

CHALLENGING RELATIONSHIPS: ANNIE POOTOOGOOK *MEMORY OF EATING WITH FAMILY* AND IMAGES OF MODERN INUIT LIFE

Jason Klimock

(see images after text)

Annie Pootoogook, born in Cape Dorset in 1969, is a third generation Inuit artist. Both her mother Napachie Pootoogook (1938-2002) and grandmother Pitscolak Ashoona (1908-1983) directly influenced what southern Canadians consider Inuit art through their tenure as artists with the West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative.¹ Beginning in the 1950s, collecting “authentic” Inuit art became very popular and the works distributed through this cooperative sold well because it was believed that they reproduced images of traditional Inuit life. Later, Inuit artists began incorporating modern elements (government helicopters, for example) into their works, but the only way that these objects were collected was if well-established artists made them.² In this context there was a great difference in what collectors considered authentic and what the artists would continue to produce. In practice, Inuit artists were continuing a “tradition” of representing contemporary life. For the most part, however, the art market rejected these works because the images were considered to be inauthentic. Annie Pootoogook’s drawings continue the tradition of representing daily reality. The themes in her works dealing specifically with family life are disturbing and present a complicated view of the north that shatters any romantic myth of Inuit life as idyllic. Whereas there is no tradition of portraiture, in the western sense, in Inuit art, *Memory of Eating with Family* can be considered a portrait in the sense that it conveys a personal experience or memory.

Memory of Eating with Family is interesting to consider in relation to Pootoogook's body of work, as well as the perception of Inuit art. We see in this image, a family seated on the floor enjoying a traditional Inuit meal of fish. The mother is holding a semi-lunar knife, called an ulu, a symbol of the Inuit woman and her traditional work skinning and cleaning animals, cutting food, making clothing, and trimming the ice blocks of an igloo. She is also wearing an amauti, the traditional garment worn by Inuit women that is specially designed for mothers to carry children in a pouch in order to protect them from the arctic climate. In contrast, the rest of the family is dressed in western style clothing. This introduces the viewer to the fact that after resettlement, Inuit women were able to hold on to their traditions more readily than Inuit men.³ This highlights modern Inuit culture as a site of conflict between contemporary and traditional ways of living. Cultural blending is a persistent theme in Pootoogook's work that underscores the social issues she addresses in her art. The juxtaposition of the fish against the box of packaged foods in the right corner is another example of this consistent motif. These comparisons depict the fusing of Inuit traditions with elements of western culture that is the reality of contemporary Inuit life. This dispels the myth of the "authentic" Inuit as a "primitive" culture that lives in a "traditional" way.

Both Annie's mother and her grandmother considered themselves local historians, recording daily events in their art.⁴ As such, the representation of everyday reality has been present in Inuit drawings and prints for as long as its market has existed. Annie's art follows these traditions, but southern influences have significantly change life in the north. The juxtaposition of traditional and modern objects in her drawings reflects these changes. Pootoogook's images, however, are far more complex than records of cultural fusion. In order to further understand *Memory of*

Eating with Family, for example, we can consider the semiotic frame of reference synthesized by Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson in “Semiotics and Art History,” and consider this image’s meaning as a product of the engagement between the image, the viewer, and the artist.⁵ Annie’s mother, Napachie Pootoogook, accompanied her prints with explicit titles to ensure her specific intention is clear to the viewer. Annie’s works do not concretize a particular viewpoint though a clear description of the scene by their title; instead her work records the difficulties of Inuit life that encourage critical engagement on the part of the viewer.

