

VISUAL ARTS

Show pushes boundaries of Inuit vision

Four artists blend traditional and contemporary in new, sometimes lighthearted ways

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN

VANCOUVER SUN

Works by indigenous artists from the North who mix and match traditional materials and approaches with contemporary ideas are being showcased until early August at an artist-run gallery in east Vancouver.

Although the group exhibition is a small one that focuses on the work of four artists, the exhibition is innovative in its reframing of art produced by the Inuit. Traditionally, works by artists from the north are shown in private galleries, where the focus is on selling work for the market. The exhibition at the publicly funded grunt gallery is shifting and expanding that focus to present work that pushes the boundaries of Inuit art.

Curator Tania Willard said in an interview she had the idea for the exhibition more than two years ago when she saw the work of Jamasie Pitseolak, an Inuit artist who uses traditional stone to carve contemporary objects, such as miniature ping-pong tables, bullets and handguns. In addition to the grunt exhibition, Pitseolak has work in an exhibition called *Changing Hands* at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York.

Not only does Willard describe Pitseolak's work as gorgeous to look at, she likes how it plays with her own preconceptions of Inuit art.

"There is something really interesting with indigenous artists in this generation," said Willard, a member of the Secwepemc First Nation. "We're really pulling on tradition and ancestry and heritage. We also need to figure out how to make that feel authentic to us with all these other things going on, so we feel like whole people."

While some indigenous artists may choose to work in traditional methods or materials, Willard said that doesn't mean the results must look traditional. Artists may be influenced as much by the outdoors as by what they see at the movies, on TV or at a rock concert.

The exhibition has the catchy title *Blizzard: Emerging Northern Artists*. It certainly conjures the idea of snow and whiteout conditions in the North. But Willard said she was thinking of



KIM STALLKNECHT/PNG

Inuit artist Jamasie Pitseolak, from Cape Dorset, Baffin Island, puts a modern touch on his soapstone work.

something quite different: Ozzy Osbourne's album *Blizzard of Ozz*. (She also thought *Blizzard* would be a great name for a metal band from the North.)

Willard is part of a new generation of younger indigenous artists involved in both making art and organizing it for exhibitions in art galleries and museums. As a curator, she's been involved with several exhibitions, including the online *Beat Nation* at grunt gallery and its recent expansion into a full exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

One of Pitseolak's outstanding pieces in *Blizzard* is a uniquely Inuit interpretation of popular music. Called *Esquimeaux Guitar*, the work is an electric

guitar made out of several different kinds of green and charcoal soapstone. It has an antler as a support stand and polar bear teeth on the body.

Besides turning stone into sculptural works inspired by what he sees around him in his Nunavut community of Cape Dorset, Pitseolak also enjoys making sculptures that play with words. One of the miniature works shows a chicken about to bend over and peck at some rocklike objects on the work's base. He calls it *Chicken Nuggets*.

But not everything by Pitseolak is domestic or lighthearted. One of the works speaks to a personal trauma experienced by many Inuit and indigenous people who

were abused at residential schools and other institutions. At the end of the display shelf is a big stone high-heel shoe with a blossom on the front. Bigger and bulkier than the other works nearby, it has a real presence in the exhibition space.

Pitseolak said it came from a dark place inside him. Initially reluctant to talk about it during *The Sun's* visit to the gallery, he said he made the shoe to help get something out of his system.

"I was forced to wear high heel shoes and a wedding dress by a pedophile," he said.

The disclosure was something even Willard was unaware of: "That was really brave of you to share that," she said.

Other works in the exhibition display that dual aspect of having a darker nature under a beautiful surface. Visitors to the exhibition are greeted by a welcome mat by Nicholas Galanin, an artist from Sitka, Alaska. Sitting on a white plinth, it's made of polar bear fur with the word "Welcome" written in black sea otter fur, the thickest fur of any mammal. It was originally made for an exhibition called *Dry Ice*, which looked at the effects of global warming on the northern landscape.

Although the *Welcome* mat invites people into the exhibition space, it's also embedded with a warning that the burning of fossil fuels by people in the south threatens the polar bear's habitat. The sea otter fur refers to the animals that were hunted almost to extinction by Europeans on the northwest coast in the 19th century.

Tanya Lukin Linklater's work *eskimo kissing booth* has the work's title written in neon letters above a wall-like structure of white bricks that recall an igloo. On the floor are four stacks of paper with Linklater's nose prints in red lipstick. Referencing the cliché nose-rubbing once popular as "Eskimo kissing," the work is ironic and humorous but distancing in the substitution of a blank wall for a booth.

Works by Geronimo Inutiq — also known by his DJ name, Mad Eskimo — include both electronic music and accompanying digital imagery along with non-traditional Arctic landscapes of a military barracks used as social housing in Iqaluit, the Nunavut city where the artist grew up.

Being showed in the grunt's media lab is *Northern Haze: Living the Dream*, a documentary by Derek Aqquiaruq about the Inuit heavy metal band Northern Haze.

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At a glance

BLIZZARD: EMERGING NORTHERN ARTISTS

Where: grunt gallery, Unit 116, 350 East 2nd Ave.

When: To Aug. 4. Gallery open Tuesday-Saturday, 12 noon to 5 p.m. Admission to the exhibition is free.