

## WHAT'S ON

## VISUAL ARTS

# Summer scares at Hart House

Marriage of ink drawings, Inuit art show anxiety is universal

MURRAY WHYTE  
VISUAL ART CRITIC

Just a word of warning: In case the title isn't clear, you can't expect the current show at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House to be a bright little diversion for your summer viewing pleasure. It's called *Scream*, and inside, there's a lot that either portrays or provokes exactly that reaction.

Between Ed Pien, 52, and Samonie Toonoo, 41, who are played off one another here, a generous degree of horror pervades, driving home the general point curator Nancy Campbell has been building for at least a few years now — that wherever you're from and whatever you do in this great big country of ours, in fundamental ways, our concerns aren't so terribly different — in the most discomfiting of ways.

Pien's from Toronto by way of Taiwan, where he was born, and Toonoo is from the surprisingly productive artistic hothouse of Cape Dorset, Nunavut, and I suppose it shouldn't be a surprise to anyone that the general anxiety of being a living human being on the planet at the moment is a sadly universal feature, wherever you might be from.

Last year on this very spot, Campbell paired Toronto darling Shary Boyle with Cape Dorset's Shuvina Ashoona, showing us dumb southerners that Inuit art could be as vital and contemporary as anything we city folk could imagine. This time, Pien's dense, claustrophobic ink drawings surround Toonoo's array of soapstone carvings, which cluster in vitrines throughout the gallery, to much the same effect.

The conceptual backdrop to the show, on until Aug. 21, is Edvard Munch's iconic 1893 work, "The



Ed Pien's "The Feet Eater" (1999) is at Justina M. Barnicke Gallery.

*Scream*," a painting you've seen thousands of times, if not in person, then on coffee mugs, calendars, cartoons, inflatable dolls (I swear I didn't make that up) and, in a memorable circumstance from my youth, a freely-adapted concert T-shirt for Metallica.

Munch struck a nerve, and fair enough. For a society besieged by modernity's fast-churning upheaval — think Industrial Revolution, rapid urbanization, fast-moving scientific achievement, the dawn of a secular society challenging the church's social dominance — the occasional public caterwaul wouldn't seem entirely inappropriate,

I'd think.

Nice to think how much has changed.

Oh, wait — we're locked in a war provoked by religious fundamentalists, the economy's in a state of "transition" that's turned the labour force out on the street in greater numbers than in decades, and more or less everything we hold to be true — Buy now, pay later! — seems entirely in peril.

So the worried, frantic tableaux Pien produced in 2008 seems to fit. In one room at Barnicke, the walls are lined with huge sheaves of paper that he has festooned with claustrophobic clusters of figures, lay-

ered dense and just-barely readable amid thick dollops of ink.

Together, they're called "A Game With Puppets," and if you need me to tell you who the puppets are, then you're just not paying attention.

Using black and blood red, the clustered figures seem to emerge from the soup just enough to let you know they're drowning; you can almost feel the viscera oozing from the walls, bodies, full or partial, intertwined in a macabre tangle of limbs, heads, whatever else.

I'm most familiar with Pien's intricate laser cuts, in which tiny, silhouetted figures tend to be ensnared by an unearthly tangle of branches. The tight precision with which they instigate the terror of feeling trapped is extraordinary. But there is nothing tight or precise here: Pien lets it all hang out, so to speak, to riveting effect.

Meanwhile, Toonoo's carvings are a revelation, a bizarre and engaging mash-up of post-colonial angst and teenage death-metal disaffection — which, by the way, seems as apt a response as any to the physical isolation of Cape Dorset, and the weirdly tight dislocations things like satellite TV and the Internet provide, offering ringside seats to the passing show of junk culture, wherever you may be.

All this to say there are a lot of skulls here, whether floating disembodied in a lock-jawed grimace, tilted back to vomit a jagged antler carved with rough images and text, or set in the dark hood of a soapstone-carved parka.

Death is everywhere, and in various forms, not least of which is a recurring figure with a bony wince and blond hair poking through his hood, gripping a cross.

He's not dead, exactly, but as a recognizable missionary figure,

Samonie Toonoo's "Stone, Cone and Bone" (2009).

his threatening pose and stony grimace makes you wonder if Toonoo might in fact prefer the reaper: teeth bared, at least he seems to be smiling.

A dark, jester-like figure, "Stone, Cone and Bone," giggles with menace from its private vitrine; surrounded by Pien's frantic nightmare-scapes, there's something less Munch, more Hieronymus Bosch about the scene, pairing general horror and the macabre delight of those apparently inflicting it.

Taken together, the entire scene is oppressive, affecting, visceral, and perfectly, wonderfully so. It comes as no surprise that a handful of the

Toonoo pieces are actually from Pien's personal collection; I'm not sure I could have said before what's abundantly clear now, but these are two artists made for each other.