Issues of domestic strife are common themes throughout her work, because this is a problem within northern communities. In this work however, the family appears content (it is not clear whether this family is hers or not). Pootoogook’s images are usually drawn from memory, so the fact that this image is drawn as a memory is especially significant to its interpretation. If we consider this drawing to be an idealized representation of a family’s meal in terms of social intercourse, there is a feeling of nostalgia for the represented time.⁶ By following the various gazes in the work we feel a connection between the family members.⁷ The mother is looking at her baby and the father is looking at his wife. This implies a degree of family tenderness and social interaction. The viewer is engaged by the gaze of the young boy who appears to be looking at us as if we are sitting with the family, and we feel a connection to them. In this case, since the work is a memory of a remote subject, the gaze belongs to the holder of the memory as its subject. The viewer takes possession of this gaze and is direct witness to the “first person” subjectivity of the memory experience as imagined.⁸

The idea that family intercommunication is idealized in this work can be further developed through comparison to other works by Pootoogook. In *Playing Nintendo* technology is a focal point. There is no discourse between the figures: one child is playing Mario, and the other two people are looking blankly to the left. The viewer is also removed from the experience because the gaze does not engage viewer experience. This suggests that TV and video games can have an alienating effect within the familial unit. This sense of estrangement is transmitted to the viewer by denying them the interactive gaze that engages the subject as a participant in the scene. The imagination of the artist is not transmitted to the viewer through the use of the gaze, so the viewer is separated from the subject in the picture.⁹ Taken further, when considered in relation to *Memory of Eating with Family*, the feeling of loneliness is symbolic of cultural alienation. The meaning is not a critique of media technology as such, but is a way to expose issues faced by the Inuit people.

Domestic violence is a very serious social problem that is explored in Annie Pootoogook's work, although this is not present in the *Memory of Eating with Family*. In *Woman Falling with Child* we see a similar family, the mother violently attacked by her husband as she attempts to protect her baby, while her son runs away from the scene. This image represents domestic violence as a major social problem that is persistent in the north, as well as in Pootoogook's own life.¹⁰

Colonialization completely changed Inuit life in the north and created a number of social conditions that lead to the proliferation of domestic violence to the scale of the current issue.

Resettlement by the Canadian Government forced the abandonment of traditional hunting practices; new hunting technologies were price prohibitive, and often Inuit could not afford tools such as rifles. As a result the people became economically dependent upon the government and

this lead to depression and substance abuse. Finally, Inuit women who were able to keep their traditions alive after resettlement also began working outside of the home, and became the primary earners of family income. All of these factors contributed to the extremely high rate of Violence in Inuit communities.¹¹ In comparison with this work, *Memory of Eating with Family* portrays an idealized representation of a family memory. The divergent subject matter of these two works reflects the complexities of life in the north because it suggests that while domestic violence is an issue, there are good memories as well. Pootoogook's drawings invite discussion by an informed audience about the disruption of Inuit family values caused by southern influences. We are able to engage with these works because they discuss domestic violence, substance abuse, and depression all of which are concerns of contemporary Canadian family life.

NOTES

¹ Nancy Campbell, "Annie Pootoogook," *Annie Pootoogook*, Eds., Annie Pootoogook and Nancy Campbell (Toronto: Power Plant, 2006) 13.

² Deborah Root, "Inuit Art and the Limits of Authenticity," *Annie Pootoogook*, Eds., Nancy Campbell, et al., (Calgary: Illingworth Kerr Gallery, 2007) 23.

³ Janet Mancini Billson, "Shifting Gender Regimes: The Complexities of Domestic Violence among Canada's Inuit," *Inuit Studies* 30:1 (2006): 5-7.

⁴ "A New Inuit Childhood and Home: the Drawings of Annie Pootoogook," (2010) 3 Dec. 2011 <<http://picturingchildren.concordia.ca/2010>>.

⁵ Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 73:2 (1991): 174.

⁶ Bal and Bryson, 195.

⁷ The idea of the gaze in this context is a reworking of Lacan's Gaze in Bal and Bryson, 205-7.

⁸ Bal and Bryson, 206-7.

⁹ Bal and Bryson, 199-201.

