

VISUAL ARTS ■ REVIEW



Shary Boyle's *The Clearances*, whose title refers to the 18th-century eviction of Scottish farmers from their lands, depicts a motley procession of migrants. COURTESY JESSICA BRADLEY ART + PROJECTS

Colonies of interconnected dreams

Two artists explore the profound ways in which the worlds of whites and the Inuit have touched each other

BY SARAH MILROY

When it comes to curatorial couplings, sometimes two artists can add up to more than the sum of their parts. Such is the case with curator Nancy Cambell's summer exhibition at Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House, the University of Toronto. With *Noise Ghost*, she brings together two female artists from dramatically different worlds.

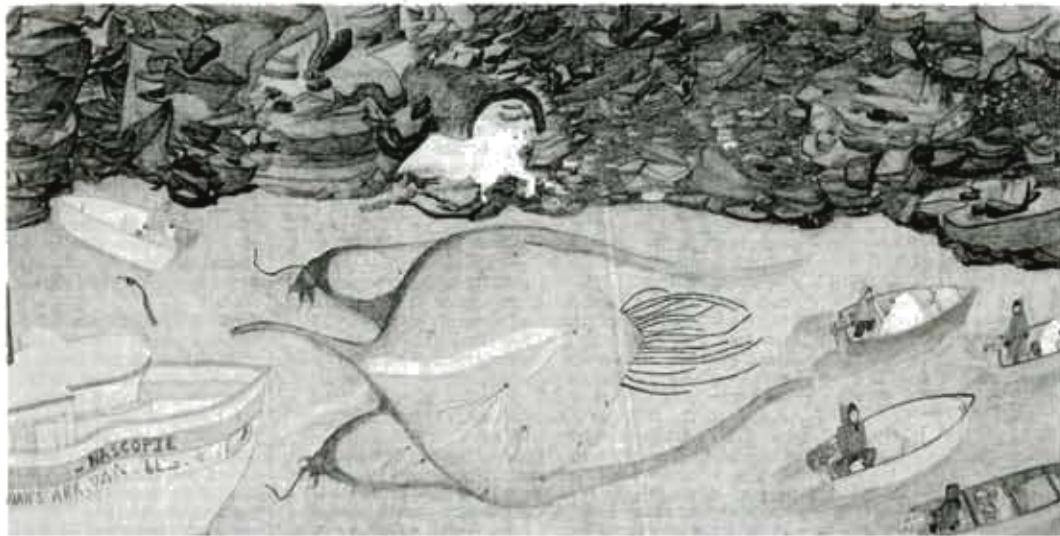
Shuvinal Ashoona, the granddaughter of artist Pitseolak Ashoona, is a 48-year-old Cape Dorset graphic artist who has created a vivid visual account of 21st-century Inuit life, infused with fantastical emanations from the spirit world. Shary Boyle, in contrast, is a 37-year-old Toronto artist, trained at the Ontario College of Art & Design and conversant with international art — a perfect anthropological specimen, one could say, of the urban bohemian. Like Ashoona, though, she has created a rich imaginary realm inhabited by the denizens of her outlandish imagination, which she sets out for us to see in her works on paper and in wall-mounted narrative drawing installations.

Each artist has her own creative cosmology, but this show brings them within touching range. In Ashoona's drawings, you encounter traces of the white world refracted through the Inuit experience; Boyle is presenting a number of works that reflect on European colonization of the North.

Boyle's *Skirmish at Bloody Point*, for example, depicts the first documented contact between Inuit and whites on the coast of Baffin Island in the mid-16th century. British soldiers came upon a group of Inuit hunters and attempted to capture them as human specimens to take back to England. Blood was shed, and several of the hunters reputedly jumped from the cliffs into the sea to avoid captivity.

In Boyle's retelling, we see the sparse, wind-sculpted Arctic landscape with the little flock of redcoats brandishing their muskets, and two Inuit hunters in their mid-air descent to the icy waters below. Every few minutes, though, the gallery's lights switch off and an overhead projector casts a spell over the depiction, recasting it as a moonlit scene. Either way, this is a parodic view of greedy, self-important Europeans struggling to command an expanse of snow and ice which holds for them no possible utility but the triumph of laying claim.

A large companion piece by Boyle lays out an imaginary parade of fanciful characters, with some of the figures pinned to the wall — humans, animals, and some that are in-between — and others suspended from thin threads, spinning lazily in the gallery's air currents. (The work is titled *The Clearances*, referring to the 18th-century eviction of Scottish farmers, from their traditional lands, by the gentry.) Over a stony landscape, Boyle's motley procession picks its way toward a giant, pink-throated seashell, which seems to offer shelter. Among



In Shuvinal Ashoona's *Untitled (Nascopie)*, Inuit boatmen, their skiffs equipped with outboard motors, make off in all directions, while a giant white beast with spreading wings emerges from its cave onshore.

the migrants: medieval crusaders, Queen Elizabeth I, British redcoats, a faun boy, two veiled Middle Eastern women on elephant back, a butterfly-winged skeleton, a Scottish Highland bagpiper, a hyena, a peg-legged Indian, and an Inuit mother and child. There's even a sad-eyed mermaid, getting a piggyback ride. Boyle's miscellany is an inventory of childhood fairytale characters and historical figures, personages drawn from a thousand enchanting accounts of battle, crusade

and high adventure. Boyle has provided elliptical notes to this work. One recounts her disappointing childhood experience of mail-order Sea Monkeys, which hatched promisingly in her aquarium but then sequestered themselves inside the shell she had provided, never to emerge. Another describes a billboard she saw on a recent visit to London: a supermodel offering her near-naked body to the camera, holding a luscious conch shell at crotch level. In

Boyle's hands, the giant seashell becomes a metaphorical cornucopia of possibility, holding a motherlode of promise and fantasy, both childlike and adult.

Ashoona, too, is presenting a sweeping narrative in her 2008-09 drawing *Untitled (Nascopie)*. History tells us that an icebreaker by this name was sunk near Cape Dorset in 1947, but in Ashoona's vision she's still afloat and plying the Arctic waters, bearing the inscription "Titanic plus Nascopie, Noah's Ark"

on the hull. The vessel looms from stage left, herding a giant sea creature (a large, grey, claw-bearing sea skate sprouting seaweed tufts) in the direction of a flotilla of little watercraft. Inuit boatmen, their skiffs equipped with outboard motors, make off in all directions (their horsepower conspicuously displayed in a nod to 21st-century reality), while a giant white beast with spreading wings emerges from its cave onshore. White and Inuit realities are compressed into one hallucinatory

Each artist has her own creative cosmology, but this show brings them within touching range.

experience. In one of the boats, the pilot has a crate bearing the enigmatic inscription "Kinnagait Co-op, Part Time Bitches and Bastards, Rip off no Gods." Caught between worlds, these boatmen are beset from all sides.

In another drawing, Ashoona depicts a circle of figures holding hands, a world globe with its two hands outstretched (the portion turned to us depicts the Arctic Circle) joins hands with a nursing Inuit mother of twins, several monsters, other mothers bearing older children on their backs, a narwhal-tusked seal, and another man or boy figure. At the centre, a pile of creatures is stacked up; on the bottom lie a Grizzly Bear, then a Polar Bear, then a seal, and finally a char, suggesting another kind of chain of being, this one linked together in a hierarchy of predation.

Ashoona's drawing posits two interconnected models for the order of things. Like Boyle, she situates herself in the stories she knows, feeling free, as well, to make new ones when tradition fails. *Noise Ghost continues at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at Hart House, University of Toronto, until Aug. 28.*