but his subject matter strays from that stereotypically associated with Inuit art, to include the contemporary and prosaic — as in the balaclava-masked figure of "My Two Balls" (2008), holding

out two snowball — and at other times, the cryptic and mystical — such as the skull-faced, prognathous and eerily eager "Seal Spirit" (2009). While Toonoo's work may sound like an entirely different show than Pien's, these two bodies of work have enough in common to keep from sparring in the gallery space— in fact, they harmonize. Pien's and Toonoo's artistic voices contrast, but theme in fugue.

Scream is the second instalment of curator Nancy Campbell's project to present Inuit artists in concert with contemporary artists from the Canadian south. It's an admirable project, or at least, a useful one. The ghettoization of indigenous peoples' art is an obviously condemnable yet still ongoing tendency. Ideally, an Inuit artist could command a solo show in a given contemporary gallery without a rattle or drag from the ball and chain of the speciality Inuit art market and/or suffering the dry myopia of anthropologically-based art criticism. But current conditions are not ideal, and Campbell's duets are at least a deliberate step in the right direction. Her pairing together of these two artists emphasizes thematic commonalities in their work; and this emphasis builds a partial defence against the anthropological tendencies that seem to shackle so much curatorial literature around indigenous art. The main thematic fulcrum Campbell clearly has in mind is in the show's namesake, Munch's *The Scream*.

Now, I usually find that when a curatorial statement or another such article of satellite literature is a little problematic, the best response is to ignore the text (as long as the text is the sole culprit) and just deal with the art. There are times,



however, when textual irks can indicate structural troubles at the level of a show's basic ideological architecture, where wilful ignorance of the text achieves nothing but to insult the intelligence of the artists, curators, and art lovers alike. As you may have guessed from my going off on this tangent in the first place, *Scream* has put me in the latter position. The Justina M. Barnicke Gallery statement for *Scream* doesn't do the show justice.

While it is a bit ham-fisted to triangulate Toonoo and Pien with Munch's *The Scream*, I'm not complaining about that. In fact all three artists have a penchant for revelling in a kind of keyed-up, angst-wrung, go-for-broke emotionality. It's no great stretch to see both the show and its namesake cowed in a certain key of upset, like the restless horror that lingers after that really bad dream you can't properly remember anymore.

Where I do take issue is at the simplifying of this ambience to "the universal anxiety of modern man" and in the reduction of our continued fascination with the key of angst to "the universality of anxiety in contemporary life." Certainly there are representations of modern things in *Scream*, but as far as I could tell, the show does not go out of its way to engage with modernity per se. It would be easy to lament these points as merely specious, if the meeting of North with South weren't so belaboured (implying a loss-of-innocence narrative) and if Toonoo weren't subsequently posited as the outsider, unaware of pop culture by way of the unsubstantiated claim that Toonoo "has likely not seen *The Scream*".

It is certainly possible that this Cape

Dorset resident has neither sought out nor encountered Munch's most famous work— but this is not something one can merely assume. Cape Dorset does, after all, have at least some TV and internet access, plus a steady stream of art loving tourists. Even in the *Scream* exhibit, Toonoo has a sculpture of a "hip-hop dancer", so evidently not all pop culture escapes him. But without further elaboration or substantiation the word "likely" implies that Nancy Campbell has never asked Toonoo outright and has instead settled for a mere assumption that, given the remoteness and isolation of Cape Dorset, and given the seeming isolation of Inuit carving traditions, Toonoo couldn't have had sufficient opportunity to view the veritable Hello Kitty of European post-industrial-revolution art.

One purpose that Toonoo's never having seen *The Scream* would serve is to play up a certain binary model of genius, where Toonoo's departures from stereotypical Inuit sculpture came from some innate inspiration versus Pien's genius as cultivated by extensive academic study (Pien is, in fact, a teacher at OCAD, and UofT's Visual Studies program). This binary set-up invites other more problematic binaries to become implicit, and glosses over the history and politics of the Inuit art market, where until fairly recently, unorthodox sculpture was more likely to be labelled unsaleable and shelved or unceremoniously destroyed.

Such a domino chain of implicit binaries, while not dire or necessarily offensive, is still unnecessary when these two artists share a deeper, less historically-glossed connection through their intense immersion in the anxious realms of the in-

between, liminal and ambiguous.

All that being said, it is a great show.

Scream. Featuring Ed Pien & Samonie Toonoo, Curated by Nancy Campbell at The Justina M. Barnicke Gallery is set to run from June 10 - August 21, 2010.

Exhibition details can be found **here**

For images and info about Ed Pien, see his **website**

Images of Samonie Toonoo can be found **here**

<sup>1</sup> For a clear and interesting article on the genesis of the Inuit Art World, see "James Houston, Armchair Tourism, and the Marketing of Inuit Art", by Kristin K. Potter, in Native American Art in the Twentieth Century, W. Jackson Rushing III, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999) pp. 39-55.