¹⁰ She was in an abusive relationship with her former husband for more details see: David Balzer, "Culture Clash: Annie Pootoogook Captures Canada's North-South Divide," *cbc.ca* (27 June 2006) <<http://www.cbc.ca/arts/photoessay/pootoogook/index7.html>>.

¹¹ Billson, 5-7.



Memory of Eating with Family. 2005

Annie Pootoogook

pencil crayon and ink, 56.5 x 76.4 cm

Library and Archives Canada/3986061

<http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3986061>.



Throwing Away Prized Possessions 1997/8

Napachie Pootoogook

Ink, Pencil Crayon, 20 x 26 in

Fehelley Fine Arts

<<http://fehelayfinearts.com/gallery/exhibitions/pootoogook/index1.shtml>>.



Playing Nintendo

Annie Pootoogook

pencil crayon and ink

CBC

<<http://www.cbc.ca/arts/photoessay/pootoogook/index3.html>>.



Mother Falling with Child

Annie Pootoogook

pencil crayon and ink

CBC

<<http://www.cbc.ca/arts/photoessay/pootoogook/index3.html>>.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"The Art and Technique of Inuit Clothing." McCord Museum. <http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/scripts/viewobject.php?section=162&Lang=1&tourID=CW_InuitClothing_IK_EN&seqNumber=1>.

Bagg, Shannon. "Artists, Art Historians, and the Value of Contemporary Inuit Art." PhD Queen's University, 2006.

Bal, Mieke and Norman Bryson. "Semiotics and Art History." *Art Bulletin* 73:2 (1991): 174.

Balzer, David. "Culture Clash: Annie Pootoogook Captures Canada's North-South Divide." *cbc.ca*. 27 June 2006. <<http://www.cbc.ca/arts/photoessay/pootoogook/index7.html>>.

Billson, Janet Mancini. "Shifting Gender Regimes: The Complexities of Domestic Violence among Canada's Inuit." *Inuit Studies* 30.1 (2006): 69-88. 16 Dec. 2011.

Bradley, Quinn, and Ann Marie Sekeres. *Annie Pootoogook's Drawings of Contemporary Inuit Life Opens in New York June 13*. Washington D.C: National Museum of the American Indian, 2009.

Campbell, Nancy. "Annie Pootoogook." *Annie Pootoogook*. Eds. Annie Pootoogook and Nancy Campbell. Toronto: Power Plant, 2006.

Cotter, Holland. "Postcards from Canada's 'New North'." *New York Times* (2009) <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/24/arts/design/24annie.html?pagewanted=all>>.

Edell, Anna. "A New Inuit Childhood and Home: the Drawings of Annie Pootoogook." *Picturing Children and Youth: A Canadian Perspective* (2010) <<http://picturingchildren.concordia.ca/2010>>.

Feheley, Patricia. "Artist Biographies: Annes Pootoogook." *Feheley Fine Arts* (2007) <http://feheleyfinearts.com/about_inu/biographies/index.shtml>.

Fraser, J. Lynn. "Interior Spaces, Northern Places: Nunavut Artist Annie Pootoogook's Artwork is Observational and Narrative." *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 175:9 (2006): 1100.

Larmour, W. T. *the Art of the Canadian Eskimo*. Ottawa: The Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1967.

"*Library and Archives Canada*." 26 Oct. 2011.

Rhodes, Richard. "Annie Pootoogook: Spirit with Flowers." *Canadian Art* (2011) <http://www.canadianart.ca/online/see-it/2011/09/29/annie_pootoogook/>.

Robertson, Carmen, and Angela Weber. "Teaching Indian Art History: A Conversation about

Post-Secondary Indigenous Art Education." *Third Text* 21:2 (2007): 341.

Root, Deborah. "Inuit Art and the Limits of Authenticity." *Annie Pootoogook*. Eds. Nancy Campbell, et al. Calgary: Illingworth Kerr Gallery, 2007.

Swinton, Nelda. "*The Inuit Sea Goddess*." M.A. Concordia University, 1985.