

GALLERIES



Noise Ghost

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BY DAVID BALZER July 22, 2009 21:07

EDITORIAL RATING: ★★★★★

To Aug 23. Mon-Sat noon-5pm.

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, 7

Hart House. 416-978-8398.

www.jmbgallery.ca.

Like all of Justina M. Barnicke Gallery's recent exhibits, "Noise Ghost" is as much a unique curatorial statement as it is a display of individual works. The curator is Inuit and contemporary-art expert Nancy Campbell, who, a few years ago at the Power Plant, brought draughtswoman Annie Pootoogook to the attention of CanArt arbiters. Here, Campbell pairs Pootoogook's cousin, Shuvina Ashoona (both are granddaughters of venerated artist Pitseolak Ashoona) with local multimedia fabulist Shary Boyle.

"Shuvina's drawings reminded me of... Shary Boyle," says Campbell simply and intuitively in her statement, and, at a quick glance, it is clear why: both artists are captivated by the otherworldly sublime as it speaks to private or social histories; both use a very graphic drawing style to relate to us their beautiful terrors – some chunky lines and lots of colour, which come, in part, from a mutual admiration of the saturated aesthetics of horror films and comics. Campbell rightly points out that topical affinities, such as Boyle's overhead projection about a 16th-century war between the Inuit and the British, Skirmish at Bloody Point (pictured), are not necessarily as resonant as these personal ones. Indeed, one sees few, if any, polemics in Ashoona's work, something that separates her from Boyle.

Looking closer, more differences emerge. However insular her images may be, Boyle is unmistakably urban: she picks up, sometimes slavishly, on the voluminous po-co/po-mo cues of the college- and university-educated – from Angela Carter to Kara Walker. She travels the world with her art. This is not to say that her considerable efforts at making beautiful, spectacular things are not admirable, ingenuous and even courageous, but, in this context, and in the end, Shuvina's work cannot help but seem distinct from hers. Campbell knows well the kind of pictography the Inuit continue to practice, but even she describes Ashoona's drawings as "often inexplicable." It's a creativity that comes from a type of free association that we have all but lost in the deliberate, affluent west. As such, its delineation is perhaps best left to Ashoona herself, who, in Marcia Connolly's haunting film about her (also screening at the exhibit – watch it first when you enter), compares it to an Inuit poltergeist, the name of which gives Campbell's intriguing coupling its title: "Everything's a ghost noise all the way.... It's good to listen to it, but it's not good to learn it."

